



THE Hungary JOB

A road trip across the Eastern Bloc with dozens of mustachioed Hungarians, a few jolly Czechs, two Slovenians, four Russians, three gung-ho dudes from the U.S. Department of Energy, one Penn Stater, and enough highly enriched uranium to destroy a city

BY JASON FAGONE '01 Com/A&A

Saturday, Sept. 13, 11 a.m.

FOR A GUY ON A MISSION TO PREVENT THERMONuclear annihilation, Andrew Bieniawski is remarkably chipper. “Big stuff,” he tells me, pulling his luggage with speed through the international airport in Budapest, “this is big stuff, OK?”

A lot of Americans these days take pains to appear vaguely Canadian when they travel abroad. Not Bieniawski. He’s wearing a blue polo shirt that says “PGA Tour” and a black Nike Fit ball cap.

“The boat is in the water,” he chirps, “the boat is in the water.”

“The boat” is the *Lynx*, double-hulled, outfitted to carry things that are radioactive. It has already departed from the Charleston Naval Weapons Station in South Carolina, and right now, it’s chuffing across the Atlantic toward Europe at 10 knots. This should put the boat in the correct place at the correct time to receive the special cargo that **Bieniawski ’89 Eng** and his team will shepherd through two countries over the next four days. The cargo is highly enriched uranium. It’s what nuclear bombs are made of.

This is why Bieniawski, who is 41 years old but looks much younger, has kept me in the dark about this trip. It’s a national-security operation. Earlier this year he invited me to embed with his team and follow the cargo, but since then he’s told me very little. Here’s the extent of what I know. I know that ultimately the boat, along with its cargo, will dock in Russia. I know that in the meantime there will be certain “Activities” tomorrow in Budapest, and that later in the week there will be other “Activities” in the small and picturesque country of Slovenia. That’s what the e-mail said. Activities. So innocuous. As if we could be playing horseshoes. As if he’s not about to choreograph a balletic series of movements involving a shipment of Apocalypse Fuel at a time when it seems like the Apocalypse is inching a bit closer on the horizon. Right before we got on the plane, there were harsh words for Vladimir Putin in all the U.S. papers, due to the fact that he had just sent tanks into Georgia—and in the Russian papers, there were photographs of Putin in the Siberian forest, hunting for white tigers....

“So, this Hungary thing,” Bieniawski says. “You excited? Obviously we’re pretty jacked.”

As an employee of the National Nuclear Security Administration, part of the U.S. Department of Energy,

Bieniawski (pronounced “bien-YAFF-ski”) gets paid to imagine worst-case scenarios, then make sure they never come true. His career in government is a surprise to him. Growing up, he always assumed he’d make his living as an engineer, like his father, a longtime mineral and mining engineer in Pretoria, South Africa. Bieniawski grew up in Pretoria, the middle child of three brothers. He still has a slight accent; when he says a word like “yesterday,” it comes out “yestuhday,” almost British. He might still be in South Africa if not for apartheid. In the 1970s, the Afrikaaner government began to conscript young men for the war in Rhodesia. But the Bieniawskis weren’t Afrikaaners and didn’t support apartheid; “We would be fighting to continue, and in a way legitimize, the apartheid regime.” So the family immigrated to State College when Bieniawski was 11. Bieniawski’s father won a teaching job in the College of Earth and Mineral Sciences, and when it came time for Bieniawski to go to college, he decided to study nuclear engineering at Penn State. He was happy being a geek. It wasn’t until he and his chemical-engineer buddy **Ken Sheely ’89 Eng** landed internships with the Department of Energy that Bieniawski began to imagine a different sort of life, in the world of nuclear nonproliferation—or, as Bieniawski calls it, “NonPro,” as in, “So, we got you hooked on NonPro?”

In the NonPro world, there are two types of people.

WE’RE MOVING 341 POUNDS OF HIGHLY ENRICHED URANIUM. THE BOMB THAT THE U.S. DROPPED ON HIROSHIMA WAS MADE WITH 160 POUNDS.



