

## ERIC MARGOLIS



# Iceland's value

REYKJAVIK, Iceland, 25 December 1987, 0600 hours — As Icelanders are sleeping off their Christmas revels, a Russian roll-on/roll-off freighter claiming engine trouble puts into Reykjavik harbor.

The vessel's bow doors swing open; down its ramp rushes a stream of light armored vehicles carrying elite Spentz commandos. Guided by military attaches from the Russian Embassy, the flying column races unopposed to the U.S. airbase at Keflavik. There, a few stunned air force guards are quickly eliminated. The control tower is seized; remaining American base personnel are killed in their bunks.

At 0730 hours, Russian troops transport aircraft, flying low and masked by electronic jamming to evade radar, land paratroopers, flight controllers and anti-aircraft missiles. Two squadrons of Mig-31 interceptors follow them in. After quickly refuelling, the Mig-31s take up combat air patrol around Iceland; Soviet submarines and surface units steam southward at flank speed from their bases near Murmansk, sealing off the island.

Iceland, with no army of its own, falls in a few hours. By a lightning "coup de main," Russia has captured the key to NATO's northern defence. The gateway to the North Atlantic lies open.

This is how I believe World War III will begin. Russia's first objective in a conventional war will be to sever the vital Atlantic sea bridge across which troops and supplies from North America must reach Europe. If the Russians can block these reinforcements, Western Europe will inevitably fall to their superior might.

This mission belongs to the huge Red Banner Northern Fleet. From bases in the Kola Peninsula and on the White Sea, 76 surface warships and 135 attack submarines, supported by 75 naval bombers, are poised to break into the North Atlantic. To do so, however, they must first traverse the narrow waters between Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom — the GIUK Gap.

### Critical weakness

Here, NATO has created a barrier defence of SOSUS underwater hydrophones, deployed to target waiting NATO hunter-killer submarines, aircraft and surface units against the advancing Russians. Iceland, with its Keflavik airbase, sits like a giant, unsinkable aircraft carrier near the middle of the GIUK Gap.

Should war appear imminent, NATO plans to reinforce the sub-Arctic barrier defence by rushing ships and aircraft to Iceland. The U.S. Second Fleet will detach a carrier task force to reinforce Iceland and the GIUK Gap. The RAF and Nimrod AWACS aircraft based in the Orkneys and the Shetlands are tasked with closing the easterly GIUK passage between Iceland and the Faroes.

All of this makes excellent military sense and it poses an extremely difficult challenge to Soviet war planners. But within this equation lies a critical weakness: Iceland's adamant refusal to allow U.S. ground troops on her volcanic soil.

In spite of Iceland's enormous strategic importance, it is the only member of NATO without any armed forces whatsoever. Worse yet, a succession of leftist governments have for many years threatened to evict the Americans from Keflavik. Today, as a result of these threats, only 24 F-4 Phantoms protect the air base. Yet as we have seen from the above scenario, Keflavik clearly is extremely vulnerable to surprise attack by commando forces.

The 220,000 Icelanders, descendants of seafaring Vikings, appear to have only three political concerns in their welfare state: squabbles with their neighbors over fishing rights; riotous drinking by the bored citizenry; and the airbase. Icelanders claim, with some justification, that U.S. military personnel at Keflavik are tainting their tightly-knit society. The sole method of expression of Icelandic nationalism is hostility towards the American presence.

### Possible solution

Cooler heads in Iceland realize that Keflavik is vital both to NATO and to the local economy, bringing in millions of dollars of revenue each year. Without the airbase, Iceland would have to depend on its steadily declining codfish catch as the sole source of foreign exchange. Given this economic reality, therefore, it appears likely that Iceland will retain the base; but there is little chance that it will ever allow U.S. ground forces to be stationed on the island.

There is a possible solution to this very real problem. Canada, which shares with the U.S. responsibility for the defence of the North Atlantic, should consider basing some of its Aurora anti-submarine aircraft in Iceland. In addition, a part or all of our CAST brigade, earmarked for transport to Norway in time of crisis, could be based in Iceland.

Such a Canadian commitment would provide important forward defence of our sea lanes by being able to strike at Soviet naval forces in the narrow GIUK chokepoint — before they break into the vulnerable North Atlantic. Arctic-trained Canadian troops based in Iceland could defend Keflavik and serve as a ready reserve for Norway.

Would Iceland accept Canadian troops? No one has asked, but I think it might. Canadians would be less objectionable to the prickly Icelanders than multi-racial American troops. Does Canada have the aircraft and men to spare? No and yes. We all know that Canada lacks the military power to defend Labrador. Yet even our limited military assets would be more efficiently deployed forward in Iceland than in trying to defend the huge North Atlantic. Iceland is the first line of defence for Canada and the U.S.

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