



The most dangerous moment in human history¹

The Cuban Missile Crisis and its implications for Scotland today.

John Ainslie, SCND, October 2012

On the evening of Friday 26 October 1962 General Issa Pliyev, Commander of Soviet Forces in Cuba, sent a report to his superiors in Moscow. He was in charge of the large military force, including 160 nuclear weapons, which Nikita Khrushchev had deployed to the island, to “throw a hedgehog down the pants of Uncle Sam”.² Pliyev was expecting American aircraft to launch a massive bombing campaign at dawn the next day. He ordered the radar systems at Surface to Air Missile (SAM) sites around the island to be switched on for the first time. Nuclear warheads were moved from two central stores and deployed with their missile regiments. Three FKR cruise-missile launchers were moved to their firing position, ready to launch a nuclear attack on the US base at Guantanamo Bay.³



Nuclear-armed FKR Cruise Missile in Cuba in October 1962. These missiles were not detected by US intelligence. Photograph provided by the Cuban government in 2002.

¹ Arthur Schlesinger, biographer of John F Kennedy described the Cuban Missile Crisis as “the most dangerous moment of human history”. The critical day of the crisis was Saturday 27th October.

² Comment by Khrushchev to his Defence Minister, Rodion Malinovsky, in April 1962. Reported in One Minute to Midnight, Michael Dobbs, which is the main source for this paper, p 47.

The arsenal under Pliyev's control included 36 R-12 missiles which could reach Washington and New York. The R-12 sites had been spotted by US reconnaissance planes on 15 October.⁴ The aerial photographs had been displayed at the United Nations and flashed around the world. Then, on 26 October, US intelligence identified several Luna battlefield missiles. The CIA were unable to detect any signs that the Luna missiles were nuclear-armed, but they were. There were a total of 12 of these mobile missiles on the island. In addition, 80 warheads, half of Pliyev's nuclear arsenal, were for FKR cruise missiles. Despite frequent overflights, the American spy planes had spotted only one of the FKR sites and they thought this was a conventional facility. The intelligence analysts also failed to correctly identify the two central stores where most of the nuclear weapons were held. In summary, US military planners grossly underestimated the number of nuclear weapons on the island, particularly the tactical nuclear weapons.

The one American aircraft which flew over Cuba on the morning of Saturday 27th October was not a bomber, but a U-2 reconnaissance plane. Moscow had replied to Pliyev's report by saying that his soldiers could open fire on US aircraft, but only in self-defence. The Russian officers in the Cuban command post thought that the U-2 was identifying targets which would be bombed a few hours later. So they ordered that the plane be attacked by two missiles before it left Cuban airspace.

The downing of this aircraft and the death of the pilot, Rudolf Anderson, brought the crisis to a new level. The American defence Secretary, Robert McNamara, had for days held at bay his generals, who had from the start been advocating a massive airstrike. Now even McNamara was proposing a counter-attack, at least against the SAM site which had downed Anderson's U-2. Others called for tougher action. US forces were ready to strike Air Defence targets within 2 hours, to launch an all-out bombing campaign within 12 hours and to invade the island within 7 days.

It was not only the invasion force in Florida that was on high alert. US nuclear forces had been moved onto Defence Condition (DEFCON) 3 when President Kennedy addressed the nation on Tuesday 22nd October. The following day Strategic Air Command took its forces up to DEFCON 2. This meant that for 24 hours each day there were 65 B-52 nuclear bombers in the air, circling over the far North of America and the Mediterranean, waiting for their instructions to proceed to targets in the Soviet Union. Over 1,000 other US nuclear bombers were ready for take-off at airfields across the globe. Nuclear missiles were in an advanced state of readiness. In England the RAF had 72 V-bombers loaded with

³ FKR - Frontovaya Krylataya Raketa - Frontline Cruise Missile. These were radio-controlled missiles for coastal defence. In 1962 US intelligence did not realise that this type of missile had a nuclear capability.

⁴ The Russian missile-men had been ordered to redeploy the R-12s to alternative firing positions, but these were not yet ready.

nuclear weapons and ready for take-off in 15 minutes or less. 59 Thor nuclear missiles, under dual Anglo-American control, were prepared for action in East Anglia. Similar forces in the Soviet Union were at a very high state of alert.

The US Air Force was under the command of General Curtis Le May, architect of the fire-bombing of Tokyo in 1945. Le May was an outspoken critic of President Kennedy and of McNamara. He chastised them for being too cautious during the crisis. Le May's attitude to Cuba was "let them fry". Le May was the model for the character General Jack D Ripper in Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr Strangelove*. General Ripper is a rogue commander who starts a nuclear war.

