2021

Battlefield Firefighter

Steve Alford

Battlefield Firefighter: A Story of United States Air Force Fire Protection in the Cold War

S.B. Alford

Roll call formation is at 0700. The announcement for this comes over the PA system in the base fire station announcing roll call and shift change. 0700 is also when the daily testing of the station and on-air alerting system along with the current weather conditions are announced.

Today is a Friday in early April. A predicted high temperature today of thirty-three degrees is balmy for our air base here in the upper plains, considering the below zero temps we had been having since January. However, high winds out of the northwest are predicted at over thirty-five knots with wind gusts even higher.

Roll call and shift change is a formal formation each morning for military fire stations across the air force signifying the changing of shifts on duty for the next twenty-four hours. Each shift exchanges pertinent information with each other. Some of which includes alert statuses for the B-52s, and their tanker supports, the KC-135s. Scheduled weapons convoys from the bomb dump are announced, as well as if there are to be any scheduled exercises for the alert forces.

Scheduled exercises involve crash fire rescue support in the form of large crash trucks, which stand by as fully loaded nuclear bombers take on fuel and undergo maintenance while their engines are running. All of this is an ongoing routine to ensure nuclear-capable strategic bombers remain in a high alert status to meet the fifteen-minute requirement.

The fifteen-minute requirement ensures bomber and tanker squadrons standing nuclear alert can scramble and launch all alert planes to go to war with the Soviet Union within a fifteen-minute window. This whole process is an amazing feat of teamwork, precision, and discipline. It involves all flight-line operations associated with the air wing; this includes high levels of security force protection, fire protection (that is us), maintenance, bomb loaders, base ops, command post, and the air crews themselves. Once airborne, crews receive coded messages from the SAC (Strategic Air Command) command post to indicate if this is just an exercise, if they

need to proceed someplace to stage to await further instruction (above the North Pole, for example) because the Soviets are getting squirrely, or if this is the real thing and they need to execute the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP)—better known as the nuclear war plan transmitted all the way from the POTUS via the nuclear football. This would order a full air assault to predetermined targets within the Soviet Union. Strike first is how we are to win World War III. This is daily life for the airmen serving in the deadliest military unit ever invented—the SAC.

Senior Airman Robert Ray has been in air force fire protection for just a little over three years now. He had recently been assigned to Alpha Air Force Base smack dab in the middle of South Dakota since December. He arrived here in December after serving the past two years in Panama. Being a SAC trained killer, or STK as regular SAC personnel liked to joke, is new to him but he's adjusting to the daily "going to war lifestyle" that is the culture of the SAC. This culture was birthed directly from General Curtiss LeMay; his SAC does not mess around when it comes to being in a constant state of war posturing with the Soviet Union. While the rest of the country listens to Joan Jett and Genesis play their '80s songs and plays Pacman at the local arcades, they have not a clue that men and women stood guard like this, had been since 1947, ready to go to nuclear Armageddon at a minute notice.

Ray was recently promoted at his third-year anniversary of enlistment. While serving in Panama as an airman first class, he was selected to attend the Fire Protection Rescue School at Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois. After graduating, he completed a lot of local on-the-job training to become rescue qualified so he could ride on the rescue truck.

At the formation, he is informed he will be crew chief of Rescue 10 for the shift, a big responsibility normally reserved for a junior NCO. He takes note of the announced wind conditions. Any type of fire involving an aircraft in these wind conditions could be disastrous.

A1C Fitzwater and A1C Pelletier are assigned to Ray's crew. He has more time in service than both of them, and Pelletier has not completed his rescue OJT yet. It would be a challenging day even if the flying mission meant the normal in-flight emergencies were called and the routine false alarm responses on the base ruled the day. All other crash crews and the engine crews have been assigned; the formation is called to attention. The off-going shift is released and the on-going shift now has the watch.

