2024

Cold War Story

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The rural road was dark, but I'd driven it for the past 6 months, from Whiteman Air Force Base to Sedalia, then to Highway 65 North. I still had to keep my eyes open for the road sign that was my cue to make a left turn onto a gravel road. An immediate right, then a quarter mile to another graveled right turn across a grilled cattle gate. Then to a nondescript, well-lit building surrounded by a chain link fence.

A sign on the gate read: B-01. Another, more ominous sign blared in big red letters: "WARNING; "US Air Force Installation. It is unlawful to enter this area without the permission of the installation commander. While on this installation, all personnel and the property under their control are subject to search."

From a loudspeaker, an emotionless voice belonging to the Flight Security Controller sitting in the Security Control Center with a full view of the gate asked us to identify ourselves. I rolled down my window: "Trip 04-67, Captain Weber and Lt Lanning, requesting permission to enter."

"Standby."

The FSC verified the trip number and expected party. A lone figure walked out, headed briskly for the gate. This was the B-01 site manager, SSgt Rideout. Following a buzz to indicate the gate was unlocked, the site manager pushed it open. Our dark blue Chevy Suburban Carryall entered. Salutes were rendered as we drove in. Rideout approached the vehicle. He was supposed to check the military IDs for me and my partner, Captain Gail Weber, my Missile Combat Crew Commander. But all three of us had pulled several alerts together, so Rideout knew who we were.

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After exchanging pleasantries, Rideout gave us a quick Launch Control Facility status briefing. We entered the Security Control Center to prepare for our elevator trip down.

On a direct line, Gail called the crew on duty downstairs in the Launch Control Center: "This is Captain Gail Weber, I authenticate FOXTROT INDIA." Later, this one-time code would be stuffed in the classified waste burn bag. Another buzzer told us the door to the crew elevator was unlocked. The code worked; access granted by the on-duty crew.

We slid closed the elevator's metal lattice gate and headed down. through the lattice the concrete wall glowed bluish-green as we descended. The 60-foot trip down took 2 whirring, slow minutes.

At the bottom waited a giant tunnel junction blast door. This massive door had to be opened manually. For some reason, I always enjoyed opening that massive blast door – engaging the alignment latch, then 20 rotations of the circular wheel to retract the giant pins that held the door into the thick frame. I swing the door open, feeling for a moment like a titan, then closed it behind myself and Gail. We completed our respective checklists to inspect the underground Launch Control Equipment Building. After a speedy inspection, we contacted the on-duty crew by interphone, to request entry into the Launch Control Center. The crew opened a smaller, even thicker blast door to let us in. This door could only be opened from the inside.

After more than 30 alerts, the LCC was familiar territory: a narrow, dimly-lit walkway past the four massive shock isolators, designed to keep the LCC stable in the event of a nearby nuclear blast. We had only a few creature comforts, a toilet with a curtain, a sundries cabinet and

hot plate. The capsule had no commercial radio or TV, just a revolving library of magazines. A single bed was neatly made with military crispness.

We relieved the day alert crew, who'd relieved the previous night's crew. We all did 12 hour shifts locked inside the blast door. A key portion of changeover was the change of locks. The on-duty crew removed their individual combination padlocks from the red safe, just beyond the bed's head. The wording on the safe read, "Access limited the MCCC and DMCCC on duty." The safe contained four items: two launch keys and two sets of sealed authentication documents - the launch codes. We jointly inventoried and inspected the authenticator documents for damage or tampering. Then Gail and I put our locks on the safe. After an unremarkable changeover briefing, the day crew left the control center to go topside for 12 hours of rest. Routine, routine, routine. Glowing green letters across the top of the Commander's Missile Status Indicator Panel showed all ten of our assigned Minuteman missiles in "Strategic Alert." Two showed minor faults, but nothing that would prevent launch.

Once the blast door shut, we were sealed in for the night. First things first: Gail and I took off our sidearms, then changed out of our crew uniforms into comfortable sweats. Boots off. With all alert inspections completed, it was time to turn attention to my Master's college classes. I always brought a jar of instant coffee to keep me awake. It tasted really bad, but multiple cups of caffeine did the trick, since Gail and I were sworn by duty to remain awake and alert all night, which for this evening had been about as vanilla as possible. Routines and checklists completed, we settled in for an uneventful overnight 12-hour missile alert duty shift.

