

# The “Milk Run” U-2 Mission of

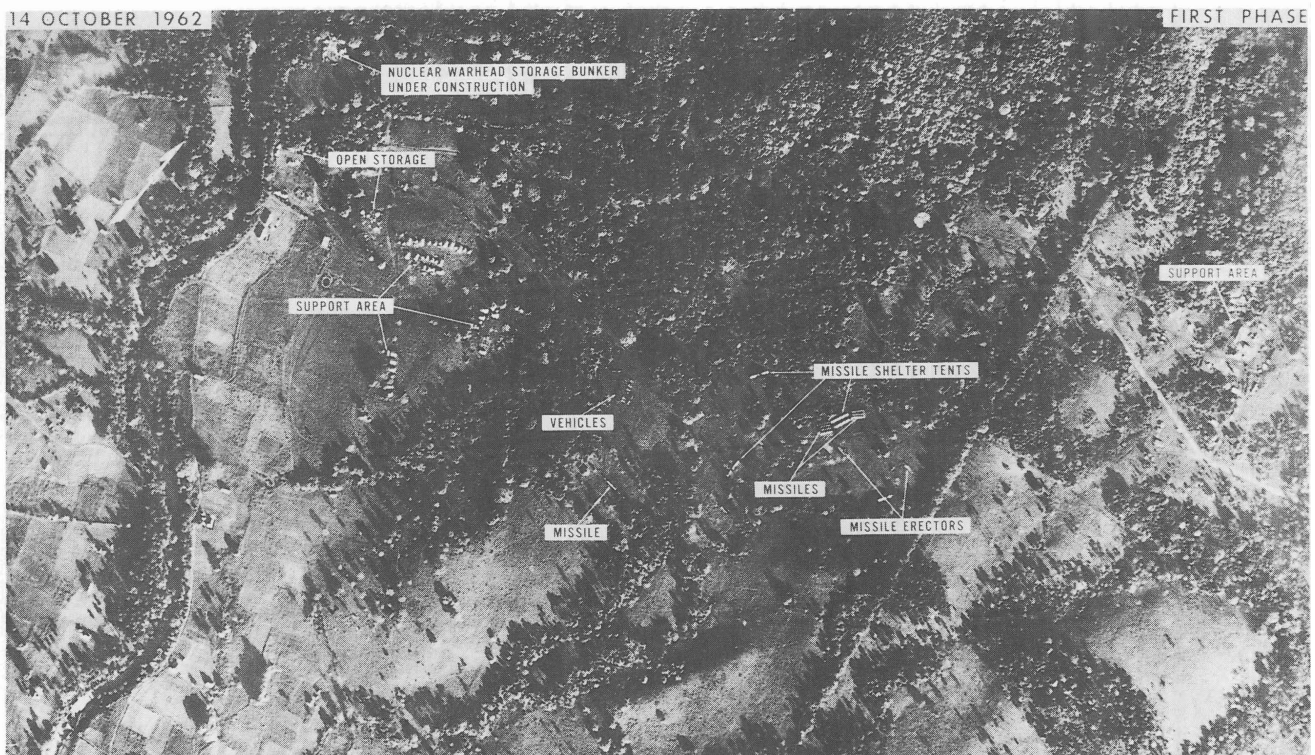
**E**vents in the Caribbean took a dramatic turn on 14 October, when American aircraft resumed flights over Cuba rather than around the island’s periphery. For the first time, U.S. Air Force U-2s were involved. Major Richard S. Heyser, one of only two Air Force pilots checked out on the CIA-modified U-2, took off from Edwards Air Force Base, California, flew over western Cuba, and landed at McCoy Air Force Base, Florida. Having encountered no MiGs or SAM activity over the Communist island, when the major landed he described the mission as “a milk run.”

Ground crews removed the film from his aerial camera and put it on a plane bound for Washington. Navy specialists processed the film and the following day took it to the CIA’s National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) for analysis.

In the afternoon, following many hours of close scrutiny, members of the joint-service and CIA team made a discovery that immediately turned the routine “milk run” mission into an intelligence coup. The photo interpreters discovered a new missile site meant for Soviet SS-4 MRBMs—offensive weapons capable of incinerating American cities

and the people in them. Art Lundahl, NPIC’s director, passed the information to his superiors at CIA headquarters, who in turn alerted National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. He immediately arranged a meeting with the president at the White House for the next morning, 16 October.

