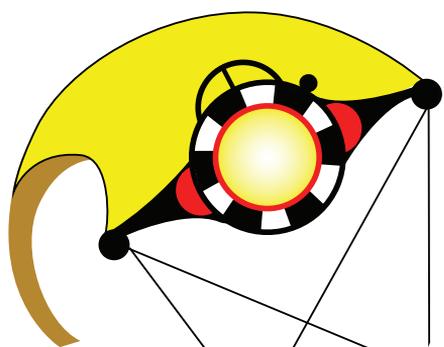




Commander William B. Ecker, CO of VFP-62, returns to NAS Jacksonville from the last Fightin' Photo mission over Cuba (5 June 1963). This mission was approved after the conclusion of the Cuban Missile Crisis to gather intelligence that was not obtainable from U-2 photos. Note the Navy Unit Commendation decal on the nose cone and the forward-firing camera bay door opened to remove film. Peter Mersky collection



VFP-62 ***SUPERSONIC HOOLIGANS***

*VFP-62 FIGHTIN' PHOTO SPOILS RUSSIAN-CUBAN
COLLUSIONS IN 1962 WITH ITS "BLATANT HOOLIGANISM."*

by Mr. Ken Jack

The thirteen-day Cuban Missile Crisis (16-28 October 1962) was one of those rare events in history where the confluence of distorted national interests, gross miscalculations by heads of state and the ideological conflicts between two nuclear-armed nations endangered the very existence of mankind. Although short, the evolving chain of events threatened the Cold War doomsday we all feared.

The crisis began when Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro sought military arms to defend Cuba from a feared American invasion to overthrow his government (a reasonable concern after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961). Boldly, Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev took the risky gamble to level a perceived nuclear weapons deficit with the U.S. by offering

offensive medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs), Il-28 medium-range bombers and high-performance MiG-21 fighters, along with a defense package that included SA-2 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), coastal defense cruise missiles and missile gun boats. All this military hardware was dismantled, crated and shipped half-way around the world, while 43,000 Russian soldiers and technicians constructed missile sites in the hot, humid tropics of Cuba—an impressive engineering achievement—with the hopes of presenting a *fait accompli* to President John F. Kennedy. They almost succeeded.

Fortunately, U.S. intelligence agencies were watching with Lockheed U-2, high-altitude photographic reconnaissance planes—not unknown to the Soviets who had shot down a CIA U-2, piloted by Gary Powers, in May 1960. Flying at over 70,000 feet, the spy plane was a marvel of

resolution, large-scale aerial photographs to determine the operational status of the missiles. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara sought a recommendation for which military service should conduct low-level photographic reconnaissance. It was well known in the Washington intelligence community that the Navy's Light Photographic Squadron 62 (VFP-62)—colloquially known as *Fightin' Photo*—had the best capabilities. Based at NAS Cecil Field, Florida, and flying the supersonic RF-8A *Photo Crusader*, VFP-62 had developed a new forward-firing photographic capability using advanced cameras. Additionally, the squadron had been training for this type of mission for months.

The Chief of Naval Operations issued orders to VFP-62's commanding officer, Commander William B. Ecker, to get his squadron prepared with a readiness of up to 16 RF-8As, and to prepare mission plans, which would originate

Surveillance discovered another MRBM site and an SS-5 IRBM (with a range of 2,400 miles) site being constructed in central Cuba. Now, 90 million American lives were endangered.

technology, but at the same time was vulnerable to SAMs and adversely affected by cloud cover. On 14 October, a U-2 flew a short mission over western Cuba and one day later photo interpreters (PIs) pouring over the U-2 imagery discovered three SS-4 MRBM sites under construction west of Havana (the SS-4 had a range of 1,200 miles and carried a two to three megaton nuclear warhead—capable of hitting Washington, D.C.). President Kennedy was informed on 16 October, and convened the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) to develop strategies to deal with the new threat. This was the first day of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