The first type is immersed in the details of foreign policy: how governments can use carrots and sticks to reduce existing nuclear stockpiles and constrain non-nuclear countries from Getting the Bomb. The second type goes in after the treaties have been struck, and executes them. The first type you find at the State Department or in academia, and the second type you find at the National Nuclear Security Administration. The NNSA installs radiation-checking machines at international ports, beefs up customs checkpoints in places like Kazakhstan, and sends undercover nuclear experts to large public events like political conventions and the Super Bowl, roaming the crowds with small concealed gadgets that can detect the decay of an atom inside a “dirty bomb”—a tiny, and as-yet unused, blend of con-

ventional explosives and radioactive material that would scatter radiation for miles.

From 2001 to 2004, Bieniawski worked for the U.S. Department of Energy in Moscow, partnering with the Russians to secure their warhead sites and roll up their old stockpiles of nuclear fuel. Then he came to D.C. to run a new program called the Global Threat Reduction Initiative, or GTRI. Whereas the other parts of the NNSA are concerned with catching nuclear-armed terrorists red-handed as they try to slip through ports and border crossings, Bieniawski’s program is all about pre-



EASY DOES IT: Bieniawski hopes to truck out the spent fuel of every civilian reactor outside of Russia by 2010. His colleague and fellow Penn Stater, Ken Sheely, is doing the same with U.S. reactors.

venting terrorists from getting nuclear devices in the first place. “We’re like the first line of defense,” Bieniawski says.

Bieniawski’s brief is twofold. One: Stop the terrorists from getting radiological materials that could be used in a dirty bomb, such as Cesium-137, common in hospitals and in the construction industry. Two: Stop the terrorists from exploding a Hiroshima-type nuclear bomb. A real bomb. A fissile device. How difficult would this be? Not as difficult as you might think. The Hiroshima bomb, “Little Boy,” was very simple. It was two lumps of dull gray metal—highly enriched uranium—that were slammed into each other at high speed, by a simple “gun-type” mechanism. Of course, “One might expect

that terrorists might not do as well as the United States did at Hiroshima,” says Matthew Bunn, a nonproliferation expert at Harvard. But even if the terrorist bomb could only manage a one-kiloton “fizzle” yield, it would still destroy every building and every living thing within a radius of a third of a mile. It would be enough to level the downtown core of any small town in America. It could turn the heart of the East Village in Manhattan to dust. By the standards of modern engineering, the terrorists could fail miserably—and still win.

The hardest part about making a bomb isn’t designing the bomb itself. It’s getting the fuel, the highly enriched uranium—HEU. It’s difficult to make. But this is the bad news: A terrorist group wouldn’t have to make HEU at all. It could just steal it. As of 1978, the year that Bieniawski’s family came to America, there were 207 civilian reactors all over the world that contained HEU in their cores. The reactors were artifacts of the Cold War. For decades, we curried favor with our Cold War allies by shipping them casks full of HEU to power their peaceful reactors—reactors that universities could use to probe the secrets of the atom, and hospitals could use to make medical isotopes. And of course Russia did the same thing with their allies, with countries like ... Hungary.

And in 1978, we began to roll up the fuel in these reactors and ship

it to safer places. By now, some reactors were crumbling. Others had nothing more than a chain-link fence and a single night watchman for security. The work was slow and piecemeal, progressing one reactor at a time.

Then came 9/11, and slow and piecemeal wasn’t good enough anymore.

Sunday, 9 a.m.

THE RUSSIANS WEAR SUIT JACKETS AND TIES and stand just to one side of the gate to the Budapest civilian nuclear reactor, in a hilly region west of the city. They are all business. They shake hands briskly with Bieniawski and the rest of the NNSA team—Bien-

awski's boss, Ken Baker, and his top technical expert, Igor Bolshinsky, and a gangly PR flack named Bryan Wilkes. (Bieniawski, Baker, Bolshinsky, Bryan: They call themselves the Four Bs.) The Russians flash the Four Bs brief toothy smiles, then retreat to their cigarettes, taking drags in the cool morning air.

It's Day One of The Job. We're having our passports checked by a beefy security guard. The place feels like a national park, leafy and green, a campus of dun-colored buildings connected by narrow roads. Further in, we park, get out, walk through a security gate, past two

RISKY BUSINESS: Getting the uranium from the reactor to the train station in Budapest requires tight security, including bomb-sniffing dogs and heavily armed police.



security guards in sweater vests with large rifles slung on their backs. The rifles have wooden butts. They look like guns I've seen in CNN footage from troubled African countries.

I ask Baker: "Are those ... AK-47s?"

"Yep."