General Thomas Power, head of Strategic Air Command, was even more militant than Le May. Power's attitude was that if a nuclear war resulted in two Americans surviving and only one Russian, then the United States had won. Power had covertly been bringing his nuclear forces to a very high state of alert since 20th October.⁵

The crisis on Saturday 27 October deepened further because of an event far from the Caribbean. While Russia and American were confronting each other over Cuba, they both continued with their programmes of nuclear tests. The Russians detonated a nuclear bomb over Novaya Zemlya on 26 October. Hours later an American U-2 plane was sent to the North Pole to monitor for radiation. The pilot, Captain Charles Maultsby, was navigating by the stars. He lost his bearings because of the confusing coloured lights of the Aurora Borealis. Before long, Maultsby strayed deep inside the Soviet Union. He finally realised his error as he heard Russian folk music over his radio.

In Russian minds this flight could easily have been making a final check of targets for the bombers circling over Alaska. Six MIG-16 fighters were scrambled to intercept Maultsby, but they couldn't fly high enough to shoot him down. As he finally turned back towards Alaska, two US F-106 fighters were sent to escort him. Like many others, these F106s had been armed with nuclear Air-to-Air missiles when the alert state was raised to DEFCON 3. They had no conventional weapons. Fortunately the two sets of fighters never came face to face.

⁵ Strategic Air Command Operations in the Cuban Crisis of 1962, Historical Study No 90, Volume 1, Strategic Air Command.



B-59 photograph taken by US Navy on 28 October 1962

Captain Vasili Arkhipov

On the same day, in the Sargasso Sea a fleet of American warships surrounded the Russian submarine B-59. The US Navy had devised a procedure whereby they would signal that a submarine should surface by dropping several stun grenades in the water. They had informed Moscow of this procedure, but the Soviet Navy refused to acknowledge the message and did not pass it on to their vessels at sea. The crew of B-59 were stressed, exhausted and living in stifling conditions. There were only a few hours of life in the vessel's batteries. The submariners heard the repeated thumping of practice depth charges detonating close to their hull. The US Navy officers who were launching these small bombs had no idea that the diesel-powered submarine was carrying one nuclear torpedo. Captain Valentin Savitsky was confused. Perhaps the third world war has already started he declared. He agreed with his political officer that the nuclear torpedo should be prepared for action. He felt that if his submarine was to be sunk, at least he would take an American warship down with him. Fortunately there was another senior officer on the submarine, who held the same rank as the Savistky. Captain Vasili Arkhipov refused to go along with his colleagues and he vetoed the order to prepare the nuclear torpedo. Decades later, when this story first became public, Arkhipov was hailed as the man who stopped World War Three. B-59 surfaced and then headed back to Russia.

As this drama unfolded at sea, McNamara was leaving his office in Washington. He turned to an aide and said that he wasn't sure that he would live to see another Saturday night.

Four decades later McNamara had the chance to meet with key figures from Russia and Cuba who had been involved in the crisis. He was horrified to learn that the world had come far closer to nuclear Armageddon than he, or anyone else, had realised at the time. On Tuesday 16th October, when the Chiefs of Staff had first proposed an immediate attack, their information on the nuclear weapons in Cuba was very limited. Even by the height of the crisis, on Saturday

27th October, US intelligence had failed to detect the nuclear-armed FKR missiles, some of which were aimed at Guantanamo Bay. There were no electronic safeguards preventing the launch of the Russian nuclear weapons in Cuba, or most American nuclear weapons. While Moscow retained authority over the long-range R-12 missiles, Khrushchev's instructions for the tactical nuclear weapons were inconsistent. First he delegated authority over them to Pliyev, then he said that the weapons should not be used without permission from Moscow. Khrushchev also toyed with the idea of saying that he would hand these tactical nuclear weapons over to Cuban control if the island was invaded.

The shooting down of Anderson's U-2 was very significant. Not only did it mark a serious escalation in the crisis, but it also showed how distant leaders could lose control over a conflict. Sitting in Moscow, Khrushchev was worried about a global nuclear war. To him, shooting down the U-2 was rash and dangerously provocative. For the Soviet officers in Cuba, who were waiting for American bombs to fall, attacking the spy plane was a reasonable operational decision.

Had the US Air Force implemented OPLAN 312, an all-out air attack on Cuba, followed by OPLAN 316, an invasion of the islands, then there is no guarantee that the Russian officers who had practical control over individual nuclear weapons, particularly the tactical weapons, would have shown restraint as their comrades were killed by American bombs.

The crisis ended on Sunday 28 October. Khrushchev mistakenly thought that Kennedy was going to make a broadcast to the nation at 9 am, Washington time, saying that the bombing campaign had started. Shortly before this, the Soviet leadership met outside Moscow and agreed to remove their missiles from Cuba in exchange for the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey.