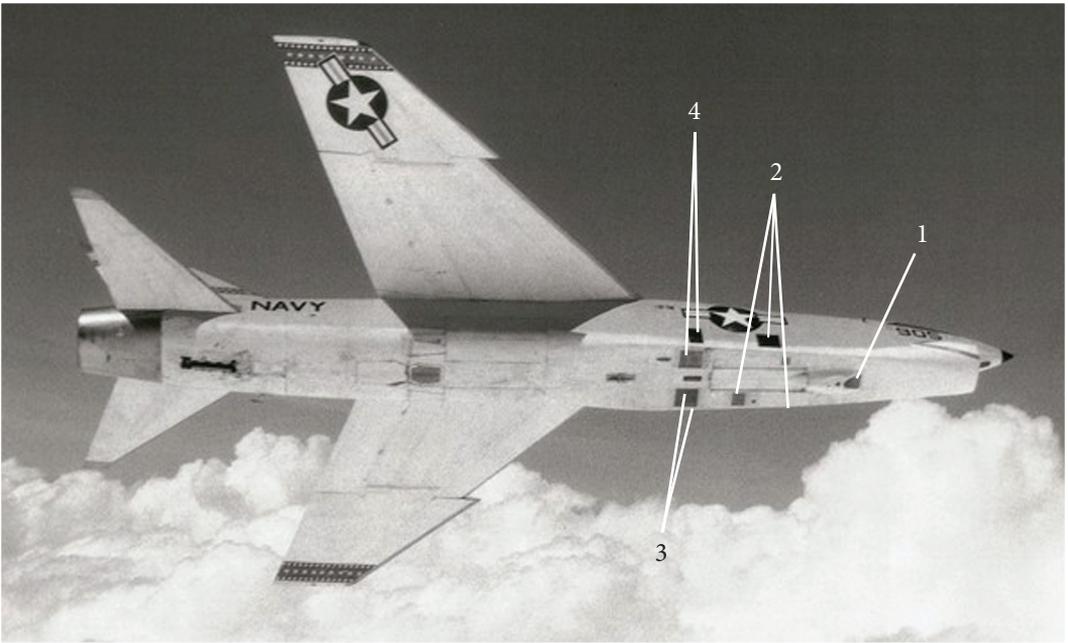
In following days, U-2 surveillance discovered another MRBM site and an SS-5 IRBM (with a range of 2,400 miles) site being constructed in central Cuba. Now, 90 million American lives were endangered. At the Pentagon, old strike and invasion operational plans were dusted off and updated with the new intelligence. An air attack with 500 sorties would be aimed at missile sites, MiG air bases and coastal defenses, followed in seven days by an invasion force of more than 125,000 soldiers. A key component of those plans was tactical (low-level) photo reconnaissance.

The intelligence community and the Joint Chiefs of Staff recognized a need for higher-

from NAS Key West and return to the Fleet Air Photographic Laboratory at NAS Jacksonville, Florida. There film would be processed and then couriered to Washington PIs. The classified operation was codenamed *Blue Moon*.

Commander Ecker's first urgent problem was to find more aircraft and aviators (he didn't have enough of either), as his squadron was tasked to provide three-plane detachments to all Atlantic carrier air groups. He requisitioned NADC's (Naval Air Development Center) RF-8A that Marine Corps Major John Glenn (later astronaut and senator) flew during *Project Bullet* in July 1957. Additionally, four RF-8As and five pilots from the Marine Composite Reconnaissance squadron VMCR-2 based at Cherry Point, North Carolina, formed an augmentation detachment to VFP-62. The Marine RF-8As were fitted with the new forward-firing cameras and the pilots merged into VFP-62's operations. *Blue Moon* also included the Air Force 363rd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, flying the RF-101C photo *Voodoo*, but VFP-62 received the first mission.