Beyond the guards, a bunch of guys in yellow and blaze-orange reflective vests are milling around in front of a line of 10-wheel trucks. "Good morning!" says a large guy with a gray mustache. "Hello. We are very glad you have come back to Hungary for this action. We

were waiting two, three years for this day." He claps his hands.

This is Sándor Tôzsér, the reactor's director. The guys in the yellow vests are his employees, and the guys in the orange vests are from the Czech Republic, here to watch over the "casks," the special blue barrels that hold the uranium and keep it safe. Inside each cask are an average of 108 HEU fuel rods, shaped like hexagons. The casks were made by a Czech company called Skoda. Each cask looks like a giant blue barbell, about eight feet tall. The "bells" are shock absorbers. The idea is that if the cask got dropped, it would still protect the HEU inside from leaking.

Right now the casks, 16 of them, are lined in neat rows inside a tall hangar-type building that the NNSA built specially for this job, at a cost of \$14 million. (The entire cost of the job to U.S. taxpayers is \$20 million: "a pretty darned good investment," in Baker's words.) The building's purpose is to manipulate the HEU and move it to the trucks. As the first truck now backs into the hangar, a giant crane whirs into motion and dips down a yoke that workers fit atop the first cask. The crane lifts the cask onto a bright blue shipping container that sits on the truck, then

the workers remove the yoke and fasten the cask to the shipping container with a series of turnbuckles. Once a second cask goes into the container, they lock it up, check for any leaking radiation, and send in the next truck. "This is a thing of beauty, actually, from an engi-

BIENIAWSKI'S PROGRAM IS ALL ABOUT PREVENTING TERRORISTS FROM GETTING NUCLEAR DEVICES.



neering perspective," Bieniawski says. "It's quite a feat."

All told, we are moving 341 pounds of highly enriched uranium. The uranium has been "spent" inside the reactor, but there is still some HEU left in the spent fuel. It can still be fashioned into a powerful weapon. The bomb that the United States dropped on Hiroshima was made with only 160 pounds of HEU. If a terrorist group were to get its hands on 341 pounds of highly enriched uranium, it could make six crude bombs.

So it's good that the HEU is leaving. Next year, in a separate operation, it will be replaced with low-enriched uranium, or LEU. You don't need the really pure stuff to run a reactor; you can do it with cruder uranium, which doesn't present as much of a proliferation risk. (Penn State's own nuclear reactor runs on LEU fuel.) What's happening here is the first part of what's called "reactor conversion," and it's the linchpin of the Global Threat Reduction Initiative; Bieniawski hopes to truck out the spent-fuel inventories of every single civilian reactor outside of Russia by 2010. GTRI also aims to convert the HEU reactors inside the United States; the domestic work is handled by Bieniawski's colleague and fellow Penn Stater Ken Sheely, who right now is back in Washington, planning a reactor conversion at the University of Missouri.

We break for lunch: a meaty goulash and pickled vegetables, served in the reactor's in-house cafeteria. The Russians are at one table; the Americans sit at a table on the opposite end. Halfway through lunch, Sándor, the Hungarian, shuffles over with a message from one of the Russians. "Misha said, We all drink vodka," Sándor says. "I said, Where is it in contract?" It's unclear if Sándor is joking or if the Russian was joking, or both, or neither.

"No, no, no," Baker says. Baker is a jowly ex-Air Force pilot and a lifelong Cold Warrior. He used to be chief of tactics at Strategic Command headquarters in

Nebraska, which during the Cold War was the closest thing going to the war room with the giant missile map in *Dr. Strangelove*. He later worked in the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, writing the top-secret information inside the "football" that con-

tained America's nuclear launch codes. "In nuclear work," he says in his Kentucky drawl, "vodka is a critical mass."

After lunch, the loading continues, until finally, a little after 4 p.m., the last turnbuckle is locked down on the last cask, and all the workers climb aboard the eighth and final

truck and take a group picture. On a table in the corner, Bolshinsky, a compact, balding man of 50, opens his laptop and loads a Web page that can pinpoint the exact location of the *Lynx*, the boat that will pick up these eight shipping containers two days from now. Bolshinsky has installed a GPS tracker on the boat. The Russians, fascinated by the GPS device, gather around and gawk. The computer says the boat is traveling at 11.3 knots. The weather looks favorable. "It's the Med," Baker says, meaning the Mediterranean Sea. "We never run into any bad weather in the Med."