All rescue men are required to memorize to heart aircraft pre-fire plans. This includes shutdown procedures, disarming of weapons on aircraft, fuel shutoffs, battery shutoffs, etc. Going inside a B-52 flight deck in an emergency with limited visibility can be a very daunting task. However, during any type of ground emergency or crash, firefighters working on the rescue truck must enter the flight deck and make sure that all members of the air crew are out and that all systems are safely shut down. This mandates that all firefighters know their aircraft backwards and forward.

These pre-plans are the same as the emergency checklists followed by the pilot and co-pilot for all airframes. Navy and marine corps crash rescue guys use the NAVAIR guidebook; it's their bible when mitigating an aircraft emergency where shutdown procedures, safety ejection seats, pinning the guns and missiles, etc. are concerned. The air force refers to these guidebooks as Technical Order 00-105E-9.

Being as it's Ray's first day as crew chief of the Rescue, he's a bit overwhelmed and nervous. This is a big step for him. Like anyone riding in this position, the question lingers in his mind, "Could today be the day?"

Not only for Ray and his crew, but firefighters in general always deal with long periods of down time followed by call after call of false alarms. Additionally, you can go from zero to one hundred miles an hour in a split second. Calls come into the fire alarm communication center at the base fire department either from the 9-1-1 lines or, in the case of any emergency on the flight line, the direct crash phone that links the tower, base operations, and the fire department. Any type of incident involving a sixty-million-dollar plane when that sixty-million-dollar plane is loaded with thousands of pounds of JP-4 (mixture of gasoline and kerosene) and is carrying nuclear and/or conventional bombs and missiles receives the utmost expeditious response and attention.

Since Reagan had been elected and vowed to flex all the US military might he could in the face of the Soviet Union, alert scrambles are almost becoming a daily occurrence at Alpha Air Force Base. More activity surrounding Soviet airspace means NORAD gets froggier. It is not unusual to activate the alert crews for a mission and then five minutes later abort.

With higher aircraft sortie rates and more inspections by the SAC inspector general's office to ensure compliance to war contingency standards, this means more bombs are being moved, maintenance intervals increase, more fuel is being uploaded. All this equates to increased potential for accidents. And accidents involving nuclear weapons are significant emotional events for all involved.

This potential increases the need for command and control. The potential for mistakes, no matter how minor, means more accountability and more discipline. All of this adds up to more stress and the need to be diligent in everything you do can be overwhelming.

Ray quizzes his crew, going over the pre-plans for the B-52 and the KC-135.

"What is the first step for shutdown of the engines?"

Pelletier responds, "Pull the engine throttles to the rear."

"Make sure all are pulled to the rear at the same time. All eight of them."

"Second step, Fitz?"

"Pull the T-handles all the way, slowly, to shut off the fuel to the engines."

Before they could discuss step three, an announcement comes over the PA for an alert scramble. "Holy shit," Ray bursts out. "Is this real shit?"

The answer to Ray's question comes immediately as the base klaxon went off.

"SCRAMBLE SCRAMBLE SCRAMBLE!!!"

All fire crews take off, sprinting to their apparatus. Station boots are stripped off and feet step into fire boots, pulling up bunker pants in one quick swoop. Bunker coats on, crash truck engines fired up, firefighters struggling to hop on board, so they won't be left behind. All crews head for the runway to their predesignated positions.

B-52 alert crews are in full swing. Normally the startup procedures for a B-52 take many minutes to go through; however, in a scramble crews use an explosive cartridge that gets the jet engine turbines moving to initiate engine startup. Much like popping the clutch on a manual drive transmission, the explosive cartridge starts up each individual engine on the massive bomber.

Security force folks take up their position with M-16s locked and loaded. Entry control points are shut down and guarded. There is always a lookout for unauthorized personnel.

While all of this is taking place, the aircrew for B-52 aircraft with tail number 57-0000 begins its start-up procedures. Engines 1–4 on the left wing of the aircraft started with no issues. Although, it's always unnerving to the air and ground crews when the series of small explosions from the cartridges rapidly fire up the engines and send clouds of white smoke all around the aircraft.