On 19 October, a VFP-62 detachment of pilots and enlisted ground crew were sent to Key West to await further orders. President Kennedy made a television address on 22 October, presented the missile threat to the nation and world and



The RF-8A's array of cameras is clearly visible in this photo. Starting from the nose are the forward-firing Camera Bay 1 (under the intake), the starboard oblique camera windows for Bays 2 and 4 (port side Bays 2 and 3 oblique windows not visible), the port Bay 2 and aft-most Bay 3 vertical camera windows and finally, the starboard Bay 4 vertical window. Bay 2 is a trimetrogon horizon-to-horizon station, while Bays 3 and 4 have rotatable camera mounts allowing the pilot to set the degree of obliquity.

his intention to form a naval quarantine (a toned-down euphemism for blockade) around Cuba. Military forces worldwide were placed at DEFCON 3. On 23 October, *Fightin' Photo* was ordered to fly three two-plane sorties over Castro's Cuba at near supersonic speeds and tree-top level. Now, the U-2s and the RF-8As would team to provide the hard intelligence necessary to gage the wiggle room for JFK to work out a diplomatic resolution to the crisis—the U-2s covering wide swaths of Cuba and the *Crusaders* investigating the suspicious areas to provide the clarity that even laymen could discern.

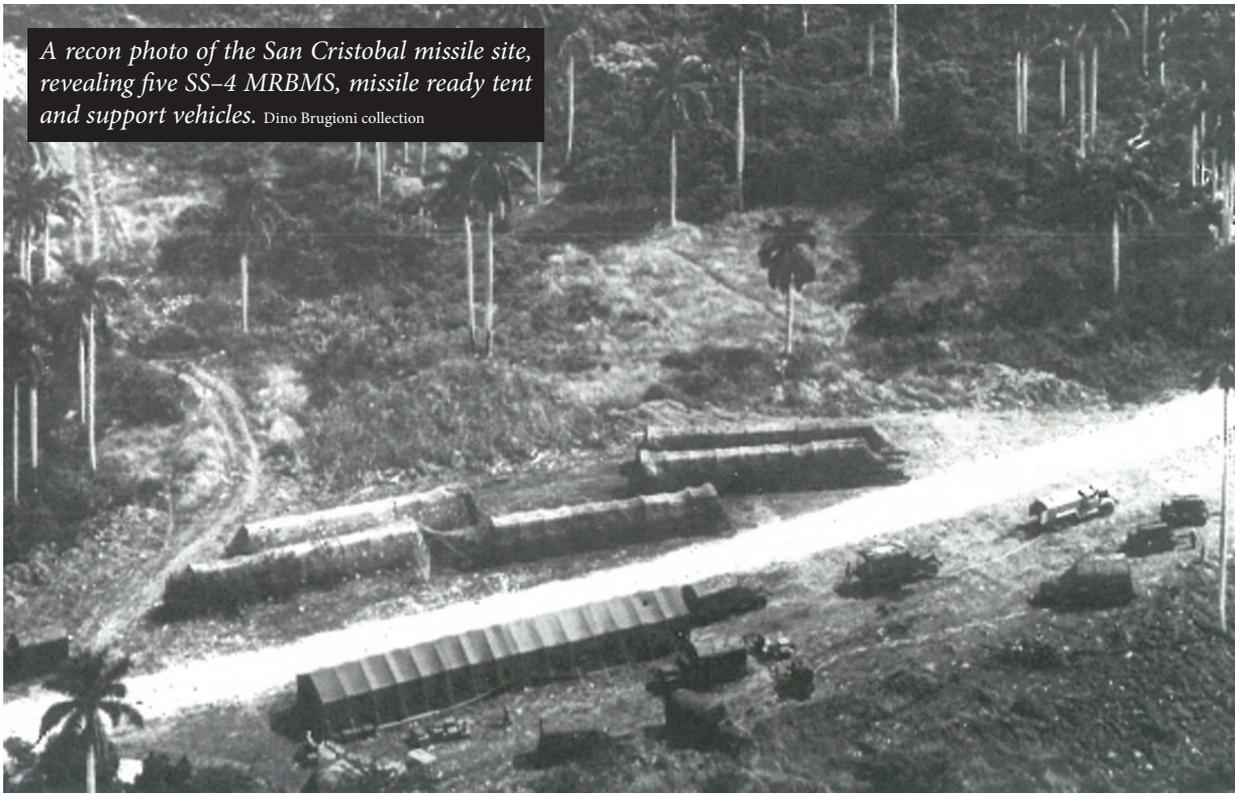
Photo pilots like to boast, "Unarmed, Unescorted and Unafraid." The rules of engagement required fighter protection to remain off-shore as the photo planes penetrated the coastline (going "feet dry"). The *Crusader* pilots flew the 90 miles over the Caribbean, low enough to pick up salt spray, avoiding Cuban radar and SAMs. Once feet dry, they kept their speed up to 0.96 Mach to make their dash to points of interest, where they popped up to 1,500 feet to take their pictures and then ran like hell to their fighter protection off-shore. The PIs now had high-resolution images showing the ground equipment in great detail: missiles and their