Monday, 2:45 p.m.

BRIEF MEETING AT THE U.S. EMBASSY WITH AMBASSADOR April Foley, who helped broker the agreement between the U.S. and Hungary that is allowing the Four Bs to do their work. The meeting is filmed. (I'm not the only journalist here; there's also a two-person documentary crew working on a movie about nuclear terrorism.) What follows is a fairly excruciating exchange of diplomatic pieties. (Baker, hands folded on table: "You and your staff have done an absolutely *splendid* job." Foley: "You're welcome. This has been an important initiative for our mission ... and for the Bush administration." PR flack Wilkes [to cameraman]: "Would you mind filming him again? Because he was smiling. And they're talking about a very serious topic.... Ah! Nuclear terrorism! Ha ha ha!")

While it's hard to be cynical about the core goal of the Global Threat Reduction Initiative—rolling up loose nukes, saving the world, etc.—the program is still just one skein in the vast web of American nuclear policy. And if you object to any aspect of the way America wields its nuclear sticks and carrots on the world stage, your objection may find its way to the doorstep of the Four Bs. Last year, around Christmas, an environmen-

tal group temporarily halted a convoy of nuclear fuel that the NNSA was trying to move from Dresden, Germany, to a nuclear institute just south of Moscow that the United States spent \$25 million transforming into a Fort Knox of nuclear fuel. (The Hungary cargo will end up in a different place in Russia, a remote city called Mayak in the Ural Mountains. Mayak is a “secret city” that never appeared on any Soviet maps; its original mission during the Cold War was to manufacture plutonium for Stalin. Once the spent fuel from Hungary gets to Mayak, it will be stored in a secure facility and eventually reprocessed back into usable reactor fuel.) Environmentalists who object to these shipments tend to argue that the U.S. government should be focusing more on eliminating nuclear material, not merely moving it from one place to another; the Union of Concerned Scientists points out that even by 2016, when the United States plans to have reduced its own stockpiles of HEU, we’ll still have 540 metric *tons* of the stuff. But the Dresden protest only succeeded in really pissing off the Four Bs, as it left the convoy exposed and immobilized for several hours—a major security risk. Remembers Bryan Wilkes, “I was like, What the hell? They were trying to stop it. I wanted to say, ‘Don’t you want it out of here, you idiots?’”

The various roles of the Four Bs are becoming clearer. Baker is the public face, the point man. Bieniawski is the future Baker, the understudy. Wilkes is Wilkes. And Bolshinsky is the man behind the scenes, the fixer, conducting teleconferences in three languages and smoothing out any problems. (He was born in

BAKER USED TO BE CHIEF OF TACTICS AT STRATEGIC COMMAND IN NEBRASKA—THE CLOSEST THING TO THE WAR ROOM IN DR. STRANGELOVE.



Ukraine but has lived in the United States since he was 33.) On the ride from the embassy back to the hotel, Baker says to Bolshinsky, “Igor, is there any country in the world you *haven’t* been in?”

“No, I do not think so,” Bolshinsky says.

“When Igor reached a million miles on Delta,” Baker says, “they sent him a set of luggage.”

“Zey did?”

“Yeah, they did.”

“Zey did.” Bolshinsky nods, remembering.

Monday, 11 p.m.

IT’S COLD IN HUNGARY IN SEPTEMBER. WE CAN see our breath. “So, I have some warm coat if you like,” says Sándor, approaching our underdressed group.

We’re back at the reactor for the dead-of-night portion of the Job. Eight trucks are idling, coughing exhaust, ready to move to the train station. We watch as the Hungarian police are using mirrors and bomb-sniffing dogs to check the trucks for any evidence of sabotage. Supervising this work is a buzz-cut lieutenant colonel, imposingly tall and lean and muscular.

“Everything OK?” Baker asks him, hands in his pockets.

“OK,” says our man, smiling wryly in a way that says, *Don’t worry your pretty little head*. “No problem.”

“On schedule?”

He purses his lips, almost whispers, “More or less.” Again that wry smile. He has been told to not divulge the schedule of the shipment. He walks away.

At Sándor’s signal, the trucks pull out, one by one, bracketed by police squad cars that put on their flashing lights but not their sirens. We follow. The convoy travels down the hilly road toward the train yard, stopping only for a short time to arrest a drunk Hungarian driver and make sure he doesn’t crash into the trucks. The train yard, when we arrive half an hour later, is dark and shadowy and lit by floodlamps across a vast expanse of pavement and track. Wilkes, the PR guy, looks up from his Blackberry and says, “Wow, it looks like a movie set here.”