Beginning just before noon, Lundahl briefed the president and his chief national security advisors. He used the photos to identify and describe the MRBM site located on the 14th. Based on additional analysis completed by the photo interpreters the night before, Lundahl also pointed



NHC S-446-B(2)

This aerial photo was one of several captured by an Air Force U-2 plane from an altitude of 14 miles on 14 October 1962. When Arthur Lundahl of the CIA showed it to President Kennedy two days later, it started the Cuban Missile Crisis. The CIA’s skilled photo interpreters, using special light tables and stereoscopes, verified that the Soviets had this MRBM site under construction.

# 14 October

out another MRBM site and another installation whose weapons could not yet be determined. Kennedy listened to the presentation calmly. But, according to Army General Maxwell D. Taylor, only recently appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the president displayed a “rather deep but controlled anger at the duplicity of the Soviet officials who had tried to deceive him.” The Cuban Missile Crisis had begun in earnest.

To gather more information on Soviet activities in Cuba, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara ordered the execution not only of additional high-level U-2 flights but low-level reconnaissance. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral George W. Anderson, concurred with Art Lundahl’s observation that the Navy’s Light Photographic Squadron (VFP) 62 was best suited for the latter mission. VFP-62, based at NAS Cecil Field outside Jacksonville, Florida, was then perhaps the finest low-level photoreconnaissance organization in the U.S. military. The men of the Navy squadron were especially skilled in navigation, instrument flying, and intelligence-collection techniques, and their aircraft, F8U-1P Crusaders, were equipped with special cameras. Admiral Anderson alerted the squadron to ready a detachment for operations over Cuba. By the 19th, the squadron had deployed six F8U-1P Crusaders along with ground support personnel to NAS Key West.

## Sandals and Skeans

On 14 October 1962, U.S. photoreconnaissance aircraft discovered that Soviet military personnel were hard at work on the island of Cuba constructing a launch site to accommodate nuclear-armed, medium range ballistic missiles (MRBM). This information sounded the alarm in Washington and touched off the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most serious Soviet-American confrontation of the Cold War.

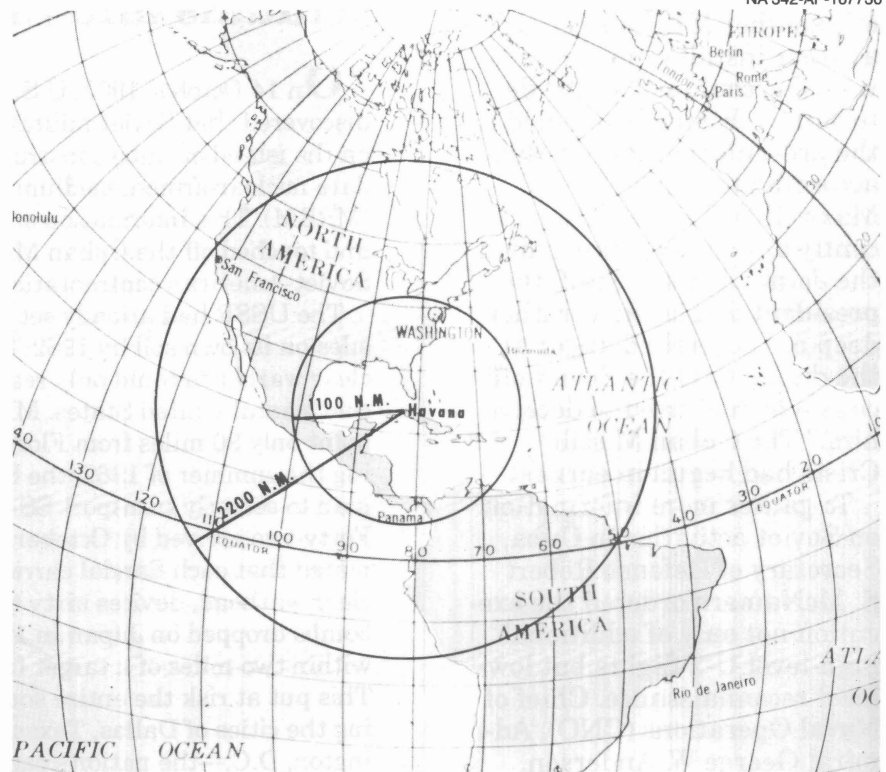
The USSR had already set up intercontinental ballistic missiles on its own soil by 1962, but these weapons and their nuclear warheads could only reach certain areas of the continental United States. MRBMs positioned in Cuba, at one point only 90 miles from Florida, were a different matter. During the summer of 1962, the Soviets carried out Khrushchev’s plan to secretly transport SS-4 Sandal missiles to Cuba. Forty-two arrived by October, and intelligence officers estimated that each Sandal carried a two or three-megaton nuclear warhead, devices sixty times more powerful than the bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. The SS-4s could strike within two miles of a target from 1,020 nautical miles away. This put at risk the entire southeastern United States, including the cities of Dallas, Texas; St. Louis, Missouri; and Washington, D.C.—the nation’s capital. In addition, the Sandal could hit the Panama Canal, all of Central America, and part of northern South America.