erectors, support vehicles with fuel tanks, nuclear warhead bunkers and even soldiers scrambling from the low-flying Navy jets to man their anti-aircraft guns were obvious to everyone.

The *Voodoos* were allowed to fly on 24 October, but failed miserably; Air Force cameras and training were inadequate and produced no useful imagery. Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay groveled to obtain Navy cameras for his planes. Days later, the Air Force improved its low-level capabilities and eventually flew alternating missions with the Navy and Marines.

The Marine pilots joined the *Blue Moon* missions on 25 October, first as wingmen and later as flight leaders. Also that day, Lieutenant Jerry Coffee flew wing to Lieutenant Commander Tad Riley—both had flown during the first missions—en route to the IRBM site at Remedios in central Cuba. Prior to reaching the target, Coffee saw an interesting military complex, impetuously yanked hard on the stick, broke formation, and just as he leveled the wings, turned on all of his cameras. After the photo run of only a few seconds, Coffee rejoined his flight leader and both photographed their primary target.

A recon photo of the San Cristobal missile site, revealing five SS-4 MRBMS, missile ready tent and support vehicles. Dino Brugioni collection



Just before going feet wet, they flew over a small coastal village, and Riley said with a note of triumph, “Let’s let ‘em know we’re here—burner . . . NOW!” Today, retired Captain Coffee laughs while remembering, “We both nudged our throttle handles to the left selecting afterburner . . . WHU WHUMP . . . as we pulled up the noses of our *Crusaders* to climb out over the Straits of Florida. I’m sure it sounded to the villagers like a humongous clap of thunder right in their village square. In reviewing the film at NAS Jacksonville, the village chickens were flapping all over the place—one guy was literally diving head first out the window of his hut.”

Fortunately for Lieutenant Coffee, his unauthorized break from his approved flight plan could have been very serious had his photography not revealed the presence of a new military weapon not known to exist in Cuba: surface-to-surface tactical FROG (Free Rocket Over Ground) missiles, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, were poised to meet an American invasion force and destroy the Guantanamo Naval Base. Instead of a reprimand, Coffee received a commendation letter from the Commandant of the Marine Corps, with the praise, “. . . the most important and timely information for the amphibious forces, which has ever been acquired in the history of this famous Navy-Marine fighting team.”

Secretary McNamara began to recognize the provocative psychological impact of the low-flying jets. During an ExComm meeting McNamara recommended “several recurring low-level surveillance strikes of multiple [recon] aircraft in an operation that *would resemble an air strike . . . camouflaging the possibility of a later low-level attack*, emphasizing our concern with offensive installations while gathering intelligence [emphasis added].” Although unarmed, the *Crusaders* were now tasked to project U.S. power and will, and explicitly threaten the possibility of hostile action to come—at the time and place the U.S. decided. During the following days, the *Crusaders* encountered more anti-aircraft fire from the Cuban gunners. It definitely was a combat environment, but Navy mission planners learned from Korea that passing over a target from the same direction caused planes to drop from the sky. Mission after mission, the fast jets were long gone before the Cuban gunners could inflict damage.

