

Script – Cuban Crisis Briefing

Title Slide

If you were a missile or bomber crew member 50 years ago today, you would have been on continuous alert for the last two weeks. I say continuous because about half the crew force is on alert - the other half is resting and waiting to take their place.

If you were in maintenance, munitions, security, comm or almost any other base specialty, you would be working continuous shift work. Every office, shop and work center has been manned for 24 hours each day for over two weeks - you are either working or resting. Nobody is on leave, on pass, TDY or doing nonessential tasks. We are at the brink on Nuclear War - we are in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Slide October 1962

first line

The Cuban Crisis didn't happen overnight - several events over the months before led to it. In early 1961, the US CIA put together a poorly planned invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. The invasion failed, and most of the Cuban Exiles who took part were captured or killed. But the attempt really bothered Fidel Castro. He was convinced that the US would invade again soon, this time with the full might of the US military.

Castro asked his friend in the Soviet Union, Nikita Krushchev, for help. Krushchev had his own concerns - he knew that the Soviet Union was ringed with US bomber bases in Europe, the Pacific and Canada, allowing US bombers to strike deep into the heartland of his country. And he knew his own bombers couldn't penetrate as deep, since they were all based within the Soviet Union. He knew that the US was building new ICBMs faster than he was, and that the US missiles had faster reaction times and were more reliable than his own. He also had recently learned that the US had deployed intermediate range missiles to the UK, Italy and Turkey. The missiles in Turkey especially bothered him, because the whole southern flank of the Soviet Union was open to attack from missiles on a couple of hundred miles away.

Second Line

So he acted, secretly and quickly. He sent 42,000 Soviet troops to Cuba without the world knowing he had done it. He also sent fighters, surface to air missiles and bombers. But he also sent what he called "defensive weapons" - medium and intermediate range nuclear ballistic missiles, with their warheads, to the island.

Third Line

On 14 October, an Air Force U-2, flown by Major Richard Huyser, photographed these missiles, and President Kennedy was briefed immediately. Suddenly, he knew that ballistic missiles that could hit almost every US city were only 90 miles south of Florida. He formed the ExComm, the Executive Committee, made up of some of his cabinet members, some special advisors and the members of the Joint Chiefs. Their goal was to analyze this move and decide how to counter it.

Fourth Line

The ExComm met over the next few days to look at the options - from a full scale invasion of Cuba, to an airstrike to destroy the missiles, to a naval blockade to stop further movements. There were heated discussions about which was the best course action. The stage had been set - it was now up to our leadership to determine the best way to resolve the issue. Let's step away from the Crisis for a few minutes, and look at our force structure in 1962

SAC in 1962 slide

In 1962, SAC had over 280,000 people assigned, almost as large as today's entire Air Force. We had over 600 B-52s and 547 Hound Dog nuclear armed cruise missiles. We had 18 B-52s on continuous airborne alert - Operation Chrome Dome - flying with nuclear weapons on board and ready to go to war. The tanker effort to maintain this alert posture was enormous.

B-47 Slide

We had 880 B-47 bombers, both in the US and deployed under Reflex Alert to bases in the Pacific, Canada and Europe. We had over 146 recon B-47s - both for electronic and photo surveillance. They were regularly flying missions around the edges of the Soviet Union and even occasionally penetrating into it. We had 79 supersonic B-58 bombers, based in the US.

Tanker slide

We had over 1,000 tankers, half older KC-97s and half relatively new KC-135s. And we had 22 new U-2 photo recon aircraft, routinely flying missions around the world.

1962 - Busy for Missileers

1962 was a big year for missiles in the Air Force. We already had some new systems and were receiving new squadrons throughout the year. We were building new Minuteman and Titan II wings, scheduled to come on line in the next two years.

Thousands of missileers were in training at Chanute, Sheppard and Vandenberg, both for the existing systems and those coming soon.

Those of us who had already finished training were at new operational units, learning how to keep them on alert and maintain them. The new systems were complex, dangerous liquid fueled missiles that didn't always perform as they should. It took a lot of people to maintain them, and they failed often. In 1962, the pass rate for an operational readiness inspection in SAC, where a unit had to do a lox loading countdown on all of their assigned missiles, was 66 percent. The success rate at the time for exercises was closer to 50 percent. Only two Atlas and Titan units ever passed ORIs - but they were all we had in 1962.

