



## The Norwegian Rocket Incident (The Black Brant Scare)

On January 25, 1995, Russian officers at the Olenegorsk Radar Station in the northwestern region of Russia detected the “launch” of what appeared to be a 4-stage missile off Norway’s northern coast. Although the officers were not able immediately identify the missile, the altitude and distance traveled appeared to align closely with the U.S. submarine-launched Trident II.

Unfortunately, the Russian Missile Attack Warning System (MAWS) crew was unaware that what they were actually viewing was the [Black Brant XII](#), an aeronautical research rocket sent to study the Northern Lights. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry had announced the joint endeavor with the United States a month prior, but for unknown reasons, the MAWS officers never received the message.

Immediately, Russia’s strategic forces were put on high alert. Cold War era “launch on warning,” procedures remained in effect, a strategy that would theoretically assure mutual destruction. President Boris Yeltsin, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, and Chief of the General Staff Mikhail Kolesniko were each handed a nuclear briefcase. Despite Yeltsin having the sole legal authority to “press the button,” each man had the technical ability. This is the [first](#) and only known instance of a nuclear briefcase being “opened” during a crisis.

Radars began tracking each stage of the rocket as it exhausted its fuel and detached. One of Yeltsin’s commanders reportedly mistook these falling components for additional warheads, or a possible [MIRVed](#) payload. Although information regarding these tense moments is limited, Yeltsin allegedly doubted any real threat. The leaders watched as the final stage of the rocket dropped into the ocean and off their radars. It was clear that Russia was not under attack. Russian news did not report on this incident until a week later.