

Ready Room Reading

Blue Moon Over Cuba: Aerial Reconnaissance during the Cuban Missile Crisis

Book Review by CDR Peter Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

CAPT William B. Ecker, USN (Ret.) and Ken Jack, are the authors of the book entitled above. (Osprey Publishing, UK, 2012, illustrated, 287 pp, \$25.95.

For those who were not yet born or too young, it may be hard to understand that the months of October and November 1962 were the most frightening and trying times since WWII. These two months were the closest days the world has ever come to nuclear war. Prophetic tales, combined with periodic air raid drills in school, which would have done little good to protect us, were a scary and constant reminder of how little had been accomplished by the six years of world-wide conflict to foster a long-standing era of peace among nations.

The tension was so intense that cities ceased their weekly tests of the big yellow sirens mounted atop prominent buildings so as not to falsely alarm the public below. Neighbors warned their friends to take money from bank accounts and to stock up on canned food. It was a terrible time, and in the end, when the Soviet Union finally agreed to remove the offending missiles that had touched off the crisis, the world stood blinking in the dawn of what might have been: its horrific destruction and poisoning that would have prevented re-population and rebuilding.

Although several books have been written about the missile crisis, mainly describing the political maneuverings that brought it about, little has been written about the men and machines that “fought” the crisis to a successful conclusion, except in passing mention or technical, often classified papers.

This new book is based on the memoir of the recently deceased CO of the U.S. Navy RF-8 squadron that flew the first, productive low-level missions over Cuba, and refined with material that only personal experience can bring by a former enlisted technician serving with that squadron at that time. The account combines several viewpoints into a highly readable and creditable story of just exactly how the Navy and Marine Corps aviators and ground crews contributed to the American response to the Soviets’ highly provocative act of placing nuclear-armed missiles a scant 90 miles from the U.S.

The book’s narrative is an excellent introduction to the pre-crisis situation, including the disastrous Bay of Pigs operation in April 1961, the first major international test of the new and somewhat naïve Kennedy administration, which ended in a complete disintegration of the invasion bent on retaking the now-communist island by refugees based in Florida. There is also a description of the first plans of a Vietnam-style alpha strike against Cuban targets by American naval forces.

Also included are the plans and involvement of VFP-62’s newly equipped RF-8As, including BuNo 144608, the photo-Crusader flown by then-MAJ John H. Glenn, Jr., on his record-setting flight across the U.S. in July 1957. This well-traveled Crusader eventually ended up with VFP-63, the west coast sister squadron of VFP-62, but was lost during a December 1972 deployment to Southeast Asia when it hit the ramp of the carrier USS *Oriskany* (CV 16).

A fascinating and somewhat scary look follows of the Russian buildup of missile sites as the U.S. watched from the high-altitude perch of U-2 spy planes. But more detailed, close-up photography was needed. The authors describe the heavy, restrictive planning that prevented another mission to be flown

until the Navy convinced the president and his advisors that the RF-8 was the right plane for the job. The mire of security and interservice jealousy almost kept the missions of what would be called Blue Moon from happening. What would have been the result is almost too much to contemplate.

CAPT Ecker’s memoir of the first mission on 23 October 1962, is heart-pumping stuff, and it forms the basis for the equally exciting 10-minute sequence in the 2000 movie, *Thirteen Days*, which featured a computer-generated presentation of Ecker and his wingman launching and flying over the Cuban coastline to photograph the surprised Cuban and Russian engineers building their missile sites. The film receives its own treatment in the book and is a welcome addition to the overall discussion. The photo section even displays the RF-8 cockpit mock-up with actor Chris Lawford, who plays the role of CDR Ecker. The open mock-up also shows how the film makers were able to get the exciting, bone-jostling views of Ecker in his cockpit as he flies his Crusader in the low-altitude turbulence as he approaches his target. Exciting stuff!

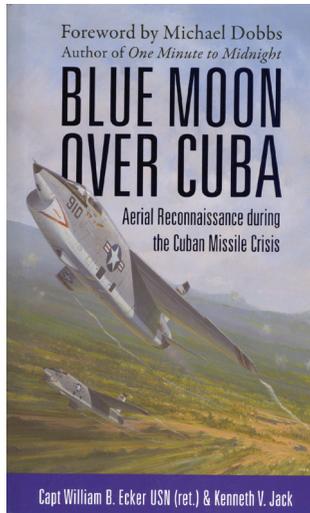
Although the film is actually a view from the Kennedy White House, this portrayal of the squadron and its men is not to be missed and is a vital portion of the overall film. An interesting additional point is that as the son of actor Peter Lawford and the sister of John F. Kennedy, Chris Lawford, was a true historical link to the actual crisis as the nephew of the president so well-portrayed in the film as he struggles with the outside events as well as the fighting between his military service chiefs and civilian advisors.

