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HST495

A Close Call

The Cold War was a tense time for the world, as friction between the world’s competing nuclear powers threatened to ignite a conflict that could end the world as humanity knew it. On more than one terrifying occasion, the two nations were both a hair’s-width away from pulling the trigger on each other and the world. On September 26 1983, Stanislav Petrov reported into work, not knowing that he would be making a decision that could change the fate of the modern world.

While on watch, Petrov saw a panel light up with alerts that a nuclear attack was incoming. He only had previous minutes to make a decision to retaliate, or declare a false alarm. In the face of destruction, and understanding the inconsistency in reported information, Petrov stayed strong, didn’t waver, and declared the warning fake. Only minutes later, the panel lit up again displaying a full fledged multi-weapon strike. Again, Petrov declared it a false alarm. He was correct in his assumption, and his decisiveness and unwillingness to plunge the world into nuclear war may have saved humanity. Many scares have happened due to technical failures, especially as computers were newer and more error prone. Nuclear war is horrible in its own right, but nuclear war caused by mistake would be all the more tragic.

Humanity was lucky Petrov was on shift that fateful September.