

## Black Hat Kamchatka

by Oren Hammerquist

ADAM/RAE, RHHT, 2CR, Rose Barracks, Germany

*Sgt. Oren Hammerquist is an Air Defense and Airspace Management (ADAM) Section Sergeant in Rose Barracks, Germany. He holds a BA in criminal justice and is currently completing an MA in English and creative writing. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in multiple journals, magazines, and blogs. His third novel will be available this winter, and he plans to publish his thesis in summer 2017.*

War room: it sounded like a joke now. They swore to defend the country against threats foreign and domestic. No one considered the need for a real response to imagined threats. Then again, the Black Hat Kamchatka (or BHK) group was not an imagined threat even if everything they put out was pure fabrication. Cumulatively, military men around the table had well over 1,000 years of military experience. They had been played for fools, but the country and the world followed the blind into the ditch.



“Kamchatka,” the General said. “It’s a country from Risk. How did we miss that?”

“Sir, there is a real place named Kamchatka,” an eager Major intoned. “And the sudden rise of a group to power is not unheard of—Bosnia, Myanmar—”

“Calm down, Major,” a Colonel interrupted. “No one is blaming you for this incident.”

“He is to blame,” the Sergeant Major said. “Begging your pardon, Gentlemen, but we are *all* to blame here. And not just the Officers and NCOs in this room, but the Secretaries and Directors. The media. The public. Even the President himself. We all allowed this to happen. We missed Kamchatka, General, because BHK knew we would. They exploited a weakness we ignored. Dozens of weaknesses. And maybe we owe them in a way.”

After a long, contemplative silence, the General cleared his throat and sat forward. “Sergeant Major has a point.” He poured a cup of coffee but did not take a sip. He stared at the ponderous stack of papers on the desk for a moment. “It’s too late to assign blame. We need to figure out how we can make sure this never happens again....”

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Evening news reports interrupted their broadcasts to show the shocking footage. Online news outlets raced to keep ahead of televised broadcasts. Twitter and Facebook propelled half-written stories into the realm of “viral media.”

The story of the day: Terrorist attack in the Democratic Republic of Kamchatka. A vehicle loaded with fertilizer and diesel fuel crashed through the wall of the compound and detonated. At least thirty Americans—Marines, Army, and DA civilians—confirmed dead, number of injured unknown. The President yet to issue a statement.

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The video—leaked onto YouTube—showed US Marines carrying bleeding and dead bodies to the casualty collection point when small-arms fire erupted. A bullet passed through the head of the Marine closest to the smartphone-cameraman, spraying blood. The civilians ran towards the only place they could find shelter, the cratered embassy. Marines traded shots with unseen civilians as they too fell back into cover. Dramatic footage showed two more Marines die trying to pull injured comrades from the line of fire.

The video was, literally, bigger than life. Pure special effects and cinematography fooled even the well-informed. The seeming authenticity of a smartphone camera, the theatrical blood spray, and the well-costumed Marines outraged millions. A real nation screamed on social media for the real government to take action against what no one yet realized were imagined events.

Phase one began; Black Hat Kamchatka (BHK), a group of hackers and cyberpranksters planned to bring the world to the edge of nuclear war.

A series of emails cascaded from top US commanders. Garrison and Post Commanding Generals across the Army emailed their deputies to initiate total accountability of all personnel. Colonels forwarded the emails immediately down the chain of command to the next tier. Receiving Lieutenant Colonels informed Captains; Captains informed First Sergeants. Every receiver reacted swiftly to click “Forward” and awaited a response. Even National Guard and Reserve commanders performed emergency contact procedures.

The alert complete to the lowest level, information moved swiftly back up the artificial chain in the opposite direction. When the Garrison Commanders saw the notice forwarded from their deputies, they applauded the initiative of these officers. This would reflect favorably when the next evaluation period came around.

Of these General officers, no one thought to check the long chain of doubly-forwarded emails. None checked his or her “Sent” items folder; had they done this, one might have noticed the alert had come from an email they did not send. Instead, unsure where the call for accountability had come from, each commander forwarded the reports up the chain to confused but approving officials further up the chain.

The hack of the government email system would not be discovered for a week. Only the alleged originator of these emails might have noticed earlier. Each email originated from a military email address, sent to a military email address. Each contained the same signature block the sender used in all emails. Except for the actual sender, the emails were authentic.

Simultaneously, all bases were ordered to FPCON Charlie. Some exercised even greater initiative and put FPCON Delta measures in place. This action was the first unanticipated event in BHK’s sick joke. Unfortunately for military commanders, the increase in readiness and security only exacerbated the issues of misinformation. The media took note and the situation approached the point of no return much earlier than BHK planned.