When the copilot gets to engine number five on the aircraft's right wing, the fired cartridge for this engine causes an explosion and subsequent fire because it ruptured the fuel line. The fire was blowing like a torch out of the rear of the engine. The copilot immediately begins to shut down the aircraft. Part of the procedure Ray and his rescue crew just discussed was that after feathering back the engine throttles, pull all the T-handles, which will cut off the fuel to the engines. Then the battery switches can be moved to the off position.

Perhaps in a moment of panic and knowing he is inside an airplane that was on fire and loaded with eight Mark 28 nuclear bombs and twelve SRAM (Short Range Attack Missiles that had a 200-kiloton nuclear warhead on each), the pilot and copilot of 0000 forget to pull the T-handle and skip to step three, turn off all battery switches. They bail out of the airplane and take off running. The navigator and bombardier have already evacuated the plane.

Ray and his crew can see the white columns of smoke coming from the alert facility from the massive cartridge starts being employed on the aircraft. By all indications, this alert scramble is real. Are they at war? Or is this just a drill? There was no announcement of an exercise at roll call. And false alarm scrambles from NORAD have become the norm. All scrambles now have to be treated as though they had just gone to war. This is their cold war battlefield.

While moving down the taxiway headed to the alert facility, A1C Pelletier shouts, "I see heavy black smoke!"

"That is NOT good," Fitzwater shouts, in an attempt to talk over the radio broadcasting from the alarm room that this scramble has been upgraded to a ground emergency with a fire on board in the alert facility.

The CFR (crash fire rescue) trucks arrive and start dumping a mixture of water and foam on the plane at a rate of 1,500 gallons per minute. As more CFRs arrive, that rate of agent applied to extinguish the fire increases to 6,000 gallons per minute. Support pumpers and tankers set up a water supply for the firefighting operation.

The firefighting operation appears futile. The fire will not go out. While the rescue crew prepares to make entry into the aircraft, the operations assistant fire chief, Technical Sergeant Lessard, consults with Ray.

"We are doing everything we can to keep the fire off the nukes, but this damn wind is making entry into the aircraft damn near impossible." It's becoming very apparent that the thirty-five to forty mile an hour winds are pushing fire back onto the airplane, impinging the aircraft fuselage and the bomb bay. Attempts at keeping the fuselage cool are getting harder and the blowtorch flames cut off the normal entry into the aircraft behind the main landing gear.

The on-fire engine steadily dumps fuel, which meant the copilot did not do a proper shutdown of the aircraft. They ensured that the fuel would continue to flow to the engine via the blown fuel line and just keep fueling the fire. That, along with the wind, makes the fire impossible to put out.

Fitzwater, who knows his aircraft, yells at Ray, "If we can ladder the left side of the flight deck on the roof, we can go into an emergency hatch and gain entry there, turn the battery switch back on, and pull the T-handle, which should shut the fuel off to the fire."

Ray agreed. Thank God Fitzwater remembered that. He had forgotten about that escape hatch on the roof. That might work, provided they can get the hatch open.

TSgt Lessard confers with the squadron and wing commanders now on scene of the incident. Colonel Shuffle, wing commander and an arrogant Vietnam linebacker bomber veteran, obviously does not want to lose the aircraft. He wants the fire out now and his impatience with the fire suppression operations is blatant. Not only is losing an aircraft at stake here, but a major nuclear incident could affect all civilians living downwind for hundreds of miles.

The Damascus incident—an explosion in a Titan II ICBM silo—had just occurred two years earlier at Little Rock, Arkansas and had been a major embarrassment to the air force. Not to mention the possibility of a major loss of life from a nuclear yield of nine megatons from the W-53 nuclear warhead attached to the missile. Fortunately, when the nitrogen tetroxide and aerozine 50 used to fuel the missile had mixed, which was caused by a leak from a dropped wrench, the explosion had not caused a nuclear reaction from the warhead. The warhead was found, intact, a hundred yards from the silo. Unfortunately, three airmen perished as a result of the incident.

Colonel Shuffle gets on the radio to base operations. They set up a link to the SAC Command Post in Nebraska. The more brass who get involved, the worse this situation could get. Something needs to be done but it needs to be done with without haste.

