

Cuban Missile Crisis

Edward T. Russell

DATES: October 13–November 15, 1962

LOCATION: Cuba

OVERSEAS BASE USED: Guantanamo Naval Air Station, Cuba

AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONS:

MAJOR COMMANDS:	WINGS:
Strategic Air Command	55th Strategic Reconnaissance
Tactical Air Command	62d Troop Carrier
Military Air Transport Service	363d Tactical Reconnaissance
Continental Air Defense Command	1501st Air Transport Wing (Heavy)
Air Force Reserve	4080th Strategic

AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT: C-124, C-133, C-135, RB-47, RF-101, U-2

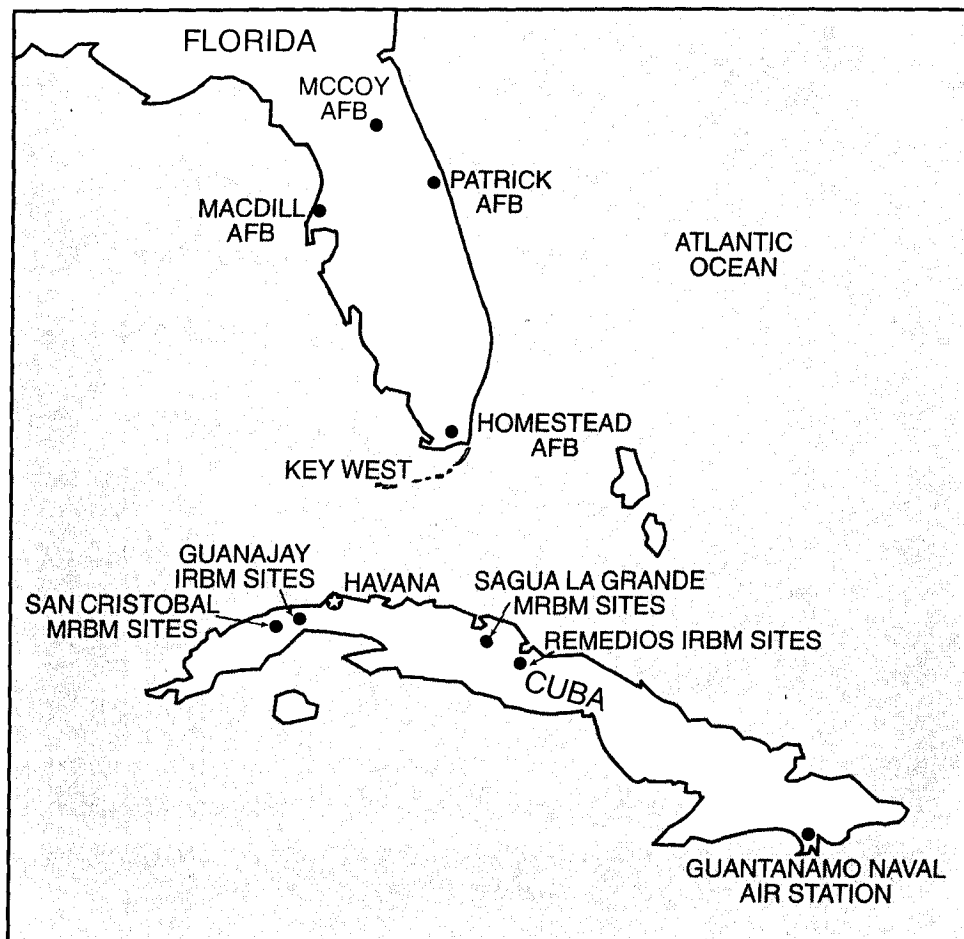
Operations

Early in 1962, the Premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita S. Khrushchev, could not match the United States in nuclear weapons or strategic delivery systems nor push the western nations out of Berlin. In the east, the Chinese constantly harassed him concerning Soviet weakness. In his frustration and frantic search for an opportunity to alter the strategic imbalance, he turned to Cuba. In 1959, Fidel Castro had overthrown the dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and assumed power. Initially promising free elections, he soon instituted a socialist dictatorship. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans fled their island, many coming to the United States. From his rhetoric and actions, Castro proved he was a Communist. Consequently, in late 1960, the President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to plan an invasion of Cuba using Cuban exiles as troops. Ultimately, Eisenhower hoped that in conjunction with the invasion, the Cuban people would overthrow Castro and install a moderate, pro-U.S. government. Eisenhower's second term ended before the plan could be implemented. The new

president, John F. Kennedy, eager to prove that he was more aggressive than his predecessor, ordered the invasion to proceed. In mid-April 1961, the Cuban exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs and suffered a crushing defeat. Not only did the Cuban people not rise to help them, but Castro's forces killed some 200 and captured close to 1,200 invaders.

