

SACEUR Exercise ABLE ARCHER 83 (U)

After Action Report (U)

I. (U) General.

A. ~~SECRET~~ ABLE ARCHER (AA) is an annual SACEUR-sponsored Allied Command Europe CPX to practice command and control procedures with particular emphasis on the transition from purely conventional operations to chemical, nuclear and conventional operations. It is the culmination of SACEUR's annual AUTUMN FORGE exercise series.

B. ~~SECRET~~ ABLE ARCHER 83 was conducted 7-11 Nov 83 with three days of "low spectrum" conventional play followed by two days of "high spectrum" nuclear warfare. Due to the low spectrum lead-in for AA 83, SAC was invited to provide liaison officers/advisors to observe and comment on operation of B-52 and KC-135 assets in accordance with SACEUR OPLANS 10604, FANCY GIRL and 10605, GOLDEN EAGLE.

C. (U) SAC Participation (Background)

1. ~~SECRET~~ SAC participated in a previous AA with two observers. Due to the nature of the exercise and the possible political implications or inferences of B-52 involvement, future SAC participation was discouraged.

2. ~~SECRET~~ SHAPE announced that AA 83 scenario had been changed to include three days of low spectrum activity and requested that SAC take an active part in the exercise. SAC proposed sending a team of two observers to each MSC, SHAPE and UK HAOC. SHAPE accepted this proposal, with the understanding that personnel were to act as observers/advisors to the staff at each level. A description of ADVON activities at these locations is contained in Section II.

D. (U) SAC objectives for ABLE ARCHER 83 were to:

1. ~~SECRET~~ Observe NATO play of B-52 and KC-135 employment in accordance with SACEUR OPLANS.
2. (U) Determine if future participation is warranted, and if so, to what extent.
3. (U) Interface with SACEUR and MSC War Headquarters' staffs for mutual education.
4. (U) Update location guides.

E. (U) SAC ADVON composition for ABLE ARCHER 83 was as follows:

1. (U) AFNORTH:
Maj Paul J. Erbacher, 7AD/DOO, Bomber Planner
Maj Arunas Siulte, 7AD/DO6, Tanker Planner

Able

the exercise had all the earmarks of a genuine countdown to war, masquerading as a war game.

According to some former Soviet officials, the KGB—Russia's spy agency—concluded that NATO forces had indeed been placed on war footing and that NATO was quite possibly in the final stages of preparing to attack the Soviet Union. In response, Moscow put its own nuclear-capable aircraft on alert.

The crisis—for crisis it was—fortunately ended there. The NATO exercise, Able Archer 83, was over in days. It soon became obvious that the drill was not a mask for a real-world NATO operation against the Soviet Union. But to Cold War historians, the episode has become a cautionary tale. It showed how easily one superpower might misread the other's nuclear intentions and how quickly deterrence might crumble as a result.

In fact, some analysts see the Soviet response to Able Archer as having brought the world closer to nuclear war than any event since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Able Archer was not an exercise in isolation. In some ways, it was the culmination of Autumn Forge 83, a months-long series of interrelated NATO maneuvers. A final phase of Autumn Forge—Reforger 83—involved the physical deployment of some 19,000 US troops and 1,500 tons of cargo to West Germany and the Netherlands. Able Archer took place when NATO readiness was at a highly elevated state.

Tensions had been escalating right up until the war game. For years, the USSR's leaders had been increasingly worried about what they called the "international correlation of forces" against them. For Moscow, the tides of history seemed to be ebbing out, not running in.

At the time, the Soviet Union's foreign adventures were draining the

NATO UNCLASSIFIED

Exercise Scenario

Fall 1983 was one of the most tense periods of the long Cold War standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States. Moscow was angry and worried about Washington's military buildup and NATO's pending deployment of Pershing II nuclear missiles. The US, for its part, was outraged at the USSR's recent destruction of KAL 007, a civilian Korean airliner that had wandered into Soviet airspace.