Living in the shadow of the Cold War

In one way the world is closer to the nuclear apocalypse today than it was on the 27th October 1962. Then most of the nuclear weapons were bombs which would be dropped by aircraft. Each plane would have taken several hours to reach its target. There were far fewer strategic missiles in 1962 than there are today. The United States had 132 Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), plus 105 Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) in England, Italy and Turkey. The Soviet Union had 42 ICBMs, plus 36 MRBMs in Cuba. The total number of nuclear warheads from missiles that could hit targets in the USA and Soviet Union was 315. All of these missiles had to be fuelled with liquid fuel before they could be launched.

Today the US and Russia between them have 1,700 nuclear warheads on missiles which are on high alert. These could all hit their targets in less than one hour from now. All of the missiles are solid-fuelled, which means they can be launched immediately.

October 1962 was just one of the many times when the world has been poised on the edge of the nuclear apocalypse. For example, on 26 September 1983 Stanislav Petrov sat in Serpukhov-15, the Russian early warning centre, watching as one, two, then ten dots appeared on his screen. Each represented a missile fired from the United States towards the Soviet Union. The Standing Orders said that in this situation Petrov should immediately inform the General Staff Central Command Post at Chekhov-3. Chekhov-3 was able to launch Russia's entire arsenal of ICBMs by remote control, and it can still do this today. Petrov decided to ignore his orders. He did not pass on the warning. Instead he waited until after the missiles would have exploded. Only then was he able to confirm that the dots were due to a computer failure. Five weeks later, the world was again on the brink of nuclear war. The Soviet Union misinterpreted a NATO nuclear exercise, Able Archer, as the final preparations for a real attack. These dangers did not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1995 President Yeltsin was on the verge of authorising a nuclear strike, when a Norwegian weather rocket was mistaken for a Trident missile.

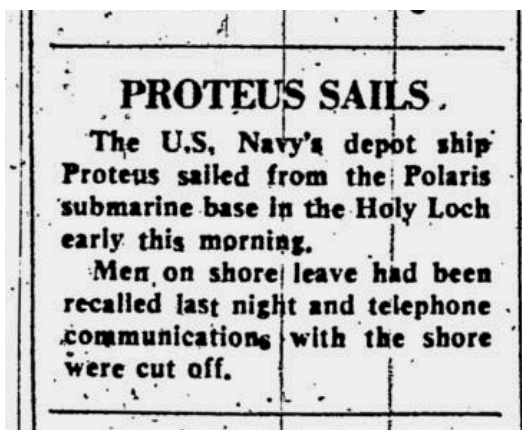
Since 1962, one way that the world's nuclear arsenals have changed is that they now rely very heavily on complex computer software. Cyber attacks, and false warnings of cyber attacks, are a greater danger than ever. During the Cuban Missile Crisis a roaming brown bear triggered an alert at an American Air Defence Command post. A guard opened fire on the intruder. The attack was initially interpreted as an act of sabotage, presaging a Soviet assault. Preparations were made to scramble as many jets as possible, so they weren't caught on the ground. Today the danger is from virtual bears, malevolent or misplaced bytes which could spiral the world into nuclear war by accident.

Scotland

Scotland played a key role in the Cuban missile crisis. In 1962 all five of the US Navy's new Polaris nuclear submarines were based in the Holy Loch. The force had been deployed to the Clyde one year earlier in the face of vigorous protests from across Scotland.



US Polaris submarine, Holy Loch 1962



Glasgow Herald 24 October 1962

At the start of October three of the submarines were at sea, on patrol. On 16th October the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the remaining two submarines should be sent to sea. However this was not initially approved. On 22nd October President Kennedy placed all nuclear forces on DEFCON 3. The two submarines in Holy Loch were rushed out to sea within 24 hours. Their support ship, USS Proteus, also sailed down the Clyde estuary and headed to the North of Scotland. It remained at sea for ten days.

The American fleet has left the Holy Loch, but today there are British submarines, carrying American Trident missiles, based at Faslane. The entire British nuclear arsenal of around 225 nuclear warheads is based in Scotland. There are always 40 nuclear warheads deployed on one Trident submarine at sea, 24/7. If there was a major crisis, then one, and possibly two, other Trident submarines would be quickly sent to sea, as in 1962.

In a landmark speech to the United Nations President Kennedy said: "Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us."

Five decades later, we have become like villagers living under a volcano, complacent about the risk of sudden catastrophic destruction. But this nuclear danger does not come from the heart of the earth. It is man-made and can be dismantled by human hands.

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