The train yard has a majestic and powerful crane that arabesques the eight containers into the night air and places them gently onto flat train cars. “Great night, great night,” Bieniawski says. He loves these shipments, you can tell. His engineer’s brain appreciates the rigorous, systematic approach; he loves to check a box off a list.

“It offers you a discrete sense of accomplishment,” he says.

This is a big part of why Bieniawski has had such success getting reporters from the likes of *The New York Times* and *USA Today* to embed on missions like this one and write breathless stories much like the one I’m typing now. The war on terror can seem like a conflict with no borders and no endpoints. It’s chaotic. But this project, the Global Threat Reduction Initiative, has clear goals, clear endpoints, and at a cost to taxpayers of



\$193 million a year in 2008—less than a third of what the government spent to put undercover air marshals on planes—it’s a bargain. “People should know there’s a team out here, with boots on the ground, doing something to help,” Bieniawski says. “And they should feel better.”

Tuesday, 1 p.m.

TRAIN’S ON THE MOVE. IT SHOULD BE IN southwest Hungary by now, about to cross over the border into Slovenia. We’re not on the train, though. We’re still safe and cozy in Budapest. This afternoon we all fly to Slovenia’s capital, Ljubljana; tomorrow we meet the train, and the boat, at the Slovenian port of Koper. Right now the Four Bs are stuck in a meeting at the U.S. embassy, so I decide to go to the airport ahead of them, get a coffee, check my e-mail.

A note from Wilkes: *Something has come up.... Go back to Marriott....*

Huh? I hop back in a cab, head to the hotel, wait for two hours, three hours. Finally, at 6:45 p.m., the Four Bs come bursting into the lobby in their diplomatic dress—gray suits and crisp ties. Bieniawski says, “Did you hear? The Slovenians—they denied the permit.”

They rush upstairs to the executive lounge, throw

their jackets onto the comfy chairs, grab a bottle of white wine from the bar—Bieniawski opts for a Pepsi Lite in addition to the wine—and fill us in. Apparently, everything went to hell starting around 11 a.m., when Bolshinsky got a call from his shipping agent in Slovenia, who said that the Slovenians weren’t letting the train—the train with all the nukes—into the country. Sorry. No deal.

“I said, ‘You got to be kidding me,’” Baker says. “We had dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t.’ And some *political* situation?”

Here’s what the Four Bs think happened: This coming Sunday is election day in Slovenia, and the incumbent Slovenian prime minister is currently embroiled in a nasty bribery scandal. He’s a conservative. He’s tied in the polls with his center-left opponents. Environmentalists. One of the P.M.’s guys worried that if the P.M.’s opponents caught wind of the nuclear convoy, they’d make it public and use it to bash the P.M. as an Enemy of the Earth.

So as soon as they got the bad news earlier today, the Four Bs sprang into action. They brought out the big guns: the departments of State and Energy, the White House, the U.S. ambassador to Hungary, and the Hun-

“SOMETHING HAS COME UP”: The mission is jeopardized when the Slovenian prime minister forbids the shipment from passing through his country.

JASON FAGONE '01 COM/A&A



AND NOW IT'S TOTALLY CLEAR TO ME WHY THESE GUYS ARE HERE. THEY KNOW HOW TO GREASE SOMETHING ODD AND DANGEROUS THROUGH THE CUSTOMS REGIMES OF FOREIGN COUNTRIES IN AN OBSESSIVELY PLANNED, COORDINATED WAY.

garian Prime Minister. The Hungarian P.M. called up the Slovenian P.M. The Slovenian P.M. said, “No promises.” Explains Bieniawski, “In diplomatic-speak, no promises means HELL NO.” The Four Bs began to despair. They procured some sharp talking points for the next round of phone calls: *This is a high priority shipment.... The material has been safely packaged.... The train can NOT be turned back to Budapest.... It is important to note that this material is being moved under complete secrecy....*

And now it's totally clear to me, if it wasn't before, why these guys are here. They are the guys who know how to grease something odd and dangerous through the customs regimes of foreign countries in an obsessively planned, coordinated way. We're not being protected by some Jack Bauer-like character, but by diplomats. Engineers. Bureaucrats. And that's OK. You will never see this on 24, but this is the reality, and this was the Four Bs' great achievement today, their Jack Bauer moment: a series of tense phone calls that culminated in one sheet of paper being replaced with another sheet of paper. A permit. They got it reinstated. “It just shows you,” says Bolshinsky, “you have to be prepared for *everyzing*.” And they were. And now the train's about to move across the Slovenian border, as originally planned.