Following the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Khrushchev increased Soviet aid, including military supplies to Cuba. In August 1962, the Soviet Union, with Cuban cooperation, began to build intermediate-range (IRBM) and medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) sites on the island. The American intelligence community, suspicious of the construction on the island, needed tangible proof and called for photographic reconnaissance. On October 11, 1962, Headquarters Strategic Air Command (SAC) notified the 4080th Strategic Wing at Laughlin Air Force Base (AFB), Texas, to "freeze" two officers, Maj. Richard S. Heyser and Maj. Rudolf Anderson Jr., for a special project. They reported to Edwards AFB, California, where they received orders to conduct strategic reconnaissance flights over Cuba. On October 13, Major Anderson deployed to McCoy AFB, Florida, to join a U-2 aircraft ferried in for the special mission. Meantime, Major Heyser launched from Edwards AFB in a U-2 equipped to photograph suspect sites on the island. He arrived over the island during daylight on October 14. The next day, Major Anderson made his flight from McCoy. Photographs obtained on these flights confirmed that Soviet/Cuban crews had launch pads under construction that, when completed, could fire nuclear-armed IRBMs with a range of approximately 5,000 miles and MRBMs with a range of approximately 3,000 miles.

While the U-2s flew high-altitude reconnaissance missions, the staff of the 363d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Shaw AFB, South Carolina, made aware of the potential need for low-level flights over Cuba, began planning such flights and preparing target folders. On October 21, Tactical Air Command (TAC) ordered the 363d to deploy to MacDill AFB, Florida. The wing began immediately to move RF-101 and RB-66 aircraft, personnel, and photographic equipment to Florida. By the next morning, the aircraft were at MacDill, cameras cocked, ready to carry out any reconnaissance missions. While aircrews went on alert, support personnel expanded the



Area of USAF Operations in Cuban Missile Crisis

base photo-laboratory facilities and installed photo vans and darkrooms. Because of a shortage of adequate facilities, aircrews and other airmen occupied temporary, inadequate, wooden barracks that hampered crew rest. After trying off-base housing, the aircrews moved to permanent airmen's quarters on the base for the remainder of the deployment.

On October 26, the wing launched the first flight of two low-level reconnaissance aircraft. For the next three weeks, wing aircraft, by photographic and visual reconnaissance, gathered vital data, including prestrike intelligence, air-surveillance verification of Cuban buildup, and subsequent dismantling of the IRBM and MRBM sites and Soviet IL-28 aircraft. Because of the possibility of alternate sites and concealed storage facilities, the wing initiated intensive low-level aerial search efforts. Other flights returned with highly significant



Photo taken by RF-101 of ground-to-ground missile base in Cuba, November 1962.

photographs of missiles and related equipment on docks at Cuban ports, the loading of Soviet freighters, and the deck cargo of Soviet ships entering and leaving Cuban ports. Consequently, the President of the United States was constantly aware of Soviet actions regarding the withdrawal of the missiles from Cuba.

Analysis of the 363d photographs provided a wide range of essential intelligence concerning Cuba. Frequent sorties over major Cuban airfields provided daily information on the number, type, and specific location of Cuban aircraft. Photos also revealed the number and location of assembled, partially assembled, or unassembled IL-28 Soviet twin-engine tactical bombers with a range of 1,500 miles. This information was vital to establish immediate air superiority if strike forces went into action. On one of these missions, the 363d discovered the first evidence of the existence of infrared homing air-to-air missiles (Soviet AA-2s). Surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites proved to be prime targets for low-level reconnaissance missions. The wing

also garnered extensive intelligence concerning Cuban ground equipment, military encampments, cruise-missile sites, and possible landing beaches.

SAC ordered continual U-2 reconnaissance flights over Cuba, and at the same time, in order to make room for fighter aircraft, ordered the deployment of medium and heavy bombers and tanker aircraft from MacDill, McCoy, and Homestead AFBs in Florida. Meanwhile, TAC began deploying F-84, F-100, F-105, RB-66, and KB-50 aircraft to bases in Florida, while Continental Air Defense Command (CONAD) began flying missions to protect bases in the southeastern United States. SAC, alerted to the possibility of war with the Soviet Union, dispersed nuclear-armed B-47 aircraft to approximately forty airfields in the United States and kept numerous B-52 heavy bombers in the air and ready to strike. In addition, all available intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) stood ready for a launch countdown. These included the first ten solid-fueled Minuteman I ICBMs, which became operational on October 27.

