

Titan

by

Robert Rietschel, May 31, 2023

Al led the conversation around the lunchroom table. He usually did as he was the alpha male. The question he put to his five companions at this table of six was simple enough. If you had only one intercontinental ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead, where would you send it? Who you gonna nuke? It might seem an odd thing for high school seniors to be talking about, but that morning had been a class field trip to the Titan Missile Museum in Green Valley, Arizona. You know, the missile site across the street from the new Safeway store. It was a field trip that seniors at Sahuarita High School make every year. It was one exit south on I-19 from the high school. Bill was the first to take up the question and he offered North Korea as a target. The table liked it, but Al said he saw two problems. One was the fallout would hurt our ally, South Korea, and North Korea could shoot back. Carl said he favored Moscow. Heads nodded. Al said they would more than just shoot back, that might end civilization as we know it. Don said we should nuke Washington, DC, and be rid of all of our politicians. Milk cartons were raised to toast the idea. Of course, that suggestion was more comic relief than serious. Only Ed hadn't contributed, and he was torn. He didn't want to waste an opportunity to eliminate troublemakers and he didn't want to be cowed by the idea that they might fight back. He said he'd take his chances with Beijing. His reasoning was that there were probably enough Chinese who would like to out from under central control that they might thank us rather than shoot back.

The table had spoken and awaited Al's considered response. Al always had the last word. This was out of respect. The alpha male status wasn't something Al used to lord over his classmates. That status arose from his unique status as a standout athlete and his class rank as either number one or two depending on the latest grade point average. He and Becky Ross kept flipping back and forth between one and two and had been since ninth grade. Al Rosen came by his academic smarts genetically. His dad was an astrophysicist at the University of Arizona and had earned his Ph.D. from Yale. It was at Yale that the senior Rosen had been a standout tight end and catcher on the baseball team that won the Ivy League championship three years in a row. Al was following in his father's footsteps in that he played both football and baseball. He was the starting wide receiver and backup quarterback on the Sahuarita High football team. Al's dad had taught him how to throw a knuckleball at an early age and he now was an unhittable pitching ace as well. He had scholarship offers from every Pac-12 school and many others and planned to go to Stanford. It was a better blend of athletics and academics than Berkeley.

Bill was the one who spoke up and asked Al whom he would nuke. And why. Al said he'd nuke Iran's nuclear facility. Since the discussion they were having gave only one

missile, he wanted to take out a singular target that might pay high dividends. A single missile headed to Moscow or Beijing would likely be shot down, but Al didn't think Iran could pull that off. Also, Iran would have limited ability to fight back compared to other high-value targets. Don said, "And that's why you are going to Stanford and I'm going to State. And probably why you get all the girls." Al laughed. For all his smarts and athletic prowess, Al was average looking and had nowhere near the animal magnetism that Don's square jaw and blonde hair rated. The lunch bell rang signaling time for the next class.

Jacob Rosen had been brought up in a moderately observant Jewish household in New York City. As he studied astrophysics, he went from moderate to nominally Jewish. He was an agnostic who maintained his connection with tradition by paying his temple tax and showing up for the High Holy Days. His brother, David, was the rocket scientist in the family. He had gone from moderate in his Judaism to rather observant. He immigrated to Israel and took a position at Tel Aviv University that allowed him to be affiliated with the Israel Space Agency. Jacob and David both had sons of the same age. It wasn't planned or anything like that, it just worked out that way and the boys were close when David was still in the U.S. After David relocated his family to Israel, the boys kept in touch by email. At least once a week they would tell each other what was happening in their respective worlds. David's son was named Matthew and he went by Matt. Matt was facing a stint in the Israeli Army when he finished high school. His plan was to follow in his father's footsteps and be a rocket scientist. You can imagine that Matt was quite interested to learn about Al's trip to the Titan Missile Museum.