Fort Bragg and Fort Campbell commanders ordered forces to prepare for contingency operations. They would be ready to meet their mission: anywhere in the world in 48 hours. All Soldiers were placed on a no-drinking order to prepare them for a possible alert deployment to Kamchatka. The alert was real; BHK had not hacked into secret emails, but the sudden increase in readiness combined with initiative and the age-old adage: it is better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.

Across the Army, Commanders at all levels ordered their intel sections to create a report on the Democratic Republic of Kamchatka. BHK relied on the tendency of intel planners to supplement classified information with open source information as a driving force for phase one. BHK created a virtual country in a real location with a rich history of ethnic strife and a fight against once Soviet and now Russian aggression.

The classified records contained only one piece of information, a grainy satellite image from the early 1970’s indicating several possible sites of Soviet ICBM missile silos on the peninsula. Though BHK was unaware of this, the information added to rising tensions and aided their purpose.

Intel analysts, panicked for lack of information, failed to evaluate the falsified information on unclassified

networks and missed the earliest chance to call BHK's bluff. Whether to give the actors a chance to catch their mistake or to further humiliate them, BHK named the current prime minister of Kamchatka Странная Любовьяныч, literally "Strangelove."

News channels reported the newest breaking story: US Army at highest alert since 9/11. Thousands of National Guard and Reserve Soldiers recalled to duty. Fort Bragg and Fort Campbell ready quick reaction forces for possible military response to Kamchatka crisis.

In the confusion, no one stopped to consider where the leak originated. The leak of this information laid pre-positioned on a dozen internet servers around the world three weeks before the imagined crisis arose. The game rolled onward, and BHK needed to make no moves for several days.

"Kamchatka" became the number-one search on the internet. Though references to the board game appeared, BHK manipulated the Search Engine Optimization (SEO: the fully automated Search Engine Optimization algorithms that decide what internet users see) to choose the first fifty web results. As expected, news articles often shouldered even these results from the first two pages of search results. Less than 5% of internet users ever navigate past the first page of search results. This held true for the Kamchatka panic. Less than 1% navigated past the second page. The small percentage of users who noticed the references to the board game Risk ignored the coincidence or modified their search criteria.

According to reports, Kamchatka declared independence in 1964 (the release date for *Dr. Strangelove*) but the USSR refused to recognize Kamchatka's sovereignty. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kamchatka hoped to realize its independence. Instead, Russia refused to recognize the country. The government operated as a province of Russia, but considered itself a sovereign state. Photographs abounded, including military marches with foot soldiers, horses, and towed cannons (a joke based on the board game which no one caught)—these had been carefully doctored using photo editing software to insert flags and other authentic touches of falsehood.

News stories about the country and crisis of Kamchatka multiplied exponentially as automated journalism programs (such as Quill and Wordsmith) created news stories at a rate of ten per minute. BHK factored the rise of robojournalism when it planned its coup. Each search for Kamchatka alerted these programs to create more on-demand news stories, clogged the SEO, and made the fabricated crisis increasingly real.

BHK completed phase one of its plan by releasing the names of the now forty-one Marines, Soldiers, and DA Civilians killed in the Kamchatka attack. The names (Turgidson, Sellers, Muffley, Kong, Mandrake, Scott, Zogg, Dietrich, Goldberg...) offered the final chance to stop the hoax; these were the names of characters and actors from *Dr. Strangelove*.

The forty-one personnel all had Facebook accounts complete with photographs. Had these been real people, OPSEC managers would certainly have raised a red flag. The detailed information on operations and assignments on each page was partially false and partially assembled from real military user social media pages.

The photographs were not falsified but rather taken from other service member pages. The use of photo editing software proved wholly unnecessary here. When someone occasionally discovered he or she resembled one of the fallen, they thanked God all the more fervently that it was not them.

Videos of crying mothers flooded social media—real videos, real outrage, but for different fallen. The survivors of 9/11, the Boston Marathon bombing, and a dozen other disasters became the faces of Kamchatka. Memorial posts went viral once again. The final capstone of phase one: an official statement by the President of the United States honoring the fallen.

This statement (though vague and meaningless), unlike much of what came before, was completely genuine. It also signaled the BHK to initiate phase two.

Phase two began when Kamchatka resistance fighters released an official statement demanding withdrawal of all US forces from the peninsula. Anyone who looked closely might recognize the leaders of the resistance as the

Marine killed in the video of the assault. Russia, aware only that Kamchatka was their land, also demanded all US forces withdraw from the peninsula. The United States denied, honestly, any forces in Kamchatka. A special assembly of the United Nations demanded action, but because both Russia and the United States were members of the Security Council, the session accomplished little more than angry threats. BHK counted on exactly this outcome.