TSgt Lessard makes the order for a roof hatch emergency entry into the aircraft. It will not be easy. Several factors make this dangerous: 1) The top of the aircraft, at over fifty feet

high, is covered with foam as slippery as eel shit, 2) there is limited room to set your feet to chop a hole through the escape hatch with a crash axe, and 3) the high winds make it possible that while attempting this task the rescue crew member could be blown off the ladder. All of these factors are diminished by the exposure of the fire to the nuclear warheads, causing direct flame impingement and possibly having a nuclear detonation.

Ray will take point on this operation and go up the ladder to chop through the escape hatch. Once completed, he will enter into the top level of the flight deck and be joined by AlC Fitzwater, who will come in behind him. A1C Fitzwater will assist in the locating the battery switches, turn them back on, then correctly pull the T-handles to hopefully kill the fuel flow to the engine on fire. Seems simple enough, but the heavy black smoke inside the flight deck would present a huge challenge to finding all the switches. The fate of the world rests in the hands of the young men.

Ray has never attempted forcible entry on an aircraft escape hatch before. Utilizing the crash axe fifty feet above the ground, heavy SCBA on his back, with the wind threatening to blow him off the ladder, he hacks away at the heavy aircraft skin. Blow after blow to the hatch seems like he isn't making so much as a dent. Finally, the hatch is penetrated; he reaches through the axe hole with a gloved hand to manipulate the manual locking arm for the hatch. The hatch door falls into the aircraft with a big thud. Ray dons his SCBA mask and crawls into the massive B-52, which is full of heavy black smoke from the burning jet fuel.

CFR trucks continue to dump large amounts of water and foam onto the aircraft keeping flames from impinging on the bomb bay of the bomber. How much longer could this continue without running short of firefighting agent?

This is Fitzwater's cue. He dons his facepiece, turns on the air, and scampers up the ladder like a cat up a telephone pole. Pelletier follows once Fitzwater disappears into the hatch.

Inside the aircraft, light from the flames coming through the B-52 canopy mase seeing the instrument panel of the flight deck possible. It is like some sort of divine intervention.

Quickly, Fitzwater and Ray manage to turn the aircraft batteries back on. This enables them to methodically pull the T-handle for the number five engine. Like turning off a faucet, the shutoff switch for the fuel is closed and the fire goes out.

Everyone outside the plane cheers. Crews continue to keep the aircraft cool. Have the actions of this crew prevented another nuclear incident? How many lives have been saved by the actions of these brave military firefighters?

Ray and Fitzwater reengage the battery switch which activates the fuel shutoff valve to engine number five when the T-handle is pulled correctly. Once the fuel is removed, the fire goes out. Ironically, they are not pilots. They are simple enlisted airmen firefighters who took enough ownership in their part of the mission that enabled a positive outcome for what looked like a disaster.

Fortunately for the air force, the incident wraps up with minimal damage. Fortunately for the civilian population, who never knew incident had taken place, no one had to be evacuated and there was no loss of life. Fortunately for the airmen involved, no one had to give their lives this day.

Alpha Air Force base is able to get back to business as usual, fighting the Cold War. As we approach the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War, more incidents like this would take place. It has been reported that over a hundred nuclear incidents, both minor and major, would occur during the forty-seven years we were engaged in the Cold War with the

Soviet Union. By the grace of God, and through the SAC's tough command and control procedures, we were able to prevent Armageddon from happening on our soil.

Ray was a war hero this day. But no one will ever really care to discuss it. The incident was considered classified for many years. Only now is it written about. For the purposes of this story, I used fictious names and a fictious base. But the story is real.

We still stand in a nuclear posture today. My son is a nuclear missile officer for the USAF and commands Minuteman III missiles. Even with the Soviet Union gone, there are more rogue countries that have developed nuclear weapons and have them pointed at us. Proper command and control of our nuclear arsenal is paramount so that we will always win on the nuclear battlefield through deterrence. You would be surprised at how many people are totally unaware of this battlefield and of those that stand guard to protect it. Especially our battlefield firefighters.