

Prologue

It was the most dangerous period in East-West relations since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The previous decade and a half had seen the military ascendancy of the Russian Federation and the renewal of its economic prospects dashed by the collapse of the oil markets. The subtle influence of so-called “Green Parties” in Germany had completely closed down the country’s nuclear power capacity, making the largest consumer of energy in Europe completely dependent on Russian natural gas, not only for heating but also for electrical power generation.

The military adventures against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 had convinced Russia’s revanchist president, Mikhail Ivanovich Platov, that NATO and the European Union were unwilling to risk war, even in the face of the most naked aggression. He began a long campaign to restore Russia to its “natural” borders, using means ranging from economic coercion to outright military threats to intimidate the smaller nations along Russia’s periphery. With the West riven by political

strife, he felt there would be no better time to wring out concessions to bolster Russia's military security. He would start by establishing a land corridor through Poland and Lithuania to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea. Kaliningrad was of enormous military and economic importance to Russia, being its only year-round ice-free seaport on the Baltic Sea. It was also vulnerable to counter-coercion from the West, as any land traffic between the enclave and Russia would have to pass through at least two other countries. That vulnerability needed to be fixed.

Platov dusted off the playbook that had worked so well before in Georgia and Ukraine. This involved fomenting unrest among the ethnic Russians toward the Polish and Lithuanian authorities, moving substantial military forces to conduct "exercises" in the Grodno region of the Russian puppet state of Belarus, and threats to curtail or cut off oil and natural gas supplies to the West. Given time, the broad front political, economic, military, and psychological pressures would force the West to shrug and deliver another bloodless victory to Russia.

This time, it did not work.

Poland and Lithuania were far more homogeneous and nationalistic than the Russia-adjacent regions of Ukraine and Georgia and, unlike those states, were governed by relatively progressive and uncorrupted regimes. Also, unlike those states, Poland and Lithuania were not unaligned countries some distance from Western military centers. These were *NATO* countries with solid internal lines of defense and

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communications. A trustworthy and professional military cadre might have pointed out these basic first principles and dissuaded Platov from this effort. But like his distant predecessor Josef Stalin, he had purged the officer corps of no-men, preferring the loyalty of yes-men to competence.

The governments of the West came together solidly and quietly on the issue so as not to panic their populations or trigger financial collapse. The senior military officers in the West also conveyed a strong and unequivocal message to their Russian counterparts. A single Russian aircraft, tank tread, or soldier's boot crossing the Polish or Lithuanian borders would unleash a decisive counterattack on *all* Russian conventional forces across the theater. And if they thought firing nuclear weapons was an option, the West would ensure there was nothing left of Russia but a sad story, regardless of the cost.

That threat convinced even the bellicose Platov to move toward disengagement, but there had to be a show of force for internal purposes. Russian Long-Range Aviation units carried this out. Tu-95 "Bear" bombers launched from Siberia to the edge of U.S. airspace over the Bering Sea in the West. In the East, Tu-160 "Blackjacks" flew from Caracas, Venezuela, to the U.S. Gulf Coast, and Tu-22M "Backfires" from San Antonio de los Baños Airfield southwest of Havana, Cuba, to the U.S. Southern Atlantic Coast. The Russians made no secret that these aircraft were carrying nuclear weapons—it was the purpose of the show of force. The U.S. Air Force dutifully intercepted and flew formation

on the bombers with fully armed fighter aircraft. This was not the usual “poking the bear” operations, and both sides were on high alert during the bomber flights.

Formation flying carries a much higher risk of collision, particularly among tired, scared men and women flying at night around foreign aircraft with different flight procedures and communications protocols. It was not a surprise that a U.S. F-16 interceptor and a Russian Backfire “bumped” in the Air Defense Identification Zone. What was a surprise was that the collision triggered the drop of the bomber’s Kh-47 Kinzhal hypersonic missile. As the crew of the bomber and the fighter’s pilot fought to regain control of their respective aircraft, the missile’s rocket engine ignited after it had dropped fifty meters, quickly accelerating it to its maximum speed of twelve times the speed of sound. The disabled F-16’s wingman promptly fell back, locked his fire control radar on the bomber, and called his controller.

“Flash, Flash, Flash, Rondo Two, Bogie has launched, repeat strategic missile inbound!”

“Rondo Two, Plaintree, confirm strategic missile launch!”

“Plaintree, Rondo Two, confirm strategic missile launch heading Northwest! Rondo One and Bogie collided, followed by launch. I am locked on to Bogie now. Request weapons free!”

“Rondo Two, Plaintree, hold and standby!”

“Roger. Break, break. One, this is Two, come in!”

“Two, One. You’ve got this one. My hands are full right now.

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“One, Two, roger.”

“American fighter, this is bomber. Launch is accident! Missile not arm! Repeat, launch is accident, missile not arm!” It was the bomber crew calling on the UHF distress frequency.

“Bomber, maintain heading, airspeed, and altitude. If you deviate, I will destroy you. Acknowledge!” *Go ahead and try to run, you son of a bitch!*

“American fighter, this is bomber. I comply.”

“Plaintree, Rondo Two, I am in contact with Bogie. They claim the launch was accidental, and the missile is unarmed. Over.”

“Two, Plaintree, do you have a visual on the missile?”

“Negative, Plaintree, it’s long gone.”

“Rondo Two, roger. Weapons tight. Direct bogie to RTB. Follow until you hit the Cuban ADIZ. Over.”

“Rondo Two, roger, out.” He switched to the emergency frequency. “Russian bomber, this is the American fighter. You will execute a slow right turn to a heading of two three zero. Acknowledge.”