But of course there are no more flights to Slovenia today. So if we're going to meet the shipment, we've got to drive there, 250 miles, in the dead of night.

Tuesday, 9:20 p.m.

“I DO NOT SEE HOW THIS IS GOING TO WORK,” says Wilkes.

We're all scrunched into a van, seven large men and all of our luggage. My thighs are stuck to Wilkes' thighs and the cameraman's thighs. Baker, in the front passenger seat, looks back at us and says: “Wait a second. This is not 10 miles. This is 250 miles.”

“Just go,” Bieniawski says gruffly. “Get on the road.”

The ride takes us through the Slovenian countryside,

on hacked-up rural roads. It's dark for miles in every direction. The van makes a sharp turn, and something goes *thunk* in the back—the sound of the luggage tocking against poor Bolshinsky's head.

Baker says, “So when they ask us, during transition”—i.e., the transition to a new presidential administration in January, always a nervous time for any federal employee—“what we did for our country....”

Wednesday, 2:44 a.m.

ARRIVAL IN LJUBLJANA. I STAGGER TO THE CHECK-IN desk at the hotel. A drawly voice—Baker?—says, “Better set up your wakeup call right now. We leave at 5 a.m.” In my room, there's a free copy of a Slovenian newspaper; the front page is a story about the bribery allegations against the prime minister. The headline reads, “The Mother of all Affairs?” Collapse into bed.

Wednesday, 5 a.m.

DAWN. BACK IN THE VAN AGAIN, HEADING TO THE port of Koper, an hour's drive southwest from Ljubljana to the Adriatic Sea. Shapes of hills nearby and mountains beyond. Closer to the port, the buildings on the cliffside shimmer in the morning light like gold ingots.

We pull into the port, through radiation-checking portals installed by the NNSA a few years back, to find the boat, the *Lynx*, docked in the harbor. It's long and stout and high as a three-story building. Its hull is a steely blue.

“The *Lynx*,” Bieniawski says. “There it is, boys. There's our boat.”

“Great boat,” Bolshinsky says.

“Beautiful boat,” Baker says.

“It's a very small ship,” says one of the two officials from Slovenia's nuclear regulatory agency.

“It's a *beautiful* ship,” Bieniawski says.

“Andrew, I don't know if I'd call it a beautiful ship,” says Baker, ever the diplomat, “but it's a ship that does the job.”

There are special police with machine guns and bulletproof helmets spaced at 20-yard intervals all along the dock. The sky is a brilliant, cloudless blue. The gang's all here—the Americans, the Russians, the Slovenians, even a few of the Czechs and Hungarians—but there's nothing left for anybody to do; the details of the

loading are being handled by a private shipping company. So everyone just sort of stands around and exhales, allowing themselves to feel expansive and proud. One of the Russians has lit a cigar. I ask if he's enjoying himself. “When it arrive in Murmansk—the boat—yes, I enjoy.”

After the last container is stacked onto the deck of the *Lynx*, the Four Bs take a picture in front of the boat. Bieniawski asks the shipping company's chief if he can board the boat one last time to take a picture from the top. “No, no,” the chief says. “Finished.” He laughs. “The cargo is safe. We just disappear.”

Wednesday, 1:50 p.m.

“SANDOR'S ORDERED A CASE OF VODKA. HE'S GONNA get drunk. He says, ‘Carry me outta here, man.’”