The second step in phase two involved the release of classified video of US Special Forces executing civilians in Kamchatka. The fact that this was the third appearance of the same actors passed unnoticed. To further raise outrage, BHK released images of US drone feeds targeting a school. Sadly, the drone footage was genuine—leaked by previous whistle-blowers in witness of poor choices in the past—but the footage was not of Kamchatka.

Peaceful protests turned violent as the US continued to deny involvement in Kamchatka. Police responded in riot gear with tear gas, but crowds grew. The governors had no choice; ten States declared martial law. The National Guard—activated now due to the growing crisis in Kamchatka—took to the streets to push protestors back.

Frustrated with US denials, Russia began to mobilize forces to move into Kamchatka.

Kamchatka insurgents released a video stating they had control of nuclear weapons on the peninsula. In response, US nuclear subs dispatched to the northern Pacific Ocean.

Russian troops—aware of the actual location of the only former missile silo on the peninsula—moved to secure a site completely distinct from the Marine targets. The Ranger Battalion out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord received orders to move to Kamchatka and secure the embassy in preparation for a full-scale assault by 82nd Airborne.

As a part of mobilization, Ranger Battalion submitted an RFI requesting the exact MGRS coordinates of the Kamchatka US embassy. Though the 75th did not receive an immediate response, mobilization began, and troops still sat on the airfield when the request reached the highest levels in the Pentagon.

Phase three began.

A video of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army General Dunkirk, testifying before Congress appeared on the web. The General detailed the rising tensions in Kamchatka and recommended a preemptive strike of known leaders of the insurgent cells. The speech never happened; BHK terrorists used open-source, graphics software to adapt the General's previous appearance (where he discussed budget issues) to match the imagined crisis. Once prepared, any member of the unseen group could become the General by speaking into the camera; the graphics software transferred the speaker's facial movements to the General and changed the voice automatically.

A Colonel working as an aide working for General Dunkirk began to suspect the Kamchatka crises might be a hoax without seeing this video. Reports from a dozen Lieutenants and Captains littered pointed to one irrefutable fact: the government had no record of an embassy, ambassador, or any military personnel (including Black Ops) assigned to Kamchatka. This Colonel shook his head and officially became the first to recognize the hoax when he said, "It's like the place doesn't exist." And the statement felt both right and wrong.

But he couldn't simply walk into the Joint Chiefs and tell them there was no such thing as a Kamchatka embassy. Hadn't they all seen the footage? People died; it was too real to be fiction. Instead, the Colonel called NASA and requested a satellite flyover of the entire peninsula. Due to the necessary detail, the full photographic scan would not be available until after the sixth pass of the peninsula. This required a delay of 32 hours. Imagery analysis would require another eight to ten hours to give an intelligence report. The Colonel agreed, unhappily, and left for home.

At 0300 the next morning, General Dunkirk woke his aide demanding to know why he hadn't been told about the video. The Colonel replied sleepily and truthfully that he had not seen the video. He did not tell the General public affairs was not his position. Undoubtedly, the Public Affairs Office had placed a thick file on his desk which he would go over in the morning. The General told his aide the date of the video—according to the time stamp on the frames—and the Colonel shook his head.

“That date can’t be right, sir,” the Colonel said. “That was during your trip to Qatar.”

“Colonel, listen to me,” Dunkirk said. “I never testified in front of Congress about Kamchatka. I’ve never heard of Kamchatka until the attack on the embassy.”

Suddenly wide awake, the Colonel felt sure his earlier statement had been right: Kamchatka was as fake as the General’s video. He couldn’t wait for NASA. The Colonel apologized to the General (though he wasn’t sure for what), and opened his computer. The Colonel opened Google Earth and typed “Kamchatka.” The Colonel spent hours looking over the peninsula with actual satellite imagery, but he still couldn’t believe what he saw. What he didn’t see worried him much more. He zoomed in closer and went over the civilian satellite images once more. At dawn, he picked up the red phone in his house and called the Pentagon. “Tell 75th Rangers to stand down.” This was the least he could do after what he had seen. It may be the last act he took before a forced resignation.

Three hours after that call, the Colonel stood at parade rest before the General’s desk; the General frowned and said nothing. Behind the Colonel stood an entourage of junior officers and senior enlisted.

“What do you mean Kamchatka is a nature preserve?” the General finally demanded.

“Just that sir,” the Colonel said. “The coup, the attack on the embassy, even the existence of an embassy was pure fiction. As far as I can tell, they hacked into unclassified email, called our forces to alert status, and our own paranoia did the rest.”

Somewhere in a server farm sat a group of creative hackers and pranksters laughing at how close they brought the world to World War Three with ten emails, open-source video, and the ability of news to write itself.

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“BHK claimed credit for the attack,” a harried signal officer with a degree in political science said.

“Well they shouldn’t,” the Sergeant Major said. “We did more than half the work.”