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But before the first of those hours had passed, the Primary Alerting System tone warbled. It was a distinctive noise, like saying "deedle" many times, real fast. The alert let us know a message was incoming from higher headquarters. Such messages were routine and frequent, sometimes as simple as a communications check: "This is the SAC Command Post with a communications check . . . . Acknowledge Now!" But this time the SAC Command Post Controller's voice had a strange echo I'd never heard before, and message transmission was already in progress: HOTEL, VICTOR, LIMA, EIGHT, TANGO, THREE FOXTROT... This was a coded Emergency Actions Message, an EAM that sent Gail and me grabbing for our individual laminated copy format books to scribble down the phonetic letters and numbers with our grease pencils. The message repeated; then Gail and I individually decoded it. To our amazement, and shock, we agreed it was authentic and valid. This was no exercise.

This message took us at once to an extremely high level of readiness. It was the type of message we only practiced in the Missile Procedures Trainer, the equivalent of an aircraft simulator but for missile crews. Though we'd practiced the checklist for this message many times in the trainer, all the scenarios had been part of a graduated escalation, not out of the blue like the message we'd just decoded.

We quickly recovered from our astonishment, and our training kicked in. Gail and I agreed this EAM was genuine and required immediate action. We surprised ourselves by how promptly and efficiently we completed all the actions required by the checklist that accompanied the message. Some of the checklist actions came with worrying implications. One of the last

was to “Strap in and Lock Chairs.” This was, of course, to keep us from being thrown out of our chairs if a nuclear blast erupted in the proximity of our capsule.

In a matter of just moments, all American strategic nuclear retaliatory forces went to the readiness status of a loaded gun with safety off and hammer cocked. Gail and I could not know it, of course, but that April evening of 1974, three of the fifteen crews on alert that night were relieved in the field, which meant they were deemed unqualified to perform alert duty because they called the Command Post to question the need to react to this ominous but authentic message.

I and the rest of the 30 missile crew members of the 351st Strategic Missile Wing, all across and beneath the Missouri countryside, were now strapped in chairs, with nowhere to go. Due to the nature of the message, another would soon follow, a message that would either escalate the level of readiness - there wasn’t far to go - and possibly direct nuclear weapons release, or a de-escalation message. Either way, we could not remain at this level of readiness for very long.

Gail and I sat silently. Strapped in, he sat with his back to me, fixed on the Missile Status Indicator Panel, and his launch switch to his right. I sat perpendicular to him several feet behind, mulling over what was happening and the consequences of what we may have to do in the next few minutes. I finally had time to think rather than react. I was ready; now we waited.

There I was, a 22-year old ordered to be strapped in a chair in a nuclear missile launch control center sixty feet under the Missouri countryside, around bedtime in the Midwest of the United States. I wore sweats and was in stocking feet. An inserted launch key on my left, and

the unopened authentication documents on my work desk, were dire reminders of what might happen very, very soon.

I questioned why this was happening, what international event beyond the locked blast door of our capsule had precipitated this very dangerous alert level. Was it Russia, China, the Middle East? I didn't know, couldn't know, couldn't guess, so I let all my thoughts of why this was happening drift into the background. Whatever the reason, this was happening. Ten minutes of silence behind Gail seemed like ten hours. I wondered about human things like, will I ever see daylight again? Will I ever get married and have children? Will I see my parents and sister again? Is my death just around the corner? Soldiers awaiting combat had these same anxious feelings. Mine were just as real, every bit as if I were on a battlefield preparing to engage an enemy. The difference was that turning my launch key a quarter-turn to the right would end humanity as we knew it. I had a thousand questions, but I did not have this one: I *knew* that if a valid and authentic execution message came to us, I would complete the mission. That's what I was trained to do, no matter what the cause or course. Gail and I had to turn keys together, along with at least one of the other four squadron crews in another control center to launch our missiles.

With a suddenness that made me jump, another deetle, deetle, deetle message, the Primary Alerting System, came over the loudspeaker. Gail and I again individually copied and decoded this new EAM, quickly and carefully. If it proved to be valid and authentic, this last message would cast our fate.

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But this coded message lowered the level of readiness; still higher than normal, but headed in the right direction.

By midnight in Missouri, through de-escalating coded messages, we returned to a normal state of alert. Gail and I resumed the tedium and routines to which we were accustomed – the constant whir of the motor generator in the dimly lit capsule. I returned to my Masters college homework.

Shift over, we returned to Whiteman AFB, more than eager to learn what had happened to cause the high alert. It turned out the Soviets launched one ICBM from an operational silo with a projected trajectory aimed at Fairchild AFB in Washington state. The missile carried a short fuel load and fell harmlessly into the north Pacific. The intel folks believed it was deliberate, a risky move to test America's command and control system. Our air base also had B-52 bombers on alert to crash-start their engines, taxi to the end of the runway with engines running, and await takeoff orders. It was that close.