That email session was longer than most. Al described the facilities and explained the anomaly that allowed this rocket to still be in existence. All the Titan II missiles had been destroyed as part of a pact with the former Soviet Union. Save for one. That one was in Green Valley, Arizona, across from Safeway. To be fair, the missile was there first. It was a training site and the missile had never contained a warhead. Everything was exactly the same as at the functioning missile sites save for the lack of a warhead and of course, there was no rocket fuel as this missile wasn't going to be launched. But it could be as everything was in place and functional. Al told Matt that the place had been there all his life, but he'd just never been until the school field trip. And it got him thinking about what a single ICBM could do if it were armed. Matt had thoughts much like the boys at the lunch table as to who might serve as a worthy target, and Al walked his cousin through the problems and when he told Matt about his Iran option, Matt was rocked on his heels. He loved the concept. He told Al that he would run this by his dad to see what he thought. Al said now he was worried. It's one thing to talk a good game at lunch among high school pals and quite another to have a rocket scientist critique your ideas. Still, Al was curious about what David would say as to Al's reasoning.

A week usually went by between emails. Matt and Al did have other things to do. Al was always trying to tweak his knuckleball. It didn't need tweaking. He already had the nickname, "Unhittable Al." He only lost three games in three years. Matt was taking

flying lessons on weekends as he had an interest in being a pilot when his stint in the military kicked in. The email exchange happened in just three days rather than the expected seven. Matt said that his dad couldn't find any flaw in Al's reasoning. He was quite taken with the possibility. The Iranian nuclear threat was something David dealt with daily. David was a university professor and had a position with the Space Agency, but his real job was unknown to his family. He was in the Mossad. His unit was deeply involved in monitoring Iran's nuclear progress. There were discussions ongoing as to how best to neutralize the threat before it was too late. David took the information that his son Matt had learned from Al to his supervisor in the Mossad and discussions moved swiftly. David instructed Matt to let his cousin know that he would receive a visitor within the next week after school. The individual would be there to discuss with Al a plan related to the Missile Museum and that he should consider everything ultra confidential. He was not to mention anything to his friends, his family, and particularly his dad. It was a matter of national security for Israel.

This all sounded pretty cloak and dagger, but sure, whatever. Al would play along. It sort of sounded like fun. But it wasn't fun. It was a serious gambit and Al had accidentally set it in motion. The contact was made by a very attractive young woman. Nothing all that unusual about a star athlete getting chatted up by a pretty fan. Or so it would appear. The young woman was Mossad, of course, and her message to Al was that his services would be required for a very minor part in a major operation. He was to volunteer to be a docent at the Missile Museum and learn about the security systems in place. If possible, he was to get the keys copied for any locks and learn and pass on any codes for any automatic systems. A team from Mossad would do all the rest. Al didn't need to know the details; he already knew the end game. It would be to launch an attack on the Iranian nuclear program. His family was surprised when he volunteered to spend his summer working at the Missile Museum as a docent, but they chalked it up to the rocket science gene that must be carried somewhere in the family jewels. It was clearly his brother, David's, fault reasoned his dad.

The plot was simple. Insert a nuclear warhead in a rocket, gas that baby up and push the button. Of course, none of that is simple. How to get a nuclear warhead smuggled into the country. Where to find rocket fuel and how to get it to Green Valley, and then there would need to be launch codes that worked and coordinates for the proper destination. For every problem, there is a solution if you have resources and stealth. Those were abundantly available. It would play out over the summer months. This would give Al time to learn the security systems and pass that information up the line. It took Al less than two weeks to have the needed keys and codes. It took a little longer to bring everything else into place.

The warhead was loaded onto a small fishing boat and that vessel docked in the night at a remote fishing village in Nova Scotia. The warhead was loaded into a Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream delivery van and driven to the Canadian border crossing in northern Vermont. This was the crossing at Hereford which is unmanned most times. That Ben

and Jerry's van was repainted to be a FedEx delivery van and driven to Green Valley where it sat in a warehouse until launch. Another team placed an order with Cameo Chemicals. The order was placed under the name of Raytheon of Tucson. It was a bit unusual, but since Raytheon was in the business of making rockets for the government and Cameo was in the business of providing rocket fuel for the government, usually NASA, no feathers were ruffled. The order was for nitrogen tetroxide and dimethyl hydrazide. Two tankers would be sent to receive the shipment. Those tankers were leased vehicles repainted with Raytheon logos. They joined a FedEx van in a Green Valley warehouse. The final puzzle piece would be the programming to make the launch happen. It helps to be in the business as David Rosen was. He was directly involved in this part of the project. He did the programming, and he would be on site to install and run the program. As much as rocket science is thrown around as a highly intellectual enterprise, this operation wasn't that. The computers that launch ICBMs from underground silos are somewhat primitive and that is by design. Sophisticated electronics can be rendered useless by the detonation of a nuclear warhead and that would keep your counterattack from launching. Analog equipment and paper tape drives that look like something you might use to operate a player piano are what is used in the silos to assure launch capability. This was well-known among rocket scientists and David would be bringing his paper tape program to swap out with anything in place at the Arizona facility.

