



A Falcon Book
NOBLE AND NOBLE
F226

BY EUGENE BURDICK
& HARVEY WHEELER

Specially abridged by Stephen M. Joseph
GENERAL EDITOR, Virginia French Allen

**A terrifying account of a global
"accident" that is all too possible**

FAIL- SAFE



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is a new paperback series of best sellers that have been abridged and edited for young people and adults who want to read books of mature content with greater ease and enjoyment. They are especially recommended as supplemental readers in junior and senior high school courses and adult education programs.

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General Editor, *Virginia French Allen*

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by EUGENE BURDICK
and
HARVEY WHEELER

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A FALCON BOOK
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Six Vindicator bomber planes, carrying ten twenty-megaton bombs among them, approach their target—Moscow. No one has planned this invasion. It is, in the words of the President, “a tragic mistake.” It is the result of a mechanical failure of a “fool-proof” system. And around the world, men are waiting. . . .

The White House

The President—A youthful, keenly aware leader, faced with a decision which could mean total world destruction.

Peter Buck—A Russian translator, called upon to interpret the most important conversation in history.

Mrs. Mary Jackson—The President’s secretary.

The War Room at Omaha, Nebraska

General Bogan—One-time fighter pilot, now commanding officer in the War Room.

Colonel Cascio—Bogan’s assistant. His military career is his life.

Congressman Raskob—On a routine visit to the War Room, he spent the most terrifying and tragic hours of his life.

Gordon Knapp—President of Universal Electronics, the company that designed the “fool-proof” system.

The Pentagon

Swenson—The cold, ruthless Secretary of Defense.

Wilcox—Secretary of the Army.

Carruthers—Navy Chief of Staff.

Allen—Head of the National Security Council.

Stark—A general.

Professor Walter Grotzschele—Called in as advisor to the Pentagon group, he felt the United States should “strike first.”

Brigadier General Warren A. Black—Called upon to perform “the highest act of courage and the most supreme devotion to duty, to his country, and to mankind.”

The Vindicators

Lieutenant Colonel Grady—Commander of Group 6, the bombers “ordered” to attack Moscow.

Captain Thomas—The bombardier, the man who would release the bombs.

Sullivan—The weapons operator.

THE TRANSLATOR

Peter Buck walked up to the Pennsylvania Avenue entrance of the White House. It was one of the sharp, crystal-clear days of early spring. The air was beautifully clear and full of sun, but it was cold. He was glad to reach the White House sentry box and looked forward to his warm steam-heated office.

A fat guard stepped out of the guardhouse and nodded at Buck. His eyes flicked over Buck's leather briefcase, and he grunted.

"Ham and cheese?" the fat guard asked.

"Wrong," Buck said and grinned. He opened his briefcase. It contained two apples, a carton of milk, and a chicken wrapped in wax paper.

"Pay up," Buck said.

The fat guard reached in his pocket and took out a nickel. He dropped it in Buck's hand.

"O.K., I lose today," he said. "You know where we stand now, Mr. Buck? After 932 bets, I have won 501, and you have won 431. What do you think it means?"

"Who knows?" Buck said. He smiled at the fat guard and walked on.

Buck went into the East Wing of the White House, nodded at another guard, and then turned left. He entered his small office.

He opened his briefcase, quickly put his lunch in the bottom drawer of his desk, took a copy of the *Washington Post* from the case, and put it on the desk. Squarely in the middle of the desk, put there half an hour before by a messenger, were the usual copies of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, the Russian newspapers.

Buck began to read with amazing speed. As he read, repeating a task he had done hundreds of times, he was aware of a slight thrill of pride. He knew that he was among the three best Russian translators in the United States. Ryskind at Berkeley might be a little better on accent, but that was all. Buck was sure that he was better than Watkins over at the Pentagon. After the three of them, there was a big gap before one came to the fourth best American-born Russian-language expert—probably Haben at Columbia University.

Buck had become a Russian expert quite by accident. In the 1950s, when he was twenty-two years old, he had been called up for military duty just as the Korean War started. He was a junior in college at the time but had no special interest in languages. He intended to be an engineer. When the Army tested him, however, he placed very high on language ability and found himself at the Army Language School at Monterey, California.

What followed next surprised Buck very much. By the end of the first week he was at least two months ahead of the others in the class. The instructor was

amazed. Not only did Buck learn the Russian alphabet and grammar quickly, but he could reply instantly, using whatever accent the speaker used. In two weeks, everyone in the school knew who he was.

At the end of a year Buck could speak Russian as well as any of the instructors at the school.

He was sent first to a division of the Pentagon which translated the more important Russian military papers.

Buck did his work in the Pentagon quickly and efficiently. Even the old-timers were startled at his speed in translating difficult phrases.

"Sergeant Buck is the best we have in this division," his superior wrote when he graded Buck's work. "He knows the Russian language almost perfectly."

Everyone else in his division was deeply interested in everything about Russia, but translating Russian was just a job to Buck. He was much more interested in his small red MG sports car, a soft-spoken girl from Georgia named Sarah, and cool jazz.

At the end of a year of Pentagon duty, Buck was ordered to Officers Training School. He graduated as a second lieutenant with orders to report to an infantry division in Germany. He was sorry to sell the red MG, but he was glad to leave the Pentagon.

He liked the long war games in which he and his platoon crept through the dark German forests, their rifles tipped with eight inches of bayonet, the rumble of tanks just ahead of them, the occasional crashing sound of a grenade giving the games a feeling of excitement.

Occasionally he went with the other members of the platoon into a nearby town and got drunk on the

excellent German beer and ate huge plates of German sausages. His spare time was devoted to the care of his new sports car, this time a Porsche. After coming back from driving the Porsche dangerously through narrow mountain roads, he wrote long letters to Sarah.