“American fighter, I am turning right to two three zero.”

The two aircraft completed a slow turn to the southwest, the F-16 trailing the larger bomber. The infuriated F-16 pilot was struggling to keep from pressing the fire switch as he listened to the steady growl of his Sidewinder missile lock-on tone. *This bastard just launched a NUCLEAR MISSILE, and we are letting him go? WTF!*

On the ground, the alert went out instantly to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe in Mons,

Belgium, North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs, and Strategic Command at Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha. NORAD activated defensive systems, but it was for naught—the Kinzhal, Russian for “Dagger,” flew so fast that its shock wave generated a plasma cloud that made it invisible to radar. Even if the missile could be tracked, nothing could fly fast enough to catch it.

The lack of indications and warnings of other offensive activity by the Russians lent credence to the claim that the launch had been accidental. They would know whether the missile was deliberately targeted and armed within ten minutes—the time it would take for the missile to exhaust its fuel. At that point, everyone could either breathe a sigh of relief or prepare for the next phase of the destruction of human civilization.

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Deployment

Sailing Vessel *High Dawn*, Gulf of Mexico north of the
Florida Keys
02:07 EST, 10 January

Heinrich Köhler eyed the slowly approaching beach of the island through the night vision ocular. *A few hundred meters to go, then the last turn into the wind, and we anchor. Nearly done.* He confirmed his estimate using the hand-held GPS unit—283 meters. It would be close enough to the beach for short boat trips, but not so near that an unexpected squall could put them on the beach. After coming so far, he would not be undone by a rookie blunder drawing the attention of the American Coast Guard or some other helpful do-gooder. Not with a metric ton of cocaine and one hundred kilos of fentanyl on board.

The two thousand three hundred mile trip had begun a little over two weeks earlier for Köhler. His employers dispatched him and two assistants to take charge of the *High Dawn*, a beautiful sixty-five-foot cabin sloop in

Greenwich, Connecticut. The yacht's owners were a Wall Street power couple who had lately made some abysmal market choices and needed quick cash. They made the fatal mistake of contacting his organization through one of their dodgier clients in hopes of a one-and-done trip to South America and back to clear their debts with no one the wiser. They were quite adept at working the system to clean up dirty cash and carefully and completely planned that aspect of the operation. Unfortunately for them, their skills in white-collar crime did not provide them with insight into the realities of the underworld of narcotics smuggling.

Köhler could not believe his luck when the two insisted on making the trip "to keep an eye on things." He feigned a mild annoyance and then acquiescence to the demand to keep them on the hook. From his perspective, the situation could not have been better: two wealthy gay men on a Caribbean vacation on their new yacht with a dour German captain and two crewmen provided the perfect cover for the trip down. It also obviated the need to dispose of them in Connecticut, risking discovery and failure before the journey began. The men's insistence on making the trip bought them an additional week of life. Their usefulness ended after the onload and departure from La Guaira, Venezuela, when they just became another liability. Both were quickly and efficiently disposed of at sea.

The organization took a substantial risk with this trip, concentrated in a single load rather than dispersed over several vessels. Köhler had sold them on the idea a year before—use their radar masker and decoy vessels to

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get a single large load through at minor risk rather than accept the almost certain loss of some portion of the product in many smaller loads. Operational security was the critical factor for success. They would not go into any port or marina. Eight terminal points for the trip were selected among the less-traveled but accessible locations in the Florida Keys. All were reconnoitered just before nightfall, and the status of clear or occupied had been broadcast by radio "in the blind." Köhler himself would select the final destination and call it in once the *High Dawn* was anchored and secured.

With only a couple of minutes to go before anchoring, now was the time to go live and get things moving. After checking that Paolo was in position on the bow to release the anchor, Köhler turned the helm over to Jaime and ducked into the cabin to retrieve the satellite phone to make the call. He had to weave around the massive stacks of cargo in the cabin to get to the storage cabinet. He powered it on and verified he had a good signal link. It was the last act of his life.

Jaime and Paolo had a brief glimpse of a bright light approaching at over 3.5 kilometers per second, just long enough to turn their heads before the impact. Like Köhler working below in the cabin, they never knew what hit them.

Water, like all liquids, is virtually incompressible. A supersonic shock wave moving through the water is a solid wall for all practical purposes. This one broadsided the *High Dawn*, with the equivalent effect of dropping the boat onto a solid surface from sixty feet in the air. The three men were actually stationary at the outset of the

event—the boat itself was “thrown” into them by the impact, killing them all instantly.

The *High Dawn* herself was laid waste. The shock wave crushed the starboard side of the hull. The mast stay on the port side snapped, and the mast itself was toppling over the starboard side, its attachment point to the deck shearing. Then the air shock wave hit, lifting the mast clear, snapping the starboard stay, running rigging, and the electric cable to the masker array. It was swept into the sea, along with Jaime and Paolo’s bodies and anything else not fastened to the deck.

Köhler’s command had become his tomb, rapidly filling with water from hundreds of cracks in the hull. Ironically, the priceless cargo was undamaged in the disaster, packaged in bales sealed in plastic and close-packed in any available space inside. The positive buoyancy of the bales would provide enough floatation to keep the boat from sinking for days as it sped off into the Gulf of Mexico with the residual momentum of the impact.

Two hours later, well past the expected time the *High Dawn* should have reported in, calls went out to the onboard satellite phones, then the crew’s cell phones, and finally, first in code, then in the clear on marine band radio. When it became apparent that no answer was forthcoming, the alarm went out, and the organization began deploying resources for a covert search. Losing this cargo would be a significant hit to the bottom line. Both inside and outside the organization, those responsible would pay dearly if it could not be recovered.