The authors also touch on the initial failing of the U.S. Air Force and its RF-101s, which were not properly equipped with the right cameras. In fact, and at one point, the USAF tried bullying the Navy into “sharing” its KA-45 and KA-46 cameras that gave the RF-8A its great reconnaissance capabilities, shooting along the Crusader’s flight path. This conflict made for a real tragic-comic aspect of the crisis that even resulted in the Navy and Marine pilots re-flying several of the USAF’s missions and embarrassing sessions at the light table when film was reviewed. Actually, the authors note that USAF historians wrote very little about its role in the crisis, although it certainly claimed its share of the glory, especially in such major publications as *Life* magazine.

Blue Moon is also a treatise on the F-8 in general, and the RF-8 specifically, including its traits pro and con, and most especially the love and respect of the men who flew it and maintained it. There are also several descriptions of missions, including encounters with Cuban MiGs of various types, many of which were obviously flown by Soviet pilots.

All in all, this new book is very welcome as the 50th anniversary of the crisis approaches. It is well worth reading from many perspectives, especially as an account of those tension-filled days when the entire world stood so close to the brink of its own destruction. And that’s no exaggeration!

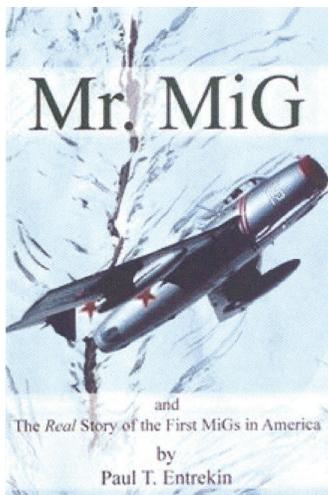
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Above left, book cover. Above, CDR Robert A. Koch, second from left, at a light table, examining mission film at NAS Jacksonville, Florida. Right, cockpit mock up and cutaway used for the movie, *Thirteen Days*. Actor Chris Lawford, who portrayed CDR Ecker, sits in the ejection seat. He is the nephew of President Kennedy. (Mike McDougall) Below, CDR Ecker taxis in at Key West after a mission in November 1962. The ribbon for the Navy Unit Commendation is on the nose cap.



Note: I was a ready pilot during this crisis with a "nuke" hung on the centerline station of my assigned Skyraider parked adjacent to the island. Each day I had to check the fuse settings etc. Seemed like it was always rainy in the eastern Med aboard Forrestal at the time. The bomb was wrapped in canvas. We were in flight suits most of time. I carried a satchel which contained the charts showing the way to my target. With the other ready pilots, we visited Air Intelligence regularly for the latest information and to update our charts. I was worried because to reach my target there was a long stretch over what seemed like moonscape terrain. No way to judge the wind, so staying on track would be a challenge. I feared that during the long flight at low altitude I'd miss the target, not to mention finding the way back to the carrier. We were deeply relieved when it was over. It was three-days of unusually intense concern. (Ed.)



As indicated by the subtitle, *Mr. MiG - The Real Story of the First MiGs in America*, this is a collection of stories that offer, for the first time, a concise depiction of many first-hand accounts of how these jets were acquired. In addition to historical facts and figures dating to the inception of the Russian Mikoyan-Gurevich design bureau, substantial effort has been taken to expose myths and bring to light facts that are significant and important regarding how, where, when and why the MiG aircraft were obtained and who obtained them. While a peek into the history of the MiG jet's genesis is fascinating, the modern day stories of the people in America that acquired them are no less intriguing. Readers will learn the experiences of the first person to own and operate a MiG in the U.S. and the free world, including a peek into the arena of air show flying.

Robert "Hoot" Gibson, Astronaut and MiG pilot, said of *Mr. MiG*, "The story is a fascinating tour along memory lane and conveys the sights, the experiences, even the unmistakable smells of this classic Russian fighter. The names of iconic aviators such as Paul Poberezny, Bob Hoover, Chuck Yeager and Viktor Belenko adorn the pages along the way as *Mr. MiG* reveals the ups and downs, the triumphs, and sadly as well, the tragedies and bitter losses of friends and fellow aviators we all enjoyed the company of."