In this charged atmosphere, the US and its NATO allies conducted a realistic command post exercise that involved the simulated release of nuclear weapons. Watching this war game closely with a variety of technical and spying techniques, the USSR apparently panicked. To Soviet eyes,

leadership in ORANGE in February 1983. Criticism of following West to gain new influence in the Third World, especially to prevent the BLUE decision to modernize Western

83: Continuing Iran-Iraq War, with ORANGE providing oil deliveries to Iran. Also arms deliveries to Syria and South

83: Gulf States feel threatened by growing ORANGE involvement. US sends military advisors and increases naval presence

growing unrest in Eastern Europe

ORANGE unable to keep its economic aid promises to E. Also pro-ORANGE political party and pressure group the government's policies and calls for closer alignment with

ORANGE steps up propaganda campaign against the West.

83: ORANGE condemns US military presence and naval

Archer

By Peter Grier

A misread war game, colored by Cold War suspicion, brought the world a hair's breadth from accidental nuclear war.

country. In the early 1980s, Afghanistan was the Red Army's Vietnam, a trap it could not seem to escape. Cuba required expensive patronage. The Soviet-backed Angola regime was struggling against an insurgency that received some aid from the United States. Nicaragua's leftist Sandinistas faced US-backed rebels, as well.

Meanwhile, US defense spending had turned upward in the last years of the Jimmy Carter presidency. Ronald Reagan ratcheted it much higher.

Hurricane Alert

In Moscow's eyes, the US armed forces seemed as if they were almost taunting their Soviet counterparts. The Reagan Administration had initiated a classified psychological operations program involving air and naval probes near Soviet borders. US aircraft or ships would seemingly appear from nowhere and approach the USSR's airspace or waters at high speed, peeling off at the last moment. The point was to keep Moscow off-balance while learning more about Soviet

early warning capabilities and practices.

Faced with all this, the KGB's foreign intelligence directorate drew up an assessment concluding, in essence, that the USSR was losing the Cold War. Then "the Politburo issued what amounted to a full-scale hurricane alert," wrote Benjamin B. Fischer, a CIA historian.

Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev and KGB Chief Yuri V. Andropov proclaimed this warning before a closed meeting of intelligence officers in May 1981. First Brezhnev outlined his worries about the direction of Washington policy.

Then Andropov took the podium and said flatly that the US was preparing for a surprise nuclear attack on the USSR. All Soviet intelligence agencies would join forces in a new collection effort to thwart America's plans. This effort would be called Operation RYAN, after the Russian-language acronym for Raketno

Yadernoye Napadenie, or "Nuclear Missile Attack."

Operation RYAN was a high priority for Soviet spies throughout 1981 and 1982, but it was not their top or main focus. It continued apace even when Brezhnev died in November 1982, after years of failing health, ending a period of drift and stagnation at the top of the Soviet hierarchy. (His successor, Andropov, at first impressed US officials as an energetic and able man, but Andropov's own declining health quickly sapped his vitality. He died in early 1984.)

In February 1983, however, KGB station chiefs suddenly received orders from Moscow that Operation RYAN was now "of particularly grave importance," according to a cable provided and translated by Oleg A. Gordievsky, a KGB colonel who was an agent of British intelligence for a decade before escaping to the West.

USSR spies were to organize a "continual watch" for signs of preparation

Left and below: President Ronald Reagan meets in 1987 with Oleg Gordievsky, a former colonel in the KGB—and a longtime spy for Britain until he escaped to the West. Gordievsky was able to provide context for and insight into the Soviets' strong reactions to Able Archer.



Photos by Mary Anne Fackelmaier, via National Archives and Ronald Reagan Presidential Library



Soviet Thinking on the Possibility

20 December 1983

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE



Top: Time magazine chose US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Yuri Andropov as "Men of the Year" for 1983. **Above:** A Pershing II missile is launched on a test flight in 1983. The impending deployment of the intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Western Europe prompted Andropov to call Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative "insane," predicting a renewed and dangerous arms race between the US and USSR.

for nuclear war in political, economic, and military sectors.

In essence, the KGB was betting that a decision to launch nuclear war would be so momentous for the US that it would ripple throughout the society in visible ways. US and NATO government, military, intelligence, and civil defense bases were even more closely watched, with service and technical workers in particular targeted for recruitment, according to Fischer.

