

Stanislav Petrov, the 'man who saved the world' dies at 77

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The former Soviet military officer credited with saving the world from nuclear destruction has died at the age of 77. Stanislav Petrov, a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet Air Defence Forces, was the officer on duty at the Soviet Union's early warning centre when malfunctioning computers signaled the United States had launched missiles at the country in September 1983.

His decision to ignore warnings is credited with averting nuclear armageddon.

Karl Schumacher, a German film maker who first publicised the story in the West, said in a statement that he learnt of Petrov's death when he tried to get in touch to wish him happy birthday.

Petrov's son, Dmitry Petrov, told Mr Schumacher that his father had died on May 19.

Stanislav Petrov was born in Vladivostok on September 7, 1939.

On the night of September 26, 1983, he was on duty at the Soviet Union's early warning centre near Moscow when computers warned that the United States had fired five nuclear missiles at the country.



The 1983 false alarm is perhaps the closest the world has come to nuclear war Credit: Getty Images Contributor

"The machine indicated the information was of the highest certainty," he later recalled. "On the wall big red letters burnt the word: START. That meant the missile had definitely been fired."

He had just minutes to decide whether to assess the attack as genuine and inform the Kremlin that the United States was starting World War Three - or tell his commanders that the Soviet Union's early warning system was faulty.

Guessing that a genuine American attack would have involved hundreds of missiles, he put the alarm down to a computer malfunction.

Lt Col Petrov was vindicated when an internal investigation following the incident concluded that Soviet satellites had mistaken sunlight reflected on clouds for rocket engines.

The Soviet government's policy in the event of a US nuclear attack was to launch an immediate and all-out retaliatory strike in accordance with the principle of Mutually Assured Destruction.

Although Petrov was feted by his colleagues and initially praised by superiors for his actions, he was not rewarded.

He later complained that he was scolded by superiors for failing to complete a routine paperwork during the incident and had been scapegoated by generals embarrassed by the failure of the early warning system.

He took early retirement from the armed forces the following year and retired outside Moscow.

The incident was only made public in 1998 with the publication of the memoirs of General Yury Vontintsev, Mr Petrov's superior at the time.

In the 2014 documentary [The Man Who Saved the World](#), Mr Petrov said: "All that happened didn't matter to me — it was my job. I was simply doing my job, and I was the right person at the right time, that's all."