

While The World Slept

IT was two a.m. Sunday morning. In the operations control room of Continental Command, a hundred feet below the facades of the Pentagon, Major William J. Higgins, Duty Officer, sat at his desk and studied the hourly reports from the scanning stations as they flashed on the screen in front of him. Completely surrounding North and South America was an intricate chain of detection stations sweeping the skies and seas in search of any evidence of attack from the Red bases scattered about the world.

The reports were negative. Naturally. They always had been. Always would be as far as he was concerned. Four years at this post. Four years of watching reports come in with "No Activity" on them. He fingered the wings on his jacket and thought about his father, killed in '58 flying an interceptor on a UFO over the pole. It was a negative contact then. Radio interference from the sun spots. How many men had died protecting the world from a war that would never come? He picked up his coffee cup in one hand and the comic section of the Sunday paper with the other as the reports finished and the screen darkened.

There was a knock on the door and an Air Policeman entered. "Sir, there are three gentlemen from the Russian Embassy topside. They asked to see the officer in charge."

Higgins looked at the Sergeant. "From the Russian Embassy? What in hell do they want?"

"I don't know, Sir, but they said it was urgent. They all looked scared. If you'll excuse me, Sir, they looked damned scared."

Higgins fingered the phone. He could call someone from Intelligence. No. Check it himself. Maybe they were defecting. But why come here? "Lead the way, Sergeant."

The two men walked through the various security check-points, up an elevator, through some more check-points, and

into the declassified waiting room of Continental Command. "There they are, Sir." The sergeant pointed to the three men. They were huddled together, apparently in great agitation. Higgins walked over to them.

"I'm Major William Higgins, Duty Officer. What may I do for you?"

The tallest of the three came forward. "I am Boris Amursky."

Higgins tried to hide his surprise. "Secretary to Mr. Browzvitch, the Russian ambassador?"

The Man nodded. "Please, we have little time to waste. You are familiar with our guided satellite that you call the 'Clincher'?"

Higgins was quite familiar with it. Too familiar. The Russians had at least a score or more circling the earth. Intelligence reported them capable of carrying nuclear warheads. The control system was pre-set on a target before launching, and when once in orbit it could be keyed from Earth. From that moment the satellite would begin a complex series of movements, using its rockets, to jockey into position to hit its target. Intelligence further reported that the Ruskies had so refined their system that an infinite number of approach patterns could be set up to the target. As a result, considering the speed of the approach and its infinite variations, Continental Command would be given six minutes to fix on the final path and launch an anti-missile missile to destroy it. Higgins knew they would need almost twice that.

"Yes, I am familiar with your satellite. Why?"

"Major, at this very moment one of them is beginning its approach. At exactly 4:38 it will hit and completely destroy the city of Omaha."

Higgins stood. Just stood. He turned the words over in his mind. It would never happen. It could never happen. . .

"Major, I say again, in a little more than two hours one of our satellites will hit Omaha. Then there will be no Omaha."

Higgins took a step back and turned around for a moment. Then he turned back. "Why are you telling me this?"

"We received a message at the Embassy about twenty minutes ago. It happened during a training exercise. Some-

thing was wired wrong. The safety devices were disconnected. When the button was pushed, the satellite went into orbit. It was an accident."

"Can't you push another button and destroy it?"

"No, not once it's in orbit."

"Can we stop it?"

"There's a chance." He pointed to the other two men with him. "This is Mr. Rhuchev, our cipher clerk. And Colonel Mastrichek, who knows and understands the operation of the satellite. Mr. Browzvitch, the ambassador, is at the White House now, to see your President. May I suggest you take us to your operations center immediately. We need every minute."

Major Higgins hesitated. "I do not have the authority to allow you down below."

"Major, Omaha is in your hands."

Higgins squeezed one hand with the other. "Follow me, gentlemen. I'll take you part way and then phone for further authority. The group followed him through the security points as far as he dared take them. When they reached the maximum security area just outside Operations Control, he stopped them. "Not even I can get you through here. You'll have to wait."

"I think I can vouch for them," a voice said.