While TAC continued to deploy fighter aircraft to MacDill, McCoy, and Homestead AFBs, the Military Air Transport Service (MATS) not only flew bombs and ammunition into bases in the southeast but also responded to airlift requests from the U.S. Army and Marine Corps. On October 20, 1962, for instance, the Joint Chiefs directed the Air Force to move nearly 2,000 marines and 1,400 tons of equipment to the U. S. Naval Air Station at Guantanamo, Cuba. Air Force C-124s, C-133s, and C-135s completed this task in two days.

In the midst of these preparations, President Kennedy and his advisors debated the sanest course of action. The President outlined the general goals: remove all Soviet missiles from Cuba, avoid a nuclear war, prepare for Soviet counter-moves in Berlin, and preserve national honor. He formed an executive committee, which included the Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, to give him advice. The committee examined several options such as launching a nuclear attack against the missile sites, launching a conventional strike against the sites followed by an invasion of Cuba, or instituting a naval blockade to prevent Soviet supplies from reaching the island. Fear of Soviet reaction soon eliminated talk of a

nuclear strike, but support for a conventional air strike followed by invasion continued to grow. While the invasion forces gathered in Florida, Kennedy ordered the state department to develop a plan for civil government in Cuba. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and the Joint Chiefs favored an invasion, but Robert Kennedy vehemently opposed that plan and instead advocated a blockade. The President listened to his brother, and on October 22, 1962, appeared on television to explain to America and the world that the United States was imposing a strict quarantine on offensive military equipment being shipped to Cuba. Kennedy also warned Khrushchev that the United States would regard any missile attack from Cuba as an attack from the Soviet Union and would retaliate against the Soviet Union. SAC increased its alert posture by placing more B-52s on airborne alert.

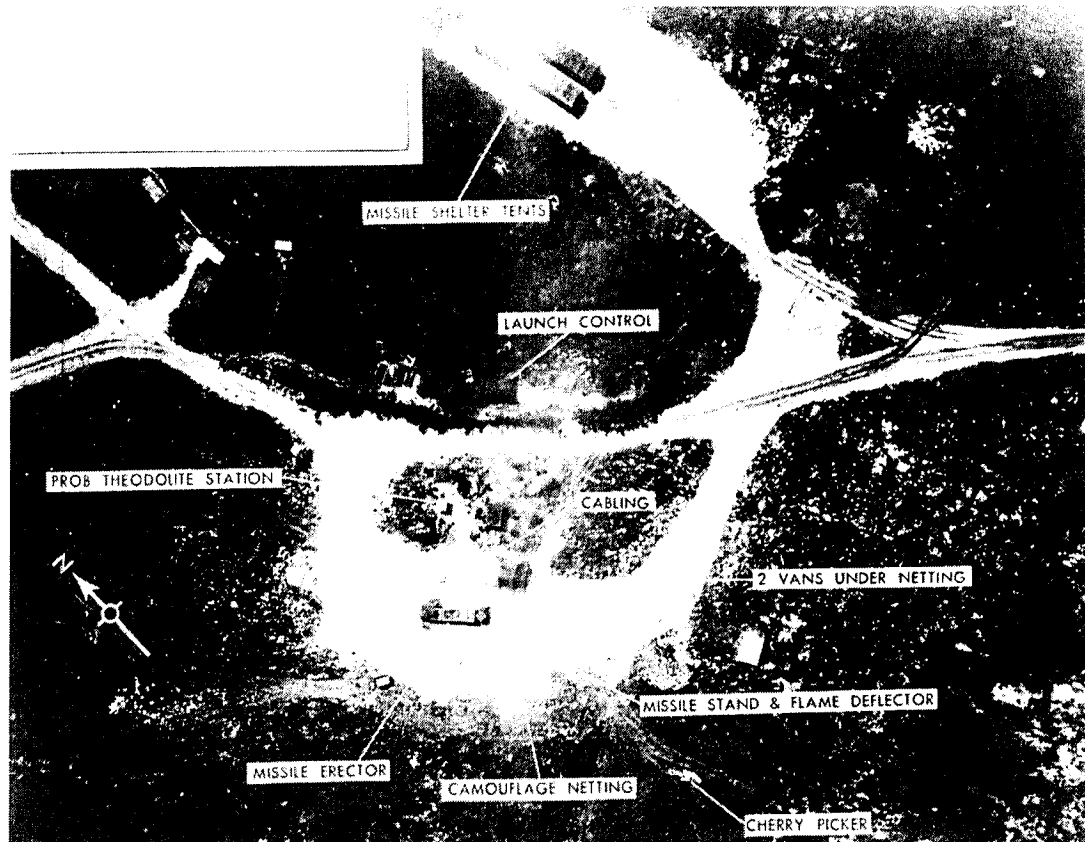
Khrushchev responded belligerently. In a letter received in Washington on October 23, 1962, he accused the United States of degenerate imperialism and declared that the Soviet Union would not observe the illegal blockade. Nevertheless, the quarantine began on October 24. Tension mounted as the Soviets continued to work on the missile sites and their ships continued moving toward Cuba. Then on October 26, Khrushchev sent another message in which he offered to withdraw or destroy the weapons in Cuba, provided the United States would lift the blockade and promise not to invade the island. Before the presidential advisors could decide on an answer, another message arrived raising the price. Now the Soviets wanted the United States to withdraw all missiles from Turkey. On October 27, an RB-47 from the 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing located the Soviet freighter *Grozny* and reported its location. Meantime, Major Anderson failed to return from a U-2 reconnaissance mission. The Joint Chiefs recommended an immediate air strike against Cuba, but the President decided to wait.