Crusader pilots never passed up an opportunity to show-off the capabilities of their hot fighter—the first carrier jet to exceed 1,000 mph. They, as well as the enlisted sailors who kept it flying, loved it with a passion. Tributes such as “it was the Harley Davidson of airplanes,” “the MiG Master” and “flying at the speed of heat,” commonly describe a communal respect. VFP-62



Above: *The officers and aviators of VFP-62 the night before the first mission over Cuba (taken at NAS Key West). Back row: LT Gerald Coffee and LTJG William Taylor. Center row: LTJG Terry Hallcom, LT Thomas Cook, LTJG John Hewitt Jr., LTJG Bernard Kortge, CDR William Ecker, LT Edmund Feeks and LT Arthur Day. Front row: LTJG Robert Chase, LT Bruce Wilhelmy, LCDR Tad Riley and LCDR James Kauflin.* William T. "Bill" Hocutt, PHCS collection

Below: *Commander William B. Ecker, CO VFP-62 (left), and Marine Captain (later Lieutenant General) John Hudson of VMCJ-2 (right), shake hands 1 December 1962 after a flight to Homestead AFB for a press briefing on the Cuban Missile Crisis.* Peter Mersky collection



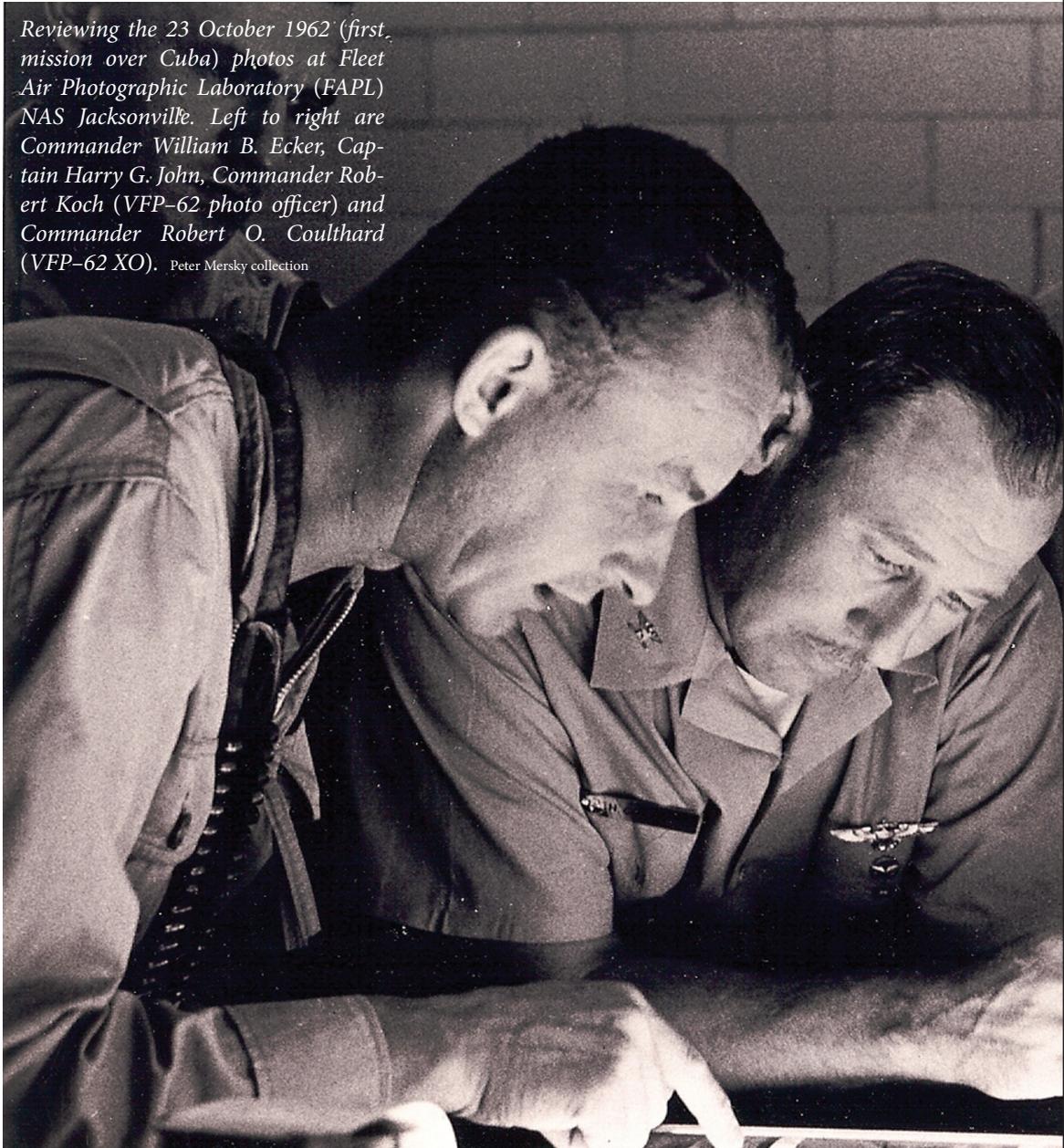
and VM CJ-2 pilots happily accepted their new secondary mission. Lieutenant Commander Riley recalls, “We were briefed to make a lot of noise with our afterburners, in other words to ‘flat hat’ so they could see our insignias. We called it ‘flushing their toilets.’”

