

The Nuclear Option

It was the mid-1980s. Perhaps one of the most dangerous times of the Cold War. The “Wall” had not yet come down and the sabre-rattling had reached a startling crescendo. Preparations, sometimes desperate, were being made to respond to the unthinkable.

The Station Warrant Officer was doodling in his notebook during the the latter bit of the weekly staff meeting. It had gone on too long and there was little discussed which concerned him. The Admin Officer, an air-force captain the SWO considered a hopeless flake, droned on about the state of the road to operations, not that she had actually ever driven it. The SWO made eye contact with the Operations Officer, an old salt-horse, who rolled his eyes and sighed.

The Admin Officer ended her road engineering speech, satisfied that she had once again put this group of dumb sailors in awe of her abilities. The Commanding Officer thanked her and suggested further review. He then turned to the SWO, “Chief, we’re going to have to schedule a Station Defence Force exercise within the next few weeks.”

The SWO was taken aback. “Sir, we’ve completed an SDF exercise within the last six months. We’re not due until next year.”

“I know but we’ve got something from Command and they want to send a team to observe,” said the CO. “It’ll be a part of a larger operation involving Halifax. I’ll talk to you about it directly after the meeting.”

The Admin Officer jumped in, suggesting she should also attend. The CO told her she would be briefed separately but that he only wanted the SWO for the time being. The Ops Officer stood and made it clear that he deemed the meeting ended.

The SWO remained in his chair while the CO briefed him on the details of the “large” operation. It would include the base at Halifax and it would involve moving a large portion of Maritime Command Headquarters into the facilities of the small naval radio station. It sounded almost as impossible as it did impressive. To the SWO it also sounded like an enormous headache.

The naval radio station on Nova Scotia’s south shore was a strategic 24/7 operation providing the navy’s Atlantic fleet, and NATO, with continuous two-way communications. Physically, it was split in two: the operations and antenna site being located several kilometers up a winding gravel road while the administrative and housing area was situated near against the coast of St. Margret’s Bay. Only some personnel actually lived in the station’s housing. Most lived in Halifax and commuted the 55 km to stand their watches.

That was what made a Station Defence Force exercise difficult. Personnel had to be recalled and billeted. The accommodation facilities simply were not up to the task and the resultant “temporary” accommodations were sub-standard. For the upcoming event, there was also the problem of meeting the needs of a contingent from Maritime Command Headquarters, the complement of which had been advertised as “seven” but which the SWO knew would grow to over 20. This would take some doing.

The Station Defence Force was not a standing body of people. It was made up of administrative day-workers, (some of whom were medically unfit for any task beyond paperwork), and off-watch operators and technicians. The nature of the station's function meant that the SDF had an operational lifespan of about 36 hours. After that, a company of infantry from CFB Gagetown would be sent in as relief. If the infantry didn't show up, the SDF would collapse from exhaustion.

The 32 headquarters staff from Halifax showed up on a Tuesday morning. They were thoroughly examined at the gate, IDs were checked and one sub-lieutenant was threatened with a cavity search by the station's military police corporal. The Commander Maritime Command, a vice-admiral, showed up last in a staff car accompanied by various deputy chiefs of staff, none of whom were on the nominal list sent by Halifax.

The exercise proceeded through the night and into the next day. Various attempts at incursion by "Fantasians", a group of ordinary seamen awaiting training at Fleet School Halifax, were detected on each attempt, detained and duly made prisoners until their number had been depleted. The Admiral was impressed.

"Magnificent crew you have here, Chief!" exclaimed the Admiral. "Damned fine performance. They stopped every one of the enemy and kept this place secure. Nicely done! Please pass that on to all."

"I will, Sir. Thank you," said the SWO, all the while thinking to himself that if just one of those ordinary seamen had decided to come through the beaver swamp to the east, where there was no fence, he could have taken the operations site with a cap-gun.

The wrap up meeting revealed the true Maritime Command plan. The small naval radio station was expected to become the navy's emergency headquarters location in the event of a nuclear attack on Halifax. The radio station staff around the table were quite stunned. The Admin Officer beamed. She, along with one of the MARCOM staff officers, had devised the plan. Binders were handed out and the briefing commenced. The SWO excused himself momentarily and returned with a binder of his own. He was studying several pages of the book.

"How will we be informed that MARCOM is shifting?" asked the CO.

A MARCOM staff officer, (the one who had co-authored the plan), answered, "As soon as we know there is an incoming nuclear strike, we'll be on the phone and issue a codeword. You will have to scramble to have things ready in accordance with annex b of the plan. We will rush down highway 103 in a staff car convoy." The Admin Officer energetically nodded in concurrence.

"No you won't," injected the SWO.

“Why not?” asked the indignant staff officer.

“Because,” said the SWO, “the first we’ll know of an incoming nuclear strike will be some sub-lieutenant flying past the station at mach 2 with a melted telephone stuck to his ear. He’ll be followed by airborne staff cars on their way to a landing in Yarmouth.”

The MARCOM staff officer stared at the SWO. “A lot of time, effort and money has gone into this plan.”

The SWO shoved his binder to the middle of the table. “Blast radius for a typical 3 megaton nuke. Make sure you wear your helmets.”