

Stanislav Petrov, 'The Man Who Saved The World,' Dies At 77

Posted by Joan Russow

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GREG MYR



"There was no rule about how long we were allowed to think before we reported a strike," Petrov told the BBC. "But we knew that every second of procrastination took away valuable time, that the Soviet Union's military and political leadership needed to be informed without delay. All I had to do was to reach for the phone; to raise the direct line to our top commanders — but I couldn't move. I felt like I was sitting on a hot frying pan."

Petrov sensed something wasn't adding up.

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He had been trained to expect an all-out nuclear assault from the U.S., so it seemed strange that the satellite system was detecting only a few missiles being launched. And the system itself was fairly new. He didn't completely trust it.

Arms control expert Jeffrey Lewis recalled the episode [in an interview last December on NPR](#) :

"[Petrov] just had this feeling in his gut that it wasn't right. It was five missiles. It didn't seem like enough. So even though by all of the protocols he had been trained to follow, he should absolutely have reported that up the chain of command and, you know, we should be talking about the great nuclear war of 1983 if any of us survived."

After several nerve-jangling minutes, Petrov didn't send the computer warning to his superiors. He checked to see if there had been a computer malfunction.

He had guessed correctly.

"Twenty-three minutes later I realized that nothing had happened," he said in 2013. "If there had been a real strike, then I would already know about it. It was such a relief."

That episode and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis are considered to be the closest the U.S. and the Soviets came to a nuclear exchange. And while the Cuban Missile Crisis has been widely examined, Petrov's actions have received much less attention.

Petrov died on May 19, at age 77, in a suburb outside Moscow, according to news reports Monday. He had long since retired and was living alone. News of his death apparently went unrecognized at the time.