Regularly, the RF-8As buzzed the MiG air bases, flying down the main runway—flaunting their ability to do so. Russian pilot Lieutenant Colonel Nikolay Pakhomov, in a memoir, discussed the frustration with the constant low-level recon flights: “. . . the planes appeared above our base daily on a regular basis . . . increased speed . . . and left off leaving a black-smoky loop

behind. And we were powerless to do anything.” Former VM CJ-2 aviator Colonel Edgar Love remembers one pass over an airfield when he saw a flight of MiG-21s about to land: “I banked steeply to my left to avoid them. Luckily, they either didn’t see us or chose to ignore us.”

In the early 1960s, those of us who were lucky enough to witness a high-speed *Crusader* flyby from a carrier’s flight deck know how difficult it was to see its approach from a distance. A bit stealthy, it blended in well with the horizon, sea and sky, even when you knew it was coming. The high-positioned knife-edged wings were nearly invisible from the front and when you finally saw

Reviewing the 23 October 1962 (first mission over Cuba) photos at Fleet Air Photographic Laboratory (FAPL) NAS Jacksonville. Left to right are Commander William B. Ecker, Captain Harry G. John, Commander Robert Koch (VFP-62 photo officer) and Commander Robert O. Coulthard (VFP-62 XO). Peter Mersky collection



it, you couldn't help being mesmerized. The mind had nothing to compare it to—the long, sleek profile, with its prominent shark-like vertical tail, streaking momentarily abeam the ship, outracing the roar of its Pratt and Whitney J-57 engine gulping thousands of pounds of air each minute. Then, the aircraft's ear-shattering sonic boom followed by an abrupt, steep vertical climb, standing on the afterburner's translucent fiery plume while performing a perfect eight-point roll. Still visible, the RF-8A clawed through the air with supersonic shock waves glowing above the wings. Then, it was gone. Even after 50 years, the memory of it is still vivid, always producing

goose bumps, evoking the pride we had in this most beautiful of man-made machines and the aviators who flew them. The hapless Cuban anti-aircraft gunners could be forgiven for missing their target.

As the 13 days of the Cuban crisis ticked off, photographic intelligence painted a grim picture for the president. The SAM, MRBM and IRBM sites were becoming operational at an alarming rate and the opportunity to attack them was narrowing. President Kennedy feared that an air strike would not get all of the missiles and he would risk a nuclear retaliatory response. Time and options were running out. The skies over their targets were becoming more dangerous for the recon pilots, and it was becoming common to see the white popcorn puffs of AAA in their rear mirrors.

Enthused with the psychological intimidation the *Crusaders* and *Voodoos* were having on Cuban and Russian morale, McNamara proposed night photo reconnaissance using high-intensity flares (generating up to 260 million candlepower). President Kennedy saw the potential for gaining new intelligence, but also recognized the possibility that exploding flares could be mistaken for an attack and might escalate the crisis into general war. The president did agree to apply further pressure by increasing the frequency of low-level incursions over Cuba from twice a day to once every two hours. VFP-62 flew 14 sorties on 26 October.

