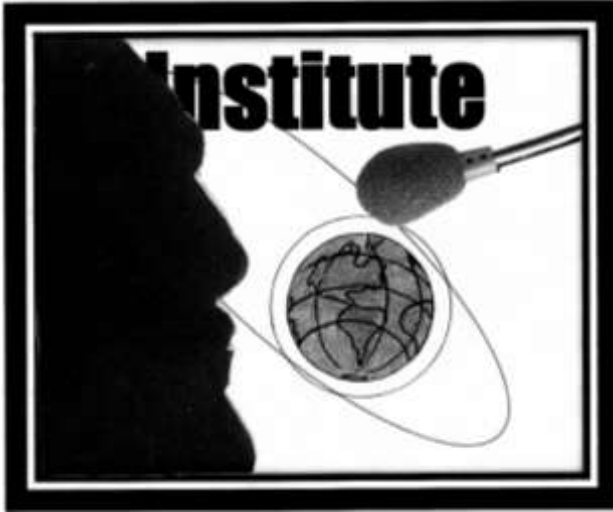


# The Thunderbolt

## Part 2

I was given the power to build a special team to ensure that the whole project was implemented at the earliest



opportunity and naturally, the scheme was given maximum publicity in order to revive public and governmental interest in the Institute. New money was voted for the project and I was virtually autonomous in my powers of direction and budgeting. The news media, as I have already described, were enthralled by the simplicity of the idea and in the end, I had to work hard to avoid becoming a full-time publicity officer for the Institute. I spent much time travelling to supervise work in Peking and Moscow, so I built up a team in Washington, led by Jim Anderson, an American scientist trained, as I was, by the Institute.

The phone rang again. I awoke from this lone reverie, aware that I had not yet pitted my wits against the disaster confronting the world.

"Hello, Professor?"

"Hello Jim. Anything new?"

"No, just news from the Pentagon that the President will call in one hour. She is very worried.

Apparently, there have been rumours from Moscow."

"One hour: is that enough for you to give me a complete run down on the latest information, Jim? Say, ring me back in fifteen minutes before with a summary."

"Sure, Professor. I'll find it myself. Bye."

I did not intend to lie back in bed and watch my "brainwave" killing people and utterly out of control. How different it all was at the beginning. Of course, we didn't actually tie the moon and earth together. The principle was the same, however. Two satellites were put into orbit, one round the earth and the other orbiting round the earth, but very close to moon orbit. Thus, the moon "station" was constantly attracted into moon orbit, and pulled on the earth station via a connecting link. The earth satellite, orbiting at the same speed as the moon, replied to this pressure by pulling back into earth's orbit, thanks to the greater gravitational force of earth. These satellites were connected physically by a highly complex system of fibres and metal cores which extended for nearly a quarter of a million miles through space. Every hundred or so miles, there was a cell or station which stored the energy. As the moon and earth progressed through the daily cycles, the connecting cables were consistently under such pressure that vast amounts of energy were discharged and then gathered in the cells. So, gravity and friction gave earth the dream of unlimited supplies of energy. It took several years of refinement and experiment to "milk" this cord, but eventually, some twenty years ago now, space shuttles were able to go up to one of the cell stations and bring back enough energy to drive all the power stations on earth. The system, under my personal direction, was refined so effectively that each major region in the world had its own space shuttle which went up to be recharged every twelve months and we even developed unmanned space shuttles that gave automatic recharging capability.

The world was not slow to congratulate me. I became Sir Anthony Barratt and eventually Director of the Institute. Honours from almost every Academic Institution in the world were offered. It was generally accepted that the world had been saved from disaster and the foresight of the politicians of the 1980's was praised in song and in monuments and the world relaxed, safe in the knowledge that while earth and moon revolved round the sun, there would be unlimited supplies of energy. Under my direction, Jim Anderson had recently been working on a new refinement of the "Thunderbolt" as it had been christened in the press. This, unfortunately, had led directly to the problems of today. Rather than use the space shuttle to gather energy and bring it back to earth, the plan was to create a facility so that the energy was transmitted automatically to earth. The idea came to me one day during a thunderstorm. Lightening had flashed to earth and the idea had

