



## False alarm: 1979 NORAD scare was one of several nuclear close calls

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Daniel Uria

Nov. 8 (UPI) -- A combination of Soviet-inspired paranoia and a nearly catastrophic blunder at the United States' top missile defense compound led to one of the closer calls of the Cold War 40 years ago, when U.S. alarms sounded a large-scale inbound nuclear attack from Russia.

The warnings sounded off early on the morning of Nov. 9, 1979, at North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, in Colorado. What [analysts saw](#) on their monitors at 3 a.m. that morning was sobering -- the Soviet Union had fired hundreds of nuclear ballistic missiles at the United States.

Alarms, in fact, were blaring at multiple U.S. defense locations -- NORAD, the U.S. Army's Fort Ritchie installation in northern Maryland near the Pennsylvania border, and locations plugged into the Worldwide Military Command and Control System, known as Wimex.

Wimex was the military's sophisticated electronic brain that connected far-flung outposts of U.S. strategic defense and provided data from satellites and perimeter radar. Implemented after the nuclear scare of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, it also provided operational support to NORAD. Wimex was so sophisticated and processed defense information so quickly, it had automated authority to unilaterally order preparations for war -- including elevating the U.S. defense condition, or DefCon, and putting bombers in the air.

President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski was awakened with a couple phone calls that morning -- the first informing him of the threat, and the second to tell him defense computers were reporting more than 2,000 inbound Soviet missiles. It appeared to be the pre-emptive strike the U.S. military -- and to a lesser degree, the American public -- had long feared.

As he prepared to contact Carter and respond by scrambling Strategic Air Command, Brzezinski received a third call. This one said the United States' early warning systems -- installations that measure scientific readings, like seismic activity, that are always recorded with ground-based ballistic missile launches -- were not reporting *anything*.

Additional systems checks ultimately revealed the truth. The scare had been a false alarm. And its place in history is now largely recognized as a very sobering reminder about the potentially dangerous mixture of computerized war machines and human error.

The frightening false alarm, it was later determined, had resulted from a nearly grave mistake made by one military officer and the failure of U.S. defense computers to recognize it.

A lieutenant colonel at NORAD headquarters was given access to the wrong machine and accidentally punched a war games tape into a missile-warning component of Wimex. The system couldn't tell the difference between the drill and reality.

"It told the rest of us we were about to be hit by a mass raid," one congressional investigator [told UPI](#) years later. "Compared to this raid, Pearl Harbor was a Sunday picnic."

"[Wimex] was going to war," a scientist at the Office of Technology Assessment added. "And it came damn close to taking the country with it."

NORAD's commander in chief later said the precise mode of failure that led to the

alarms couldn't be replicated.

The mishap spawned serious concerns among the international community and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev scolded Carter for the "tremendous danger" of the error.

Although the 1979 incident was entirely unique, it would precede other close calls during what was perhaps the most precarious period of the Cold War.

U.S. warning systems generated three more false alarms in May and June of 1980, which were attributed to a failed computer chip and "faulty message design." Then came, four years after the 1979 blunder, perhaps the most famous of all the near misses.

On Sept. 26, 1983, Moscow's satellite-based detection systems indicated that several U.S. Air Force Minuteman nuclear missiles had been launched at the Soviet Union. Soviet Lt. Colonel Stanislav Petrov received multiple launch warnings at the Oko early warning facility near Moscow -- but correctly judged the warnings were in error. It was later determined that a rare alignment had resulted in the sun's glare on high-altitude clouds that interfered with a Russian military satellite.

Petrov, who [died in 2017](#), correctly asserted in the midst of the chaos that the computer's warning of only five U.S. missiles defied conventional military theory that argued a pre-emptive strike by the United States would likely involve hundreds of missiles.

Although he has been called "the man who saved the world," Petrov later said he was reprimanded by his superiors and reassigned following the incident. The close call didn't become public knowledge until after the Soviet collapse in 1991.

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