The Major turned around and looked at the President, accompanied by the Russian ambassador and General Mark Allen, chief of Continental Command. Higgins nodded his recognition to the new arrivals. "This way, please."

The group of seven moved quickly into Operations. Higgins turned to the general for directions. "It's your show, Bill," the general said. "Go to it, and good luck. I'll do the praying."

Higgins pushed a button and orderly hell broke loose. In less than three minutes anti-missile stations surrounding Omaha were alerted and at their posts. The Russian cipher clerk was at a receiver waiting for information from Russia concerning the orbit of the satellite. Units around the world were locked on and tracking the target. Colonel Mastrichek was briefing the computer crew on the opera-

tion of the satellite, using design blueprints. He watched as an Air Force man photographed them. Copies would be made for the scientists who were being rushed to the Pentagon from all over the area. Cipher agents arrived from Intelligence to help the Russian clerk handle the information beginning to arrive from Russia. The General took Boris Amursky to a table, pulled out a large number of folders and began to explain the location of the missile bases, how they were armed, and how they could best use them.

The cipher clerk handed Major Higgins several sheets of paper. They contained complete details on the pattern the satellite was following from the time it was triggered until touchdown. Higgins looked at the clock on the wall. The second hand swept around to twelve, making it exactly 3:27. One hour and eleven minutes to stop a missile the size of a church tower from wiping out the fourth largest city in America.

It had been decided not to give the alarm to Omaha. It would be impossible to warn them in time. The confusion that would result would kill thousands anyway before it hit. Civil Defense units outside of the city were quietly notified to stand by and prepare for maximum effort.

The President talked quietly with General Allen and the Russian ambassador. It was agreed by all that if the missile hit, war would have to be declared. There would be no avoiding it. Less than five minutes after the explosion, thousands of ICBM's would be on their way to Russia and its puppet states from the U.S. and NATO bases around the world. Russia would retaliate. The results of this were plain. General Allen went about quietly preparing for it.

A bell rang sharply as data began coming out of the computer. The men studied it for a moment. "Major Higgins. There is a possibility we can get a shot at it before it makes its final approach. See here." The man pointed out a line drawn on a celestial map. "At this point it will approach the sector of our Dallas units. If we could get a shot at it here, and it was successful, we'd knock it out over the ocean at about 95 miles up."

"Try it," Higgins ordered. He realized that if the shot missed, the orbit might be so disturbed that they wouldn't

be able to predict where or when the satellite would hit. It could also mean that they wouldn't get another shot at it. The computer ticked away. The bell rang. A man pulled a large card out, picked up a phone, and fed the information to an officer near the city limits of Dallas, Texas. There, the data was fed into another computer and the missiles rose skyward in their launching pads and pointed toward an empty space 95 miles away, nearly straight up.

"Count-down five minutes," a voice echoed over the speaker in Operations Center. The automatic timer went into effect to launch the missiles at the approaching satellite.

The clock. Forty-two minutes until the Clincher would be due to hit Omaha. "Blast-off!" the speaker roared. There was nothing now to do except watch the converging pen points on the tracking table as the paths of the two missiles approached each other.

No one spoke. Every eye in the room followed the two pen points as they came closer together. The only sound heard was the click-clicking of the computer. The points approached as the countdown continued. "Ten seconds . . . 9 . . . 5 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . Contact," the voice said, as the two pen points met.

Major Higgins let out a whoop with the others. He looked around. It was quite a sight, the President shaking hands with the Russian ambassador, General Allen smiling at the Russian colonel, the cipher clerks, Russian and American, slapping each other on the back.

"Attention! Attention!" the speaker chattered. "Missile mis-fire! Missile mis-fire! The target is not destroyed. We will continue to track."

The smiles froze. The back slaps stopped in mid-air. The computer began again. Operators moved hesitantly to retrieve the data and analyze the information. It was plain. No evidence of a predictable orbit.

General Allen looked at the President and then slowly sat down next to the red telephone that connected him with every ICBM station under NATO. The room quieted and all eyes began their vigil on the clock. It was 4:09.

— *Jack Gill, Sc. Sr.*