

The PFIAB report also cited a January 1989 “End of Tour Report Addendum” by Lieutenant General Leonard H. Perroots, who had served as Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, US Air Forces Europe, during the 1983 Able Archer exercise, to emphasize the potential consequences of the intelligence gap during the Able Archer exercise. Perroots addressed Able Archer as well as Gordiyevskiy’s reporting in that memorandum:

1. (U) In 1983, I was assigned as the DCS for Intelligence, US Air Forces, Europe, Ramstein AB, Germany. The annual NATO Command and Control exercise ABLE ARCHER was scheduled to begin during the first week of November. The context of this nuclear command and control exercise was relatively benign; the scenario had been purposely chosen to be non-controversial, and the exercise itself was a routine annual event. This exercise closely followed the bombing of air defense sites in Lebanon and directly followed the invasion of Grenada. As I recall, however, there was no particular feeling of tension in the European Theater beyond that which is normal.

2. [*portion marking not declassified*] Only the fact that Soviet Intelligence collection assets (primarily low level signals intercept units) had failed to return to garrison after their normal concentrated coverage of NATO’s AUTUMN FORGE exercise series could be reckoned strange at all. As the kickoff date of ABLE ARCHER neared it was clear that there was a great deal of Soviet interest in the forthcoming events. Again, this seemed nothing out of the ordinary. We knew that there was a history of intensive Soviet collection against practice Emergency Action Messages (EAM’s) related to nuclear release.

3. [*portion marking not declassified*] ABLE ARCHER started in the morning of 3 November, and progressed immediately in the scenario to NATO STATE ORANGE. At 2100Z on 04 November NSA issued an electrical product report G/00/3083-83, entitled “SOVIET AIR FORCES, GSFG, PLACED ON HEIGHTENED READINESS, 2 NOVEMBER 1983.” I saw this message on the morning of 5 November and discussed it with my air analysts. It stated that as of 1900Z on 02 November the fighter-bomber divisions of the air force of Group Soviet Forces, Germany had been placed in a status of heightened alert. All

divisional and regimental command posts and supporting command and control elements were to be manned around-the-clock by augmented teams.

4. [*portion marking not declassified*] In addition to the directed command and control changes the fighter-bomber divisions were also ordered to load out one squadron of aircraft in each regiment (if this order applied equally across GSFG the result would have been at least 108 fighter-bombers on alert). These aircraft were to be armed and placed at readiness 3 (30 minute alert) to “destroy first-line enemy targets.” The alert aircraft were to be equipped with a self-protection jamming pod. We knew from subsequent NSA reporting that a squadron at Neuruppin, East Germany sought and was apparently granted permission to configure its aircraft without the ECM pod because of an unexpected weight and balance problem. My air analysts opined that this message meant that at least this particular squadron was loading a munitions configuration that they had never actually loaded before, i.e., a warload.

5. [*portion marking not declassified*] At this point, I spoke to CinC-USAFA, General Billy Minter. I told him we had some unusual activity in East Germany that was probably a reaction to the ongoing ABLE ARCHER. He asked if I thought we should increase the real force generation. I said that we would carefully watch the situation, but there was insufficient evidence to justify increasing our real alert posture. At this point in the exercise our forces were in a simulated posture of NATO State ORANGE and local SALTY NATION tests involving simulated generation of combat aircraft were underway at various locations including Ramstein AB. If I had known then what I later found out I am uncertain what advice I would have given.

6. [*portion marking not declassified*] An NSA message dated 022229Z DEC 83 provided the rest of the picture as far as we knew it—at least until the reports began to surface from the British penetration of the KGB, Oleg Gordievskiy. This GAMMA message was entitled “SOVIET 4th AIR ARMY AT HEIGHTENED READINESS IN REACTION TO NATO EXERCISE ABLE ARCHER, 2–11 NOVEMBER 1983.” This report stated that the alert had been ordered by the Chief of the Soviet Air Forces, Marshal Kutakhov, and that all units of the Soviet 4th Air Army were involved in the alert “which included preparations for immediate use of nuclear weapons.” This report described activity that was contemporaneous with that reflected in East Germany, but because of the specific source of this material it was not available in near realtime. The two pieces taken together present a much more ominous picture.