What caused this sudden surge in RYAN's importance? Most likely, it was the impending deployment of Pershing II intermediate-range ballistic missiles in West Germany. Accurate and fast, Pershing IIs were powerful enough to destroy Soviet command bunkers. By locating them in Western Europe, US officials intended to link the fate of the US and its allies more closely and make the NATO nuclear deterrent more credible. The Soviets, though, called them a destabilizing threat that could reach Moscow in minutes and thus would be a useful nuclear first strike weapon.

Two other developments in early and mid-1983 caused superpower tensions to worsen further.

In late March, Reagan publicly outlined the Strategic Defense Initiative, a multilayer space- and ground-based antimissile structure intended to involve everything from space-based "rail guns" to superfast ground-based interceptor rockets. Moscow worried that the program would create a whole new category of fantastically expensive antimissile weaponry that Washington would dominate and that might negate Russia's offensive missile force.

In response, Andropov lashed out in intemperate terms, saying that upsetting the existing deterrent nuclear balance would launch a runaway race in both offensive and defensive strategic arms.

"Engaging in this is not just irresponsible, it is insane," said Andropov in response to questions from a *Pravda* correspondent.

Then came KAL 007. On Sept. 1, a Soviet Su-15 shot down a Korean Airlines 747 carrying 269 passengers and crew. The airliner had transited the Kamchatka Peninsula, a sensitive Soviet military region, then re-entered Soviet airspace near Sakhalin Island. The air defense response was not swift; by the time the interceptor fired at the airplane it was re-entering international airspace.

Moscow didn't publicly admit what had happened for five days. It then blamed the event on the US, saying the 747 had been on some sort of American intelligence mission. Reagan did Andropov one better in the toughness of his response. He called the shootdown "an act of barbarism" from a country that "wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life."

A Dire Scenario

On Sept. 26, a Soviet early warning satellite erroneously reported the launch of an American ICBM. Soviet officers correctly recognized it as a computer fault, especially since it was highly unlikely the US would launch only a single missile, but the incident put Soviet leaders on edge.

Able Archer 83 took place only a few weeks later. The war game was conducted from Nov. 7 to 11, 1983. It was designed to practice high-level staff procedures and interactions, with a particular emphasis on "the transition from conventional to nonconventional operations, including the use of nuclear weapons," according to an unclassified NATO summary of its operations.

The notional action of the war game spanned Europe, from Norway (launching pad for attacks on the Kola Peninsula) to the intra-German border (fighting along a broad front) to the United Kingdom (attacks on NATO airfields) to Bulgaria and even Crimea.

Even by the standards of the era, the scenario for the exercise was dire. The setup was this: Orange forces—the thinly veiled Soviet army—had dealt with growing political unrest in Eastern Europe by invading Yugoslavia in late October.

In the game, on Nov. 3, Orange crossed the Finnish border. A day later it rolled into Norway—a NATO member—and crossed the inner German border. Simultaneously, Orange began to occupy Greece while conducting naval attacks in the Adriatic, Mediterranean, and Black seas.

Then things got really serious.

Facing stiff resistance from Blue

(NATO) troops, Orange resorted to widespread use of chemical weapons.

While only NATO headquarters staffers were direct participants, there were some moments of scripted drama. At one point, war gamers were directed to evacuate from their permanent war headquarters to an alternate location, where they donned helmets, gas masks, and chemical suits.

Early plans for the exercise even included participation by President Reagan, Vice President George H.W. Bush, and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger.

On Nov. 8—again, all within the exercise—the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, requested initial limited use of nuclear weapons against predetermined targets. This didn't stop Orange's advance, though. The next day, SACEUR asked for follow-on, more widespread nuclear use.

Command authorities granted this request on Nov. 10, according to the NATO summary. On Nov. 11, the second wave of Blue nuclear weapons unleashed atomic devastation on Orange. And there the exercise terminated.

The point of the drill was not to fight a simulated war to its conclusion, but to practice the political interactions and communications necessary to do so, should it ever become necessary.

The Soviets knew that NATO had conducted Able Archer exercises in previous years. But they noticed that the 1983 version was somewhat different from its predecessors.