While the president didn't approve night photo runs over the missile sites, Lieutenant Jim Curry did fly two night photo runs from USS *Enterprise* (CVAN-65) over Guantanamo's boundary fence. The base commander wanted to check out suspicious noises on the other side of the fence. As often happens, word did not get passed to the base Marines and when the *Crusader* made its pass with booming flares lighting the night sky, they thought they were under artillery attack and ran for their defensive positions. Curry's photos showed groups of isolated Cuban soldiers on the other side of the fence, leaning on shovels and looking up at the streaking *Crusader*.

On 27 October, the crisis was drawing to a climax with both Khrushchev and Kennedy trying to arrive at a peaceful resolution. ExComm had to respond to a Soviet offer to dismantle the missile sites and withdraw their offensive weapons, but required the U.S. to remove the quarantine and promise not to



invade Cuba. In addition, the U.S. secretly hinted that it would concede to removing its obsolete nuclear-tipped *Jupiter* missiles from Turkey in the future.

While these peace offers were being formulated, the RF-8As were conducting dawn-to-dusk surveillance—all but two faced fierce anti-aircraft fire over the targets. The *Crusaders* escaped damage, but a U-2 pilot wasn't so fortunate. Air Force Major Rudolph Anderson was flying over Banes, Cuba, when a Russian colonel in charge of a SAM site disobeyed Khrushchev's orders and fired a barrage of SA-2s, bringing the spy plane down and killing the pilot. The president resisted his adviser's recommendations to retaliate against the SAM site and sent Khrushchev what might have been his final peace offer. Should it fail, an air attack was planned for the 29th to be followed by an invasion. Fortunately, Khrushchev agreed on the 28th to dismantle and withdraw his offensive weapons.

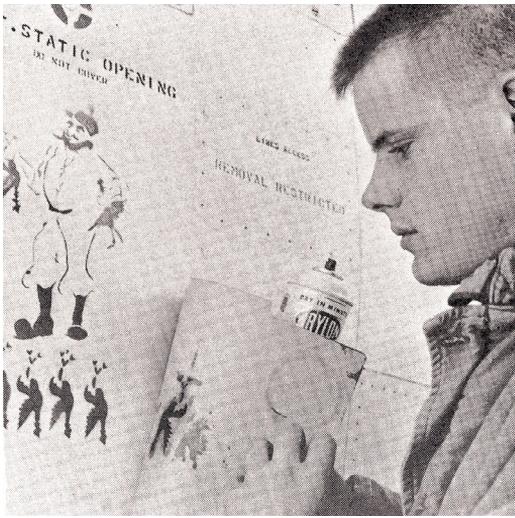
The agreement to resolve the crisis peacefully by the two superpowers did not involve Fidel Castro; his concerns amounted to nothing. The relentless intrusion of his air space brought him to a new level of belligerence—refusing

any on-the-ground inspection teams. He had a particular aversion to the low-level flights and the effects they were having on his military's morale. To the Cubans, the U-2 overflights were invisible but the *Crusaders* and *Voodoos* were a personal affront to Cuban sovereignty. Unable to restrain his frustration any more, he ordered his forces to shoot down any foreign aircraft.

At the same time, the need for photo intelligence was greater than ever; there was a need to account for all of the weapons being removed. McNamara still saw value in the harassing effects of the recon jets, keeping pressure on the Soviets to honor their commitments and demonstrate to the American public that the U.S. was taking aggressive action with the Cubans. On 5 November, Lieutenant Commander Tad Riley and his Marine wingman Captain Fred Carolan were bounced by two MiG-21s. Carolan detected them in time and the two used evasive tactics, ducked and escaped at speeds up to Mach 1.2. The encounter was over in a few minutes. When informed of this, President Kennedy forwarded a protest to the Soviet ambassador at the U.N. and suggested that any future challenge to recon planes would be met with an armed response.