After two years of duty, Buck was discharged from the Army. He and the Porsche were returned to America on the same ship. Two weeks after he arrived in New York, he married Sarah and took a job as translator at the United Nations. Two years later only two things had changed in Buck's life: they had a four-month-old son, and Buck had discovered law.

He had started to read a law casebook that someone had left in the translator's room at the U.N. building and did not stop until he had finished the whole book. It was an exciting discovery. To Buck, it was like a fascinating new foreign language, and he loved it.

Sarah was happy for Buck, and she encouraged him. The only problem was how to support his family and go to school at the same time. Through friends, he heard of an opening on the White House staff for a Russian translator. The job was supposed to be easy. He merely had to be there in the unlikely case that the President needed to speak directly to a non-English-speaking Russian. The last man who had the job had held it for five years, had not seen the old President, and had quit out of boredom when the new President took office. Buck had applied for the job and in the examinations scored fourteen points higher than the next highest man.

He and Sarah and the child and the Porsche made their way to Washington. Sarah set up housekeeping,

and Buck began to go to Georgetown Law School at night. During the day, he spent his time reading law books and occasionally glancing through the heap of Russian papers which were sent through his office.

The White House job took very little time. Over the years he came to think of the White House as a place where he went to study.

It was true he had seen the new President, but never on business. In the first month after the new President took office, he had wandered into Buck's room, introduced himself, and sat down. Buck was impressed by the President's youth, his easy manner, the way in which he put his feet up on Buck's desk and talked about Buck's background. It was only later that Buck realized that behind that boyish manner and seeming relaxation was a sharp, tough mind. The informal meeting had really been the President's way of testing him. Buck knew he had passed.

This particular morning, Buck had finished his quick look at *Pravda* and *Izvestia* and was turning with pleasure to an essay on corporation law. He opened the book and began to make careful marks on the margin.

Buck was so interested in his lawbook that the harsh sound pierced through the office for several seconds before he was aware of it. He had never heard the sound before, but instantly he knew where it came from. In the second drawer of his desk, there was a red telephone. When he had been given the office and his instructions, he had been told that this telephone would ring only in case of emergency and was never to be used for ordinary calls. The black telephone on top of the desk was to be used for normal

business. He had also been told that when the red phone did ring, it would not ring like an ordinary telephone. It would give off a steady sharp sound until it was answered.

Someone at the White House switchboard had made a mistake, Buck thought. He had been in this office for three years, and the red telephone had never rung. Buck was convinced it never would. He pulled open the drawer, and instantly the sound of the telephone became louder.

Nervously, Buck started searching for a clean piece of paper. He calmed himself. The call was sure to be a mistake. Nevertheless, he found a clean piece of paper and then looked at his watch. He wrote the time in big black figures in the middle of the white paper.

“10:32 A.M.”

He picked up the phone.

“Mr. Buck, this is the President speaking,” a voice said. There was no mistaking the voice. “Would you please come to the White House bomb shelter as soon as possible?”

“Yes, sir, I . . .” Buck said and then stopped. As soon as he had said the word “Yes,” the President hung up.

THE WAR ROOM, OMAHA

The War Room of the Strategic Air Command at Omaha was no bigger than a small theater. The pools of darkness in its corners, however, made the room

seem huge. The only light in the War Room came from the Big Board. It covered the entire front wall and looked like a gigantic movie screen. At the moment, the Big Board showed a simple map of the world. The continents and the oceans were familiar, as were the lines of latitude and longitude. But the map was covered with strange symbols and signs. Arrows, circles, squares, numbers, triangles, were strewn across the screen; sometimes they came up bright and clear, sometimes they dimmed, and once in a while a sign would fade entirely and leave only a glow that lasted for a few seconds.

Even in the uncertain light it was possible to see that there were only a half dozen men in the War Room. In the dimness, the men looked as small as dolls.

"I expected a little more action," Congressman Raskob said. "This is just like a second-rate theater. Where are the ushers?"

Lieutenant General Bogan, United States Air Force, glanced down at Congressman Raskob. "Right now, sir, we are at our lowest condition of readiness," General Bogan said. "Right now everything is routine. The moment that something starts to happen there is plenty of action."

"In a few minutes, sir, your eyes will get adjusted to the light, and we can show you some of the more interesting things in the War Room," Colonel Cascio said. Colonel Cascio was General Bogan's deputy.

The Congressman grunted. He stood at the raised runway at the back of the War Room, his feet wide apart.

He's going to be a tough one, General Bogan

thought. He looked over at the other guest, Gordon Knapp, the president of Universal Electronics. No trouble there.

This was Knapp's first visit to the War Room, and General Bogan could see that he was excited. Many of the instruments that he had invented and manufactured were used in the room, and his eyes glittered as he tried to identify the machinery in the gloom.

"It may look simple, Mr. Raskob, but this is one of the most complicated rooms in the world," Knapp said in a whisper.

"And one of the most expensive," Raskob said. He turned to Colonel Cascio and asked without much interest, "Where are you from, son?" His eyes were still peering, not yet adjusted to the thin light.

"New York City, sir," Colonel Cascio said.

Raskob stared hard, really interested now. "What part of the city?"

Colonel Cascio hesitated a moment. "Central Park West," he said, "in the Seventies."

"Probably in the Twentieth District," Raskob said thoughtfully. "You're getting some Puerto Ricans in there now. It's one of those swing districts. Might go either Democrat or Republican. In a few years it will be solidly Democratic."

"Actually, Congressman Raskob, my family moved over to the East Side some years ago," Colonel Cascio said. He turned his head sideways and glanced quickly at General Bogan. Then he added as an afterthought, "As a military man I really don't follow politics very closely."

There was a long moment of silence, a moment in which General Bogan understood something which