flashed into my mind. Why not transmit the energy like a flash of lightening? As the Bolt travelled around the earth, passing over virtually all the surface of the earth, why not fire salvoes direct to earth into specially constructed receptors? So simple, like the original idea itself! Here was the fulfilment of the purpose of the Institute. Now, it seemed, the earth and its people need only live out its life peacefully developing its human institutions and putting to the service of all people the unbounded energy we had tapped. Now, laughed some of the junior members of the Institute, we who had made all this possible could retire on big pensions for life and be secure in public's undying gratitude. Such dreams were soon to become, as they often do, nightmare material.

I had, at first, blamed myself as I suppose is natural. Then, after listening to Jim and my wife and friends, I became more sensible and started to seek ways of correcting an error in the system that had caused the Bolt to fire salvoes in a random pattern of destruction all over the globe. I had given the world its salvation but it felt only a deathly scourge now. But the inventor of the wheel was not to be condemned for the warrior's chariot. The perfecter of the metal process could not be accused for the spear or the inventor of flight be reviled for the fighter-plane. It was no use feeling sorry. All thought now was needed to find ways of taming this wild snake in the sky. I felt an urgent need to get up and be in the heart of the operation, but could barely lift myself off the bed, so acute was the pain in my back. Just to prepare myself for the interview with the President, I switched on the T.V. in time for the news bulletin. I could not believe my eyes. My Thunderbolt was spitting destruction every twelve hours or so. Scenes from Leningrad were on the screen, and it was very reminiscent of the old movie file of the London Blitz. Refugees were flooding away from the affected areas in China. Forest fires had been started in Canada and worst of all, there was no telling which path the destruction would take.

Jim had been unable to plot a projected course, as the whole transmitting centre had gone hay-wire. Together, the members of the three Institutes had sent co-ordinated shuttle teams to sever the Bolt and cut off the supply. It had destroyed these craft before they were in firing range, killing several crew in the process. The only way that we had come up with which would guarantee success was a nuclear warhead, but, in the great Peace Era, these had all be dismantled. And, if such a nuclear explosion were to be unleashed, who could tell what might result? The earth beneath the explosion would almost certainly be destroyed, along with all inhabitants. It might be possible to do it over the ocean, and thus cause minimal damage to the earth's population, but the whole debate was speculative anyway, since there existed no nuclear force with such a capability any longer.

The phone rang again.

"Hello, Jim. Go on."

"Well, it seems that it is blank on every score. To start with, we are still unable to contact Moscow or Peking. I am very worried by that, sir. This is exactly the time when all the corporate resources of the Institute should be working together. It was exactly such an emergency which gave birth to the whole thing. Anyhow, total silence from them and it's just as bad from all departments here. The Bolt seems to be able to destroy anything we send up to counteract it before we can take evasive action. It is almost as if it has a life or mind of its own. The moon has been bombarded too, by the way. Our moon base reports massive explosions and they requested advice about evacuation. We do have a team of volunteers standing by to make a last ditch attempt to destroy the Bolt, should all else fail."

"Volunteers, you say, Jim? They sound like a team of kamikaze pilots to me. Or else they are sadly lacking in common sense. Look what happened to the last manned shuttle craft. Who is behind that idea Jim?"

"Er, sorry sir, but it was my idea."

"Jim, what can you be thinking of? You ..."

"Sorry, Sir Anthony, but the world needs something pretty desperate right now. I feel kind of responsible and anyhow, I am the best equipped person to go up and have a closer look. I know all the technical details and could make a quick on-the-spot decision."

"I know that Jim, but really, you shouldn't feel responsible. If anyone should, it is me, and ..."

"Sorry sir, but the President is on the line and wishes to speak to you immediately. O.K.?"

"O.K. Jim, and Jim?"

"Yes sir?"

"Well, thanks for the idea of that volunteer force, but listen, only if it is the very last resort. You understand? Now, put the Queen Bee on the V.D.U."

"Hello, Sir Anthony?"

