

The Five Minute Decision that Saved the World

by Douglas Mattern



Top photo: Stanislav Petrov speaking at the United Nations
Bottom photo: Photograph taken in the office of Walter Cronkite on January 20, 2006. Left to right: Stanislav Petrov, Walter Cronkite, Douglas Mattern.

THIS PAST JANUARY 19, 2006, a forgotten hero of our time was honored at a special ceremony held in the Dag Hammarskjöld auditorium at the United Nations in New York City. Stanislav Petrov spoke at the UN and was presented with a World Citizen Trophy by the Association of World Citizens for his heroic decision in 1983 that has earned him the title of “The Man Who Averted Nuclear War.”

This refers to the incident on September 26, 1983, when Lieutenant Colonel Petrov was the duty officer at Serpukhov-15, the Soviet Union’s main command bunker just south of Moscow. He was in charge of 120 men with the responsibility of monitoring incoming signals from satellites when, suddenly, nightmare became reality as the warning system reported the Soviet Union was under attack by U.S. Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles.

It’s important to note that this was a period of high tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. President Ronald Reagan was calling the Soviets the “Evil Empire.” The Russian military had shot down a Korean

passenger jet just three weeks before this incident, and the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization were organizing a joint military exercise in Europe.

In an interview with Walter Cronkite, held the day after the UN award ceremony, Petrov talked about that fateful night when the red button beamed “START” along with flashing lights and a huge map of the United States with a U.S. base lit up showing that the missiles had been launched. Petrov’s duty was to report the attack to command headquarters, where an immediate counterattack could have been initiated.

For five minutes, however, in the midst of chaos and the prospect of total destruction, Petrov held a phone in one hand and an intercom in the other as the lights on his console continued to flash that a missile attack was on the way. Petrov believed in his gut that, contrary to what the high tech equipment was reporting, this alarm was an error. As the *Moscow News* later reported, Petrov then made his historic decision and called his Kremlin liaison to report it was a false alarm.

But Colonel Petrov didn't know for certain this was a false alarm. He later said, "I made a decision and that was it." It was only after fifteen to twenty agonizing minutes passed, as he waited to detect if U.S. missiles were incoming, that Petrov's decision proved correct. It was a system error that had signaled the attack. In his interview with the British *Daily Mail* newspaper, Petrov said that, in principle "a nuclear war could have broken out. The whole world could have been destroyed."

Dr. Bruce Blair, President of the Center for Defense Information, a leading expert on nuclear weapons and a former Minuteman missile launch officer said: "I think this is the closest we've come to accidental nuclear war."

The interview with Walter Cronkite and Stanislav Petrov was an unforgettable scene that took place behind closed doors, and at which I was personally present. Cronkite's office at CBS headquarters was crowded with a movie crew filming the conversation between the two men. This went on for about twenty-five uninterrupted minutes.

Petrov felt comfortable with Cronkite as the great journalist brought out the full story and drama of what had happened at the command bunker and Petrov's five minutes of decision. I heard Petrov explain how he had morally prepared himself for the kind of decision he was forced to make on that fateful September night. And I heard Cronkite say that Petrov's decision was "five minutes that saved the world."

The conversation then shifted to the dreary events that followed 1983, with Petrov dismissed from the military and living poorly with a meager pension in a small town outside of Moscow. Although interviewed by major media like the BBC, NBC, NOVA, and the *Washington Post*,

Petrov remained unrecognized and unrewarded until the first World Citizen Award was presented to him May 21, 2004, by the Association of World Citizens at the headquarters of the *Moscow News*. That event received large media coverage, inspired people to read about the event and send financial contributions to Petrov, and prompted a Danish movie company, Statement Film, to make a feature film on Petrov's life.

It was this company's crew that filmed the Cronkite interview. The multi-million dollar movie is entitled *The Man Who Saved the World*. The movie was filmed in Russia, the United States, and the Ukraine and is now being edited for release to theaters in the United States and elsewhere sometime around November. Though a documentary, it has been filmed like a theatrical release, without the talking heads.

The movie also demonstrates that the catastrophic danger Petrov faced in 1983 is still with us today as four thousand U.S. and Russian nuclear warheads are on hair-trigger alert, ready for launch on a few minutes notice and would destroy both countries in an hour. Such a doomsday scenario could result from an accidental missile launch, a system error, or a miscalculation.

What is clear is the nuclear nightmare can only end when all nuclear weapons are eliminated. On this point Cronkite and Petrov were in total agreement. ■

Douglas Mattern is president of the San Francisco based Association of World Citizens and author of *Looking for Square Two – Moving from War and Organized Violence to World Community*, published by American Book Publishing and available for purchase or order through local bookstores or through the internet at www.worldcitizens.org

MINIMUM SECURITY STEPHANIE MCMILLAN