A date for the operation was selected once all the players and equipment were in place. It would all go down over the course of no more than two hours. Members of the team had taken the tour of the Missile Museum multiple times to become familiar with the layout. There was a warhead team, a fueling team, a launch team, and the man with the paper tape. It happened. It worked. The missile was on its way to Iran. The tanker trucks would be found soon after the launch ablaze on I-19 after colliding with a FedEx van. Little could be identified and oddly, no bodies were detected among the ashes.

A missile launch does not go unnoticed. It was immediately detected, and its direction was away from the U.S. and over the Pacific. This caused so much confusion at NORAD command that by the time someone with enough authority had been briefed, the missile was out of range for any takedown. In China, the missile was detected as well, but by the time the Chinese had it on radar, it was clear that the path was not taking it to their soil. And when Iran detected the incoming missile, it was unable to do anything in time to make any difference. The warhead set the Iranian nuclear program back to stage one.

The finger-pointing began in Washington before the warhead exploded. How did a missile that had no fuel or payload make the journey from Arizona to Iran? Where did the warhead come from? The Joint Chiefs had no answers. The politicians who wanted to take credit couldn't as they had no explanation of how this came about, and those that wanted to cast blame weren't sure who to point their fingers at. Rogue operatives?

Terrorists? White Nationalists? Neo-Nazis? The CIA? There would be investigations. No answers would be discovered.

Iran immediately blamed Israel. They claimed that Israel had induced the U.S. to do its dirty work. Perhaps U.S. payback for the embassy problems during the Carter administration. They were grasping at straws like everyone else. The U.S. denied any role in this and was going to get to the bottom of who was responsible for hijacking a dormant missile. Israel said it had nothing to do with a missile launched from the sovereign United States. At the same time, Israel applauded the end result of the rogue state of Iran not becoming a nuclear threat. The Israelis wished to thank whoever carried out this attack. Iran wasn't about to launch a counter-offensive against the U.S. That would be suicide. Protests were held at the United Nations. There was outrage in the international community. The norms of international diplomacy had been violated. Righteous Indignation was the order of the day. There was plenty to go around from friend and foe alike. Of course, the friends were actually laughing down their sleeves. The foes were fuming, but there was nothing more that they could do. The furor took a long time to die down. But that was all part of the plan.

The plan had worked the way Al Rosen had laid it out to his lunch buddies. Al had explained that the target he selected would have no recourse making it the most desirable target. That logic was apparent to David Rosen when his son Matt told him about it over dinner. It resonated up the chain of command at the Mossad. It was why the plan was put into action.

Al's job as a volunteer docent at the Missile Museum was over. There being no missile in the museum, there would be no tours. Besides, the area was now considered a crime scene. No matter. Al was off to Stanford to study astronomy and physics while playing football and baseball. For relaxation, Al plays golf. He happens to be a scratch golfer. If anyone ever figures out how to hit Al's knuckleball, he can switch to the Stanford golf team.

Green Valley is usually a quiet place in late summer. The snowbirds are up north, and the locals are enjoying the air-conditioned great indoors. But this late summer, there was no peace and quiet near the intersection of La Canada and Duval Mine Road. On one side of that intersection is the Safeway store and the other is a former missile museum which is now on the National Historic Registry as the site of the only ICBM attack launched from U.S. soil. News reporters replaced the snowbirds. Summer rentals were suddenly being snatched up like never before. The Safeway parking lot was jammed like the day before Christmas. Reporters are a hungry bunch.



The Count Ferdinand von Galen Titan Missile Museum visitor center. You can't see the missile as it is in the silo underground. Von Galen is a German who grew to love airplanes as a youth watching bombers fly overhead in World War II Germany. He heads the Pima Air and Space Museum foundation and raised the money for the missile museum.

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