

## *Remembering the Cuban Missile Crisis*

*by Jack Holdzkom, OTCM, USN (Ret)*

Where were you 50 years ago, on Monday, 22 October 1962? I realize that some of our members were not yet born, and many others may have only vague memories of that time or have read about it in history books, but at least two IUSSCAA members -- Chic LoMonaco and I -- were students at Fleet Sonar School, Key West, Florida, and experienced what it was like to be so close to the critical action focused just 100 miles to the south. Chic and I were in separate classes in the 31-week, 560G surface sonar course and would not enter the inner sanctum “behind the green doors” for another six months. Our Director Emeritus, Ed Dalrymple was under orders to attend the SOSUS officer course and arrived a few weeks later, in mid-November, while US/Soviet tensions were still very high.

Word on the Naval Station late that October afternoon was that President John F. Kennedy would make a televised address that evening, on an urgent matter of national importance. While most base residents probably had no idea of what would be the subject of his address, many of us had observed that the waterfront piers - normally occupied by several submarines, destroyers, and other Navy ships - mysteriously had become completely vacant. The President’s comments would explain that situation.

In his address, “JFK” revealed that Soviet medium-range, surface-to-surface ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads, capable of striking Washington, DC were being installed on Cuban soil. He said the United States would “regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response against the Soviet Union.” Further, he demanded those missiles be removed and stated that a Naval “quarantine” was being imposed on the island of Cuba, to prevent the introduction of additional missiles that were known to be en route aboard cargo ships. Thus began a period of extremely dangerous confrontation between the US and the USSR.

The DEFCON was raised to a higher level. Within an hour after the President ended his speech, all off-duty personnel on the Naval Station were rounded up, mustered, given brief instructions, and posted around the base perimeter in a continuous chain of security watches. We were initially “armed” with flashlights, whistles, and nightsticks. As they became available, within a day or two, these items were augmented by M-1 rifles and clips loaded with eight, .30 caliber cartridges. My watch assignment on that first night was to “guard” the marine railway against swimmers (frogmen) and to blow my whistle if I saw any. I was happy that there was no need to use the whistle! During a later night watch on the long concrete mole pier that juts out into the Gulf of Mexico, I was startled by a loud splash but relieved to discover it was caused by a large Manta ray.

Fleet Sonar School quickly modified its normal schedule, so that we students were attending classes every other day, alternating with days on which we stood security watches, four hours on, eight off. Instructors, all senior petty officers and Chiefs, were

also on that daily schedule and were on the watch bill as security section supervisors. They carried .45 caliber side arms when making their rounds.

Key West rapidly became a beehive of additional military activity. Unknown to us at the time, the US had become aware of the missiles in Cuba a week earlier and was ramping up preparations for war. Nike anti-aircraft missile batteries were set up by the US Army in at least a couple of locations on the island as well as at other sites in southern Florida. Several Army divisions were preparing to invade Cuba. The sounds of powerful Navy F-4 Phantom jet fighters and RF-8 Crusaders, probably flying out of the adjacent Naval Air Station at Boca Chica, roaring overhead at all hours, were a common occurrence. These flights were especially unnerving in the middle of the night, as they rattled the Jalousie windows of the BEQs. The Phantoms were probably escorts for the Crusaders, which flew frequent, low-level photo-reconnaissance missions over Cuba.

During the first few days of the confrontation the Soviets repeatedly denied the presence of their missiles in Cuba and raised strong objections to the Naval “quarantine”. I remember our Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, after challenging his Soviet counterpart to deny the missiles and being stonewalled, saying “... I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over...”. He then displayed large aerial reconnaissance photos of missile sites to the UN Security Council and explained what they revealed, exposing the Soviet lies.

Tense negotiations ended about a week later when President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev struck an eleventh-hour deal. In exchange for the withdrawal of their nuclear missiles from Cuba, the Soviets were promised that the US would not invade that Communist-controlled island nation. While this agreement allowed both sides to step back and take a deep breath, we did not relax our guard until late November or early December. The resolution of the crisis and subsequent relaxation allowed a personal happy ending. Fleet Sonar School was able to observe a Christmas - New Year break and I was able to take leave and participate in a wedding that had been planned for that period – mine!

We had been literally on the brink of nuclear war. To my knowledge we have never before, nor since, been so close to the edge.