Originally, Weinberger and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were scheduled to participate, along with Reagan and Bush. This participation on the part of top officials had been scaled back due to Soviet nervousness, wrote former *Washington Post* diplomatic correspondent Don Oberdorfer in his book *From the Cold War to the New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1991*. But Able Archer was still more realistic than it had been in the past.

It was different in that it covered the full spectrum of conflict: The transition from conventional weapons to the full use of the West's nuclear arsenal within the exercise's scenario was new.

With all these events in the swirl, the KGB saw the rapid succession of Reforger and Able Archer—which included bursts of encrypted communications—as potentially an actual countdown to nuclear war.

The Soviet espionage hierarchy believed they had to treat Able Archer as real. Gordievsky said that on the night of Nov. 8 or 9 (he can't recall the exact date) the KGB sent a flash cable to its Western European station chiefs that US forces in Europe had gone on alert and some troops were being mobilized.

The cable requested Soviet spies to evaluate possible reasons for these supposed US actions. Were they reactions to the bombing attack on a Marine barracks in Beirut in late October? Were they part of some larger exercise? Or were they the prelude to hostilities?

"At two air bases in East Germany and Poland, [nuclear-capable] Soviet fighters were put on alert—for the first and last time during the Cold War," wrote CIA historian Fischer in a secret article for the agency's *Studies in Intelligence* series. The article was declassified in 2011.

Genuine Fears or Fake Ones?

Other analysts have asserted that the Soviets went so far as to put their entire ballistic missile force on an elevated alert status. Under these conditions, another false-alarm ICBM launch detection—like the ones the Soviets experienced in September—could have been catastrophic.

Reagan, writing in his book *An American Life*, said he had a hard time believing the Soviets could have imagined the US striking the first blow in a nuclear war, but developed a profound worry that leaders on either side could apply "reason" in such a crisis, with "six minutes to decide" what to do about a detected incoming strike.

American listening posts noticed that Warsaw Pact communications traffic spiked sharply during the period of Able Archer. Soviet intelligence efforts were at full extension, watching for signs of real movement by NATO forces.

A few weeks after the exercise had ended, the CIA's London station reported that the USSR had been concerned that the activity masked an actual US move toward war. This account probably came from Gordievsky. But a similar report of Soviet fears came from a "well-connected American who had heard it from senior officials in an Eastern European country closely allied to Moscow," wrote Oberdorfer.

US National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane discounted these reports,

considering them Soviet disinformation, and told Reagan as much. But early in 1984, CIA Director William J. Casey sent over a more extensive report that sobered minds at the White House.

After reading it, Reagan asked McFarlane how Soviet leaders could put any credence in a nonexistent US intention to destroy them with a nuclear first strike. That was something to think about, Reagan said.

"In a meeting with his senior White House advisors the same day, Reagan spoke about the biblical prophecy of Armageddon, a final world-ending battle between good and evil, a topic that fascinated the President. McFarlane thought it was not coincidental that Armageddon was on Reagan's mind," wrote Oberdorfer.

Was Moscow genuinely concerned about the nuclear headquarters exercise? Or were its fears faked? Two US Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIEs) produced in 1984 concluded that the entire war scare of 1983 was a Soviet scheme intended partly to frighten the US and its allies into toning down their rhetoric and perhaps rein in their defense plans as well.

In 1990, however, an extensive review of the situation by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board reversed this conclusion. The SNIEs had not looked at things from the USSR's point of view and therefore had not fully grasped the Soviet fears, according to the advisory board report.

The "war scare was an expression of a genuine belief on the part of Soviet leaders that [the] US was planning a nuclear first strike," said the unclassified summary of the report.

A few years later, Robert M. Gates, who was CIA deputy director for intelligence when Able Archer 83 took place, concurred in this judgment in his 1996 book *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*.

"I don't think the Soviets were crying wolf," Gates wrote. "They may not have believed a NATO attack was imminent in November 1983, but they did seem to believe that the situation was very dangerous. And US intelligence had failed to grasp the true extent of their anxiety." ■

Peter Grier, a Washington, D.C., editor for the Christian Science Monitor, is a longtime contributor to Air Force Magazine. His most recent article, "Kittinger," appeared in August.