President Kennedy personally presented the Navy Unit Commendation to VFP-62. Twelve VFP-62 and four VMCJ-2 aviators received the Distinguished Flying Cross. USN



Another dead chicken for a VFP-62 RF-8A. Each chicken represents a completed low-level mission over Cuba, symbolizing the dead hopes of the communist power. Peter Mersky collection

By the end of November, it was clear that the low-level photo planes were getting under the Russians' skins. In a meeting with President Kennedy, Mr. Anastas I. Mikoyan, first deputy of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, complained that "low-altitude overflights are blatant hooliganism. High-altitude overflights are also hooliganism, but less blatant."

For their performance during the crisis, VFP-62 and VM CJ-2 received the Navy Unit Commendation, with President Kennedy personally presenting the award at Key West. Twelve VFP-62 pilots and four VM CJ-2 pilots received the Distinguished Flying Cross. In a letter to Commander Ecker, the president wrote, "... the reconnaissance flights which enabled us to determine with precision the offensive build-up in Cuba contributed directly to the security of the United States in the most important and significant way."

After the crisis, VFP-62 was slowly absorbed by VFP-63, primarily responsible for supporting reconnaissance needs in Vietnam. In 1966, VFP-62 sent its only detachment to Vietnam aboard USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA-42). The detachment lost Lieutenant Junior Grade Norm Bundy to unknown causes off the Vietnam coast and Lieutenant Norm Green received a Distinguished Flying Cross for his skills flying his battle-damaged RF-8G back to the carrier.

Fightin' Photo was disestablished in January 1968, always to be remembered for helping a grateful President Kennedy avert nuclear war. ✪



Mr. Ken Jack enlisted in the Navy in July 1959 after graduating from New Kensington High School near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, determined to be a Navy photographer. He graduated from the Navy's Photographic School at NAS Pensacola, first in his class. In April 1960 he

headed to his first duty station, VFP-62 at Cecil Field, Florida to work with the sophisticated camera systems in the RF-8A Crusader. After a short Mediterranean cruise, he was sent to photographic-electronics school to learn how to repair the state-of-the-art electronics controlling the camera systems.

In early 1962, VFP-62 was developing a new forward-firing camera (the KA-45) capability for the RF-8A. Jack was assigned to the photo maintenance shop, where Photo Chief Frank Wolle and Commander Robert Koch (VFP-62's head photo officer) were resolving the camera's numerous problems. The camera was scheduled for carrier testing aboard USS *Forrestal* (CVA-59) in late summer. Jack was promoted to a photomate second class and assigned the position of lead photomate with *Forrestal*'s VFP-62 detachment. The KA-45 camera was tested for the rough carrier environment and for the first time, night photography, using the carrier and its escorts as targets. Just in time, the KA-45 was ready for the October photo missions over Cuba.

When his enlistment ended, Jack obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics Education from Penn State University and taught high school mathematics for 13 years. During that time, he received a Master's degree in mathematics education and post-graduate credits in Computer Science from the University of Pittsburgh. He joined Westinghouse Electric Corporation as a Computer Software Engineer in 1980 designing and developing computer code for nuclear reactor safety monitoring systems.

Mr. Jack and his wife of 38 years, Darlene, built their retirement home in the mountains of north-central Pennsylvania and both retired in 2002. In retirement, he reads, writes, enjoys fishing and in 2006 became the webmaster for the VFP-62 website www.vfp62.com. He and his fellow squadron members consulted with the producers of the History Channel's documentary *Man, Moment, Machine* ("JFK, Cuban Missile Crisis, RF-8A Crusader"). In 2007, he and his squadronmates again provided technical support for the restoration of the RF-8A (flown by Lieutenant Jim Curry over Gitmo during the Cuban crisis) at Battleship Park, Mobile, Alabama.

Mr. Jack is co-author with the late Captain William B. Ecker, USN, of the forthcoming book with the working title, *Operation Blue Moon: JFK's Missile Hunters*, which will coincide with the 50th anniversary of the crisis in 2012. In October 2010 Mr. Jack was interviewed for the PBS documentary on the 100th Anniversary of Naval Aviation.