"Yes, Madam President, I'm here. How are you?"

"How are you, that's more to the point. I can see that you are still laid up in bed. Who have you got in there with you? Oh no, I forget you're one of these reserved Englishmen aren't you. Well, look Anthony. Tony. Yes, Tony, the news is bad."

"I know, I've been watching the T.V."

"No, Tony, I mean the news, not what we see on television. The news is that the Soviets and Chinese have closed down their Institutes and, wait for it, yes, they have trundled out of the moth-balls from Gods knows where, a rather antique but still highly lethal collection of nuclear warheads and missiles that we all thought had been thrown out twenty years ago."

"Oh no, Madam President, if they use those warheads, it could be disaster for all of us."

"Yes, I know. I spoke to the Soviet Party Chairman earlier today and he informed me rather curtly that they were planning to destroy the Bolt as soon as the missiles were operational, and no matter where in the heavens it happened to be. That seemed to me like a thinly disguised threat to explode nuclear warheads where they will do least damage to the Soviets when the Bolt is over U.S. land. Now, I do not feel able to let them do that."

"Yes, I quite see your objections, Madam President."

"Tony, cut the Madam bit, will you? It's me, Jane, remember?"

"Sorry, Jane, but the gravity of the situation seems to demand formality. But, I feel sure that if we cannot come up with a scientific solution on earth, we have a team of volunteers who might just be able to disarm the Bolt if they are given the time and the equipment. You know Jim Anderson, don't you, well he ..."

"Hell, Tony, I am now more worried by the nuclear threat from the Soviets than the Bolt. How much time do you need to work out this 'scientific solution'?"

"Jane, I just don't know. Give me twelve more hours?"

"O.K. Tony, twelve hours, and then we may have to negotiate with the Soviets and Chinese about nuclear solutions."

"Just a minute, Jane. How do you mean negotiate? Surely you don't mean that we ..."

"Yes, Tony, I do. We too have some nuclear warheads which we could make operational in eight hours. I didn't know that we had any, until elected President. But they are there, large as life, and just as destructive to it as in 1988. They had been kept, just in case, you understand, way down deep in the Ocean."

"And what, may I ask, are you going to tell the Soviets and Chinese?"

"Tony, you know I am a pacifist, a true heir of the Peace Era, a member from youth up of Peace International. But I will not stand by and see the U.S. destroyed. I will tell our comrades in the East that if they do attempt to fire their warheads without international agreement, we will attack their installations, and if necessary, their cities, with ours."

"Jane, I just do not believe I hear you right. How can you threaten them? It's like 1988 all over again. Oh, God, Jane, you can't do this, you can't."

"You're the scientist, Sir Anthony, and I am the politician. I know what I am doing, so you get on with your solutions and leave the politics to me, understand. And by the way, I heard that crack about Queen Bee. Now, you have your twelve hours. Use them. Good bye."

Her tone changed suddenly and she ended the interview with more than a trace of anger in her voice. Jane. Doctor Jane Cummins, now Madam President Cummins, the first woman ever to hold the most powerful executive post in the history of the world. She had always shown a steely determination when a student at the Institute and now it was being put to use in the most dangerous power game since 1988. It was now the year 2033 and during those forty-five intervening years, she had been through a busy and even tragic life with enormous energy and panache. Having left the Institute to marry, we thought her wasted. But it would seem that she was planning her rise to power. Having made the grade in the most famous institution in the world, she then proceeded to make the grade by bearing three children and satisfying the American's desire for their politicians to have nice, ordinary, family backgrounds. Then she sat in the House of Representatives for several terms before becoming State Senator. Three years ago, after intense campaigning for the Democratic nomination, she had been elected as the first woman President with on the largest majorities in the popular

vote ever recorded. It is worth noting that she defeated a well-known 'hawk' who campaigned on the issue of unilateral defence programmes and who wanted to cool off the forty years détente that had brought the world peace and stability. Now, this elected 'dove' was planning a nuclear attack on the Soviets. What irony there is in politics. Jane's husband had died, with one of their children, in a plane crash in 2028, which, some cynics said, had given her the public sympathy and therefore the Presidency.