Party time. Twenty-four days from now, as we'll later find out, the *Lynx* will dock in Murmansk without incident, unloading its cargo to a train. The train will arrive in Mayak 11 days after that. But for now, The Hungary Job is complete, and judging by the laughter and buzz in this smallish conference room at Slovenia's own civilian reactor, where a long table is heavy with elaborate plates of food—mozzarella and tomatoes, mussels in the

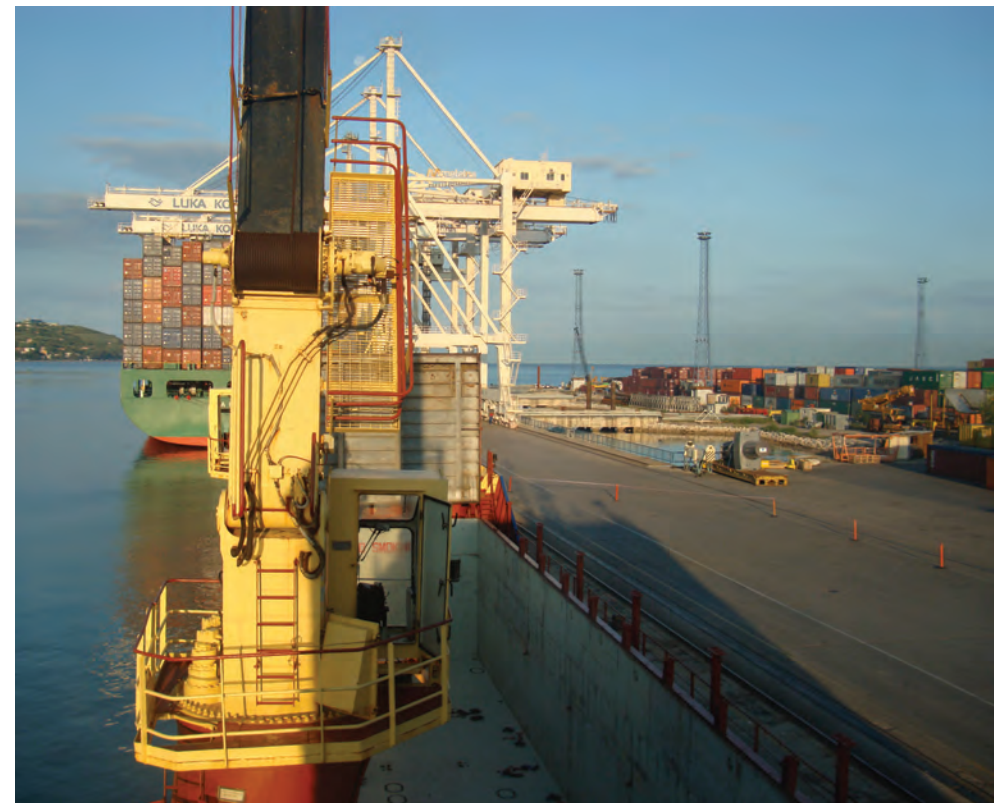
shell—it's been a great success. Waiters circulate with bottles of champagne, spurring toasts: toasts to the cooperation between countries, acknowledgements of the recent U.S.-Russia tensions, and the joy of having overcome these tensions to do good work, together. “This is the best part,” Bieniawski tells me, champagne glass in hand, scanning the room. “If you have a small group of people and really connect ... you can do amazing things.”

When it comes time for Bieniawski's toast, he holds up his glass and the room goes quiet. “From my perspective,” he says, “there's really one phrase that we learned throughout this project that really summarized it from the beginning. *Ne'voz-mozhnoe—vozmozno*. And I spent three years in Russia, and what that phrase really means is, The Impossible Is Possible.... Cheers.”

One of the Russians comes over and says something to Bieniawski. I don't catch it exactly, but it's clear that he's teasingly correcting Bieniawski's Russian. *Ne'voz-mozhnoe—vozmozno* is maybe not the best way to say what Bieniawski is trying to say.

“Aw, come on,” Bieniawski says, grinning. *Ne'voz-mozhnoe—vozmozno*. Close enough, anyway. Close enough for government work. ▀

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SAIL ON: The cargo's final stop is a secure area in Russia, where it will be reprocessed into reactor fuel.

Wednesday, 10:30 a.m.

ON THE RIDE BACK TO LJUBLJANA, THE VAN SLICES along a ridge overlooking the sea, passing a string of vineyards, tiny villas, and farms. I can see women walking the rows, tending the plants, the vines fat with purple grapes. It's so idyllic I want to scream. I turn around to share this with Bieniawski and Baker—*Guys, are you seeing this?*—but Bieniawski's neck is craned back at a sharp angle against the headrest, his eyes tightly shut, and Baker is snoring. Both dead asleep.

NATIONAL NUCLEAR SECURITY ADMINISTRATION