Even more threatening to the United States and her neighbors in the Western Hemisphere were the Soviet SS-5 Skean intermediate range ballistic missiles for which four launching sites (four launchers and eight missiles per site) were being built in Cuba when the crisis unfolded. The Central Intelligence Agency estimated that these weapons each carried a three to five-megaton warhead that was several hundred times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. The Skean could reach out to 2,200 nautical miles and impact within two miles of its intended target. Hence, from Cuba, the Soviets could devastate any city or military site as far north as Hudson Bay, Canada, and as far south as Lima, Peru. Fortunately, none of these weapons reached Cuba. However, even as Kennedy announced establishment of the quarantine, the Soviet freighter *Poltava*, with launch rings for the SS-5 stowed on her deck, and perhaps missiles in her holds, was en route to the island. Khrushchev might have been less willing to compromise if his deception was discovered after these lethal weapons had become operational.

Several days later, a detachment from Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron 2 joined VFP-62 at Jacksonville.

Meanwhile, the president assembled in Washington a group of defense, intelligence, and diplomatic officials, and other trusted advisors to assist him in handling the crisis. The Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or EXCOM, included Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Bundy, General Taylor, Robert Kennedy, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, as well as other specialists. This high-powered group discussed the various options and recommended certain courses of action, but President Kennedy made the key decisions.

The president weighed three options regarding the U.S. response to Khrushchev's opening gambit. The first option was military: launch air actions against Cuba, as embodied in OPLAN 312. There was a great likelihood that these operations would be followed by the amphibious and airborne landings laid out in OPLAN 316. The second option suggested the combined use of military pressure and diplomatic negotiation, compelling the Soviets to remove their offensive missiles from the island. The third choice was a different combination of force and negotiation, with more emphasis on inducing the Soviets to withdraw their weapons in ex-



Based in Cuba, Soviet SS-4 Sandal MRBMs could hit targets in the southern and eastern regions of the U.S., while the even more fearsome SS-5 Slean IRBMs could strike sites in most of North America and northern South America.

change for U.S. concessions. After some debate, all members of the EXCOM agreed on one point: the Soviet Union must withdraw its offensive missiles from Cuba.

Feeling Khrushchev had willfully deceived them over the missiles, the president and most of his advisors immediately rejected the third option. The military action had several adherents, particularly McCone, Acheson, and Taylor. But, Rusk, Bundy, and several others feared that the air strikes would cause a large number of civilian and Soviet casualties. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Taylor was the

sole military officer present. This former Army Chief of Staff and Special Military Representative of the President was highly regarded by Kennedy. Taylor did not press for the military option, as some of the chiefs of staff might have had they been present. In any case, the majority of the EXCOM members were cautious about launching combat operations. No one could predict how the Soviets or the Cubans would react. At this stage, however, the group did not rule out a military response. There was consensus that the second option held the most promise – that the United States use military

pressure, short of outright hostilities, to force Khrushchev to back down.

As the EXCOM analyzed the pros and cons of various actions, new intelligence reached them that raised the anxiety level. The U-2 missions flown on 17 October revealed construction activity in an area, just west of Havana, that photo interpreters soon identified as a launching site for Soviet SS-5 Skean IRBMs. These weapons were more accurate and powerful than the SS-4 and had twice the range. The following day, NPIC confirmed that the Soviets had two IRBM and six MRBM sites under construction.

NAH, Cuba Ops. 1962



LC P&P LC-U9-8639 #21

In the diplomatic arena, on 18 October, the president met with Ambassador Dobrynin and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. Kennedy repeated the warnings he made

On 18 October, the president met with Soviet Ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko (center) at the White House. Kennedy was in possession of photos revealing the construction of Soviet ballistic missile sites in Cuba, but he was not yet ready to confront Gromyko with this evidence. Gromyko, however, assured Kennedy that no offensive weapons had been or would be placed in Cuba, prompting the president to later refer to the Soviet minister as "that lying bastard."

in September. Gromyko assured the president that the Soviet Union had not and would not introduce offensive weapons into Cuba. Both men, however, knew the truth. Kennedy did not confront the foreign minister, but after the meeting referred to Gromyko as "that lying bastard."

Lts. Gerald L. Coffee and Arthur R. Day, two VFP-62 naval aviators, discuss aerial photographic operations as RAdm. Joseph M. Carson, Commander Fleet Air, Jacksonville, Florida, listens. Because of its skilled personnel, excellent planes, and advanced cameras, military leaders considered the squadron first-rate.