The phone rang again. I switched on my V.D.U. and tried to alert myself to the task in hand. It was Jim.

"Hello Professor. How did it go?"

"Not good, Jim. Time is running out for us. What is the situation now?"

"Well sir, failing a concerted approach by the three Institutes, I can only recommend a do or die mission to sever the Bolt. Without co-operation, it seems unlikely to succeed."

"Yes, Jim, I know. Look, if we manage to secure co-operation from the East, it seems to be that it might be possible to do it. Perhaps we should ask the President to appeal to them for help.."

"Yes, I think that would be imperative, sir."

"Very well, Jim, will you attempt to link me with the Pentagon or the White House, wherever she is?"

"O.K. I'll be back as soon as I can."

What a mess to happen at this critical point. It would be ironic if forty-five years of peace and co-operation should end now with a resumption of belligerence using the weapons of the 1980's. Surely the world would rally round again and force the spirit of peace back into the politicians?

The phone rang and the President was there again, on the screen.

"Hello, Tony. What did you want?"

"Jane, I want to make a massive appeal to the others to allow the Institute scientists to co-operate for an attempt at severing the Bolt. It is imperative that there is a concerted effort."

"I've tried that, Tony. They refuse to listen. Presumably, they have drafted all available scientists on to the nuclear warhead scheme. Look, Tony, I'm in the middle of a conference right now. If you have any definite ideas, let me know ..."

"Jane, wait please. You don't seem to realise the danger we are in. If we start throwing nuclear warheads about, even on the pretext of destroying the Bolt, it may involve us in a holocaust."

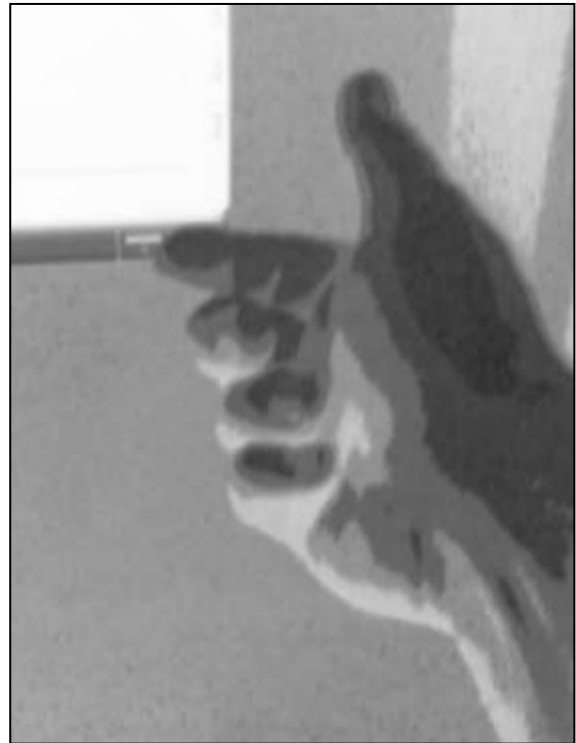
"Tony, I do know what dangers we are in. It is back to the old game of deference by strength now."

"But Jane, there is a real chance, if we make a concerted effort that the Bolt can be severed by a manned shuttle. It's dangerous, but we have a team who are prepared to give it a try. Please Jane. Ask them. You remember those long nights we spent talking about peace and the salvation of the world through science? In the name of our shared hopes when we were young, please try to gain their co-operation."

"Tony, I can't promise anything, because events are rapidly overtaking us all now. The Chiefs of Staff are now discussing the military implications of the whole scene and it may be that things have gone too far for any co-operation. However, Tony, I am going to speak to Moscow and Peking on the subject in a short time. I will mention it to them. But don't expect anything."

"Jane, please press them. It will take one effort together. Please do everything to make it possible."

She had gone. Back, I presume, to some insane war games and organising the re-arming of the old missiles. Hope was not high, in my heart, as I lay helpless on my bed and tried to envisage the second half of the twenty-first century after a major nuclear war.



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