“Sergeant Major,” the same signal officer said, “they conducted a careful IO campaign to cause panic. There is no way we could have known.”

“Gentlemen, with your permission,” the Sergeant Major stood up. “I would like to play for you the national anthem of Kamchatka. From their Wikipedia site.”

As the music ran, the General, the Colonel, and one Major shook their heads. A few senior NCOs understood as well. The Captains, younger Majors, and younger NCOs looked at their elders in confusion.

“Turn it off, Sergeant Major,” the General said, pressing his fingers to his temples. “No one noticed that?”

“We listened to it, sir,” a young intel officer said. “The title is красные шары, sir.”

“Which translates to?” asked the General.

The Lieutenant shifted uncomfortably as he said, “Red Balloons, sir.”

“‘Ninety-nine Red Balloons,’ actually,” the General said. “Who was that? Earth, Wind and Fire?”

“Nena I think, sir,” the Colonel said. Every officer and NCO under the age of 35 still frowned at each other, so the Colonel explained, “It’s the English version of ‘Neunundneunzig Luftballons.’ Both are songs about how ninety-nine balloons take the world to the edge of nuclear annihilation.”

“Why would they do that?” a younger officer finally managed to ask. “Use a pop song as a national anthem?”

“To play us for fools,” the Sergeant Major said. “They took advantage of a lack of experience in the virtual world to create a real world crisis. When I heard that music, I typed the prime minister’s name into Google Translate. I—” The Sergeant Major, the Colonel, and the General cracked a smile. There was irony in using technology to expose a technology hoax. Then again, Google Earth had been the driving force to call down the Rangers

“It’s literally a strange name, Sergeant Major,” the intel officer who spoke Russian said. He had tired of waiting for the elder’s smiles to vanish. “Strange is the first name, and the patronym translates to ‘son of love.’”

“Strangelove,” the General said. “Or son of Strangelove.”

“Yes, sir,” the Sergeant Major said. “And no one noticed.”

“I’m sorry,” a Captain broke in. “Noticed what?”

“It’s a movie,” the Colonel explained to his juniors. “A comedy. *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. It’s about how military and diplomatic failures cause nuclear annihilation.”

“Well, what have we done about this?” the General asked.

“All units have stood down, but...” The Colonel sighed heavily and shrugged, “Aside from that, the damage seems to have been done. We haven’t let the public affairs release the information yet.”

“If anyone believes it,” a young Lieutenant said.

Sergeant Major scoffed. “After today, I’m sure people will believe anything they see on the internet.”

A Major said plaintively, “This was an act of terrorism. We can prosecute them.”

“Won’t make a difference, sir,” the Sergeant Major said.

“He’s right,” the Colonel said. “If they can pull this hoax off...”

A Lieutenant finished, “...what are our chances of finding them? For god’s sake, they made a country appear. I bet they can make themselves vanish.”

Silence circled the table. The time to actually stop the virtual disaster had passed. The real disaster had been halted just in time. The General finally pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. The others simply stared.

“All things considered, I think smoking in a government facility is the least of my concerns,” the General said. After releasing a large cloud of smoke, he added, “What can they do to a civilian anyway? As soon as they get my resignation letter, which I haven’t written yet, that’s where I’ll be.”

The Sergeant Major joined the General for a smoke.

“Sergeant Major,” the General said, “I doubt you will be asked to resign.”

“My choice, sir,” the Sergeant Major said. “Imaginary wars, cyber terrorism...” He blew a cloud of smoke. “I’d stand toe-to-toe with any enemy you name. Give me a knife and I’ll take a machinegun nest or die trying. This isn’t my war. Not any longer.”

The Colonel, three Majors, and two senior NCOs joined the elder men smoking. Only the young men remained to defend their country against enemies, foreign, domestic, and other.

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This story presents a worst-case scenario, and we hope such a hoax would be quickly and immediately halted. Unfortunately, the events in this story are not impossible. The near eruption of World War III here is speculative only in the sequence of events; the technology presented exists. Some predict that 90% of news stories will be written by machines in fifteen years. Thousands of stories a year already are. Special effects are nothing new, and dedicated pranksters could cause mass panic on a viral scale. Video software allowing faces and voices to be edited to appear to be famous persons have already appeared on YouTube. Afghanistan and Iraq taught us more than ever that technology will change the shape of the battlefield to include the incorporeal social media realm.

That the characters in this story must fall back on civilian systems run by Google and other companies to compensate for holes in our dated information infrastructure is likely more truth than fiction. What, as an Army, is our IO presence? Stereotypically, older Soldiers use more technology than they understand and younger Soldiers understand more technology than they use. As the dynamic of our force shifts, as Gulf War and even Vietnam vets step aside, what danger do the gaps between information, knowledge, and technology create for the Army, the country, and the enemy?