

## **1995: ARM-WRESTLING RUSSIA**

*How We Won The Cold War: A Personal Account of the Greatest Adventure of Modern Times*

### **Chapter Four**

#### **1995: ARM-WRESTLING RUSSIA**

On a late September day in 1995, I was washing the family station wagon in the driveway of our home in McLean, Virginia, when my wife called out, "Dana's on the phone for you."

Rebel brought me the phone and I heard a familiar voice. "Hey, Wheeler, there are some Russians coming by my office around four this afternoon - the Deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg and his entourage. You need to be there."

I looked at my watch. "Dana, it's two o'clock already. You sure?"

"Well, I don't know anyone who's been to Russia more than you whose opinion I can really trust. I'd really like you to be here."

How could I turn that down?

I'd known Dana Rohrabacher since we were in Youth For Reagan during Ronald Reagan's first campaign for governor of California in 1966. Now, almost 30 years later, Dana was a Member of Congress, and on the powerful International Relations Committee.

So I finished up with the car, put on the Washington costume of dark suit and tie, and motored down the George Washington Parkway to DC and Dana's office in the House Rayburn Building. The meeting went well. This was the time of Good Feelings between Boris Yeltsin's Russia and America, and there was a camaraderie between us all.

So much so that Dana suggested at the meeting's close, since he had no more meetings scheduled, why don't we all have a beer together at the Irish Times pub on the other side of Capitol Hill?

Beer? The Russians thought that was a great idea.

Soon enough we were at a set of tables in the back of the Irish Times. Paul Behrends, Dana's foreign policy staffer, and I were talking with a couple of the Russians who spoke passable English when all of a sudden Dana, who by now has obviously had one too many pints of Guinness, announced that he and the Deputy Mayor were going to have an arm wrestling contest.

"What the hell?" I mutter to Behrends, and we stare with our mouths agape as the Deputy Mayor puts Dana down in a New York second. Dana stands up grasping his right arm, looks around wildly, and spots me. Not US Marine Paul Behrends, but me.

"Wheeler!" he shouts. "Defend the honor of your country!"

I laugh. "Dana, don't do this to me. I'm happy. I'm having a beer."

Paul gives me a nudge. "C'mon, Jack." One of the Russians does the same. "*Tovarish*, you must."

So I think to myself, "The Cold War wasn't over *that* long ago. How can I resist?"

A second later I'm sitting across from this fellow about a decade younger than me, clearly fit, with thin blonde hair, ice blue eyes, and a smirk. I greet the smirk with a big smile as we clasp right hands and jostle a bit for the set up.

If only I could have told Dana about the Russian trick of putting all they had into the first microsecond. It's the way they fight wars, so I figured it's how they arm wrestle. What you have to do, then, is not try to win fast but just hold the initial hit off, for there's usually not much behind it.

And sure enough, once I took the hit I knew I had him, and down he went.

Instantly, up goes his left arm. He wants to go again. Okay, no problem, for I notice his smirk is gone. The man is all seriousness and intensity now, but I maintain my friendly smile and look right into those icy blue eyes. I never take my eyes off his as he goes down again.

Well, that was fun, so I can go back to my beer. Not a chance. Up steps the Deputy Mayor's KGB bodyguard. "Now my turn!" he announces, poking his chest with his thumb. I sigh. Damn, he's huge. I'm not a big guy, 5-11 and 175, fit enough at 52, but he's got me by at least 25 pounds and 25 years. I'm going to be destroyed. But I'm also mad. Goddam Russians! All right, you big KGB sonofabitch, let's go...

Those were my thoughts while I keep a silly, innocently friendly smile on my face. No smiles from him. I had humiliated his boss and he was going to teach the *Amerikanski* a lesson in Russian strength he wouldn't forget.

I try my best to keep the smile as I take the hit and he just about rips my arm off. Holy Mary Mother of God is he strong. But that I didn't instantly go down demoralizes him. My smile gets bigger as I realize he doesn't have that much stamina. Slowly, slowly I began to edge him down, until finally it is over.

His left arm up immediately goes up just like his boss's, but we both know the outcome at the start. Down he goes again, this time fast.

Sitting back next to Behrends, I take a tug on my Guinness and comment, "That was weird."

And so it remained, a strange forgotten moment until more than five years later when Dana and I were having a sandwich in the House Dining Room in the Capitol Building. It was January 2000 and we were discussing the recent elections in Russia. Out of the blue I recalled a photo in the newspapers of a face that looked oddly familiar. I felt my face turn white.

"Jack, what's the matter?" Dana asked. My mind was racing. "Dana, do you remember that time years ago at the Irish Times when we arm wrestled those Russians?"

It took Dana a moment. "What? Arm wrestling Russians? No, I.... oh... oh, yeah, my arm was sore for two days... why do you think of that now?"

"The guy who wanted to wrestle was the Deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg - do you remember his name?"

Dana frowned. "Why would I remember his name? I meet all kinds of people, you know that. What I remember is that great big blond KGB bastard. I'll never forget the look on his face when you put him down."

"Well, it just dawned on me who that Deputy Mayor is. Dana, he just got elected President of Russia. His name is Vladimir Putin."

Dana's eyes bulged, and I knew he was looking inward, searching his memories and comparing them with today's newspaper photos. Then he smiled in wonder. "You're right - it was Putin!" he exclaimed. We raised our glasses of ice tea to clink them as we both recited our personal toast of so many years, "FTC."

Our eyes held for a second - we were both thinking the same thing. "Good Lord it was a great adventure," I mused.

"Greatest adventure of modern times, man," responded Dana.

"It's funny how no one understands that," I went on. "The Cold War was the dominating event of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Defeating the Soviet Union was unthinkable for most everyone - much less its actual elimination as a country - right up until it happened. Then when it does, what did the liberals and leftie-weenies who always wanted to surrender to the mighty invincible Soviet Union all say?"

Dana had the answer. He smiled and waved his hands back and forth and spoke in a mocking voice, "Oh, 'I knew that was going to happen, it had to happen, we knew it all along'..." We laughed.

"But you're right, Jack," Dana continued. "Winning the Cold War was a great adventure, done on purpose. It's an adventure story that's never been told. You should tell it. Who better than you, the Indiana Jones of the Right?"

I groaned. The *Washington Post* saddled me with that moniker in 1986. Across the front page of the Style section, the headline blared, *Jack Wheeler's Adventures With The Freedom Fighters*, with the sub-headline, *The Indiana Jones of the Right and His Worldwide Crusade Against the Soviets* - and I had been stuck with it ever since.

"And look at the cast of characters besides you," Dana persisted. He held up his hand and began counting fingers. "Ollie North, Charlie Wilson, Bill Casey, Ronald Reagan of course, and dozens more. Then there was the zoo at the White House speechwriters' shop where I was. It's like some crazy adventure movie with the fate of the world at stake - yet it's true. It really happened. We're the gang who won the Cold War! C'mon, buddy - tell the story. It's the greatest adventure of your life - of all our lives."

"Dana, I have an expedition business to run," I pleaded. "I'm planning an overland expedition this summer across eastern Tibet. This April will be my 20<sup>th</sup> expedition to the North Pole."

Dana sighed in derision. I stared into the ice at the bottom of my drained glass of ice tea. Ice. "But you know," I said, "if I were to tell the story, the North Pole would be a good place to start."