The increasing tempo in the military, however, continued unabated. SAC ordered over sixty B-52 bombers to continue on airborne alert. TAC forces in Florida assumed a one-hour alert and prepared to go to a fifteen-minute alert, which involved pilots waiting in aircraft for launch orders. The Army placed six divisions on alert and called on MATS and the Air Force Reserve

for airlift support. The U.S. Navy, in addition to tracking every known Soviet submarine in the Western Hemisphere, patrolled the high seas waiting for the Soviet ships to arrive.

In Washington, the President's advisors examined the Khrushchev letters and debated the appropriate action. The launch pads in Cuba were almost finished, and there were already missiles on the island. Furthermore, the Soviet ships carrying additional missiles were fast approaching the island and the quarantine cordon of the U.S. Fleet. Something had to be done. Robert Kennedy proposed that the President ignore Khrushchev's last message and instead answer the message offering to exchange the removal of the missiles with an American promise not to invade Cuba. After a heated debate, the advisors recommended that the President follow this proposal while Robert Kennedy met with the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, and in effect, promised to remove the American missiles from Turkey. This promise was sufficient. The next day the Soviet Union informed the United States that the missiles in Cuba would be withdrawn. The Soviets began turning their ships around, packing up the missiles in Cuba, and dismantling the launch pads. As the work progressed, the Air Force started to deploy aircraft back to home bases and lower the alert status.

The Air Force response to the crisis must be rated as outstanding. On October 19, 1962, the Air Force followed its normal peacetime posture. Within the following week, American airmen evacuated SAC bombers and tankers from Florida to make room for tactical fighters and defense forces. They placed B-52 forces on airborne alert, dispersed the B-47 fleet to predetermined military bases and civil airports, and brought the SAC airborne force (approximately 1,400 bombers and 900 tankers) to full combat alert. In addition, SAC initiated shipping surveillance assistance fifteen hours after receiving the request from Commander in Chief Atlantic. Throughout the crisis the Air Force flew daily high- and low-level reconnaissance flights to keep the U.S. leadership apprised of activities on the island of Cuba and on the high seas. Concurrently, TAC, which had 140 tactical fighters in Florida, increased this number to 511 fighters, 72 reconnaissance aircraft, and 40 tankers. At the same time, Air Force leaders



Missile site in Cuba, November 1962.

formulated a plan to augment the European force with ten additional fighter squadrons. At the beginning of the crisis, CONAD had 240 aircraft on normal air defense alert. Within 48 hours, it increased the force in Florida to 82 aircraft (F-101s, F-102s, and F-106s) and the total number on alert to 520 aircraft.

The airlifters of Military Air Transport Service, Tactical Air Command, and the Air Force Reserve played a vital role during the crisis. They airlifted several Marine battalions from points in the United States to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, TAC support units from bases all over the United States to bases in Florida, and Army units from various locations to the southeastern United States. In addition to moving personnel, the airlifters carried bombs, rockets, ammunition, tanks, and other materiel. Some of this materiel came from as far as Turkey and the Philippines. MATS estimated that it airlifted 6,738 tons of cargo and 5,018 passengers in direct support of the Cuban requirements.

In examining the crisis, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara noted deficiencies in the conventional forces. For example, there were not enough aircraft available to locate every Soviet ship moving toward the Western Hemisphere. In addition, because of a shortage of transport aircraft, the government called up approximately 14,000 Reservists and utilized approximately 400 obsolete aircraft to accomplish the airlift mission. Finally, McNamara noted the shortage of fighter aircraft, pointing out that air defenses in other parts of the United States had been stripped because of the need in the southeastern part of the country.

The Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world dangerously close to nuclear war, and the world breathed a sigh of relief when it ended. The strategic and tactical power of the U.S. Air Force, coupled with the will and ability to use it, provided the synergy to deter nuclear war with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and convince the Soviet leaders to remove the nuclear weapons from Cuba.