7. [*portion marking not declassified*] Equally ominous in its own way was the fact that this alert was never reflected at all by the I&W system.

At the time of this occurrence there was no distribution of electrically reported GAMMA material to the Tactical Fusion Center at Boerfink. I remedied that shortfall in the aftermath of this activity. Secondly, a real standdown of aircraft was secretly ordered in at least the Soviet Air Forces units facing the Central Region, and that standdown was not detected. The Soviet alert in response to ABLE ARCHER began after nightfall on Wednesday evening, there was no flying on the following two days which led to the weekend, and then the following Monday was 7 November, the revolution holiday. The absence of flying could always be explained, although a warning condition was raised finally on about the ninth of November when overhead photography showed fully armed FLOGGER aircraft on air defense alert at a base in East Germany. When this single indicator was raised, the standdown had been underway for a week.

8. [*portion marking not declassified*] For the next six months I was on a soapbox about ABLE ARCHER whenever I could discuss it at the appropriate classification level. I spoke to the Senior Military Intelligence Officers' Conference (SMIOC), and I buttonholed a lot of people. I suggested that perhaps we should move our annual exercise away from the November 7 holiday, because it is clear to me that the conjunction of the two events causes a warning problem that can never be solved. Our problem here was that we had a couple of very highly classified bits of intelligence evidence about a potentially disastrous situation that never actually came to fruition. For decision-makers it was always difficult to believe that there could have been any serious reaction by the Soviets to such a "benign" exercise as ABLE ARCHER. From the Soviet perspective, however, it might have appeared very different. It was difficult for all of us to grasp that, but Oleg Gordievskiy's reporting began to provide a somewhat more frightening perspective when it became available in the Fall of 1985.

9. (S) By the time Gordievskiy's reporting began to surface for analytical review I was the Director of DIA. Gordievskiy's initial reporting about a "war scare" in 1983 immediately caught my attention. It should be pointed out at the outset that Gordievskiy knew nothing of a military alert during ABLE ARCHER. He did, however, tell us something of a chilling story about Moscow Center's Intelligence tasking during 1983. He related that there was a project called either "RYaN" or "VRYaN," the latter probably being the full form of a Russian acronym meaning "sudden rocket nuclear attack." There was a cadre of specialists in Moscow Center charged with, among other things, finding the evidence of planning for a western attack on the Soviet Union. Beginning in 1982 and continuing into 1983 Gordievskiy says that this group became ever more insistent that an attack was being planned by the West. By March 1983 the KGB officers in Moscow

had decided that ABLE ARCHER 83 would provide an excellent cover for the planned attack, and KGB and GRU residencies around the world were being directed to find the evidence. Gordievskiy, living in London at the time, states that he never believed there was really a threat, and that the London residency of the KGB simply ignored the collection requirements until it began to become clear that Moscow was serious. During the summer of 1983 the London residency sent some reports that, in retrospect, Gordievskiy believed might have hyped the war hysteria. He never really believed in the threat, however, and reported during his debriefing in 1985 that he thought the VRYaN hysteria might have been some kind of internal political ploy. I must reiterate again that Gordievskiy did not know about the secret military alert of November 1983.

10. [portion marking not declassified] The US intelligence community has never really closed with this analytical problem. A SNIE addressed this subject, [1½ lines not declassified]. The position has been taken again and again that had there been a real alert we would have detected more of it, but this may be whistling through the graveyard. It is not certain that we looked hard enough or broadly enough for information. For Western collectors the context was peacetime without even the most basic ripples of crisis. For the Soviets, however, the view may have looked quite different. It is uncertain how close to war we came or even if that was a possibility at all, but we know from Gordievskiy that the analysts in Moscow had predicted that the West would launch the attack from a posture of NATO State ORANGE. What might have happened that day in November 1983 if we had begun a precautionary generation of forces rather than waiting for further information?

(Central Intelligence Agency, National Intelligence Council, Job 91B00551: Speeches, Lectures, Briefing Files (1988–1989), Box 1, Folder 2: C/NIC (Ermarth) Chrons March 1989)