Matador and Mace

The Air Force had fielded Matador, then Mace, in Europe and the Pacific beginning in the mid-1950s. These intermediate range cruise missiles weren't part of SAC, but they were a key part of the nation's deterrent posture.

We had several squadrons of BOMARC surface to air missiles deployed across the northern US and in Canada. These nuclear or conventional armed missiles were designed to counter the Soviet bomber force.

We had recently deployed the Thor intermediate range ballistic missile to the UK, jointly manned by US and RAF crews. The Jupiter was on alert in Italy and Turkey, also manned by joint US and host nation crews.

Atlas D

In late 1959, the first Atlas D missile came on alert. This radio guided IDBM was based in three squadrons and at Vandenberg, either in above ground gantries or hardened above ground shelters called coffins. The Atlas D had to be raised to a vertical position and loaded with propellants before it could be launched - it took about 15 minutes to get the first missile of the three at each site off the ground, and the second could not follow until guidance was complete on the first.

Atlas E

We had three squadrons of Atlas E - this one with inertial guidance, and housed in coffins that had the roof at ground level. Like the D, it had to be erected and loaded with propellants before launch. Each missile could be launched within about 15 minutes.

Atlas F

During 1962, the Air Force brought six squadrons of Atlas F missiles to alert. Each squadron had 12 of these inertially guided missiles, housed in deep vertical silos. Before launch, the missile had to be loaded with propellants and raised above ground - about a 15 minute process.

Titan I

We also activated six squadrons of Titan I missiles, with 9 missiles in each squadron. The Titan I was radio guided, so there were three at each site, like the Atlas D. In vertical silos like the Atlas F, the missile had to be loaded with propellant and raised above ground before launch. The first missile at a site could be airborne in about 15 minutes, the other two following at 7 minute intervals.

Saturday, 20 October

On Saturday morning, 20 October, the world changed drastically for all of us in SAC. I was a young 24 year old first lieutenant, a maintenance officer in the Titan I squadron at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho. That morning, we had begun preparing one of our missiles for a lox loading exercise, about a five or six day process if all went well - and often it didn't, so the process stretched to many more days. About 1030 that morning, as I monitored maintenance in the Job Control center I ran, I got a call on the direct line from the 9th Bomb Wing Command Post. The senior controller, a major, told me that SAC headquarters had called and said "put your missile back on alert - now - and don't ask why."

I called our Maintenance Supervisor, Major Ted Grossholz, who was on site overseeing the effort, and relayed the message. He said, "Charlie, I can't react to direction like that - I need more specifics." I told him he had better call the command post - in a couple of minutes, he called back and said, "Charlie, Alpha-3 will be on alert in four hours."

We were told to keep everything on alert - and not remove any missile from alert for anything.

Later that day and Sunday, we received some intel briefings on the situation - we knew it involved Cuba, and that we are to stay at high alert, but not much else - yet.

Monday, 22 October

On Monday, we got all the facts. At 1900 Eastern time, President John Kennedy addressed the nation - and the world - and told us about the missiles in Cuba. He told Krushchev and Castro that "if a single missile is launched to any target in the western hemisphere, we would retaliate with our full nuclear force against the Soviet Union."

While he spoke, the US military was directed to DefCon 3 - the first time in our history we had actually gone to that defense condition. We were preparing for nuclear war, and US forces were preparing for invasion of Cuba. Kennedy announced the quarantine - designed to stop all traffic into Cuba. Forces in Europe were not placed on DefCon 3 for political reasons with the NATO force, but US forces were basically there without being actually declared in that posture.

B-47 Slide

Over the next few hours, all of the B-47 bombers at our base, and at other B-47 units around the US, were loaded with nuclear weapons and dispersed to overseas bases, other bases and commercial airports around the country. I talked to a B-47 pilot who was stationed at Whiteman AFB in Missouri - he was part of a three-aircraft cell that dispersed to the commercial airport at St Louis. He said he sat alert in the aircraft, and when he had to leave for any reason, another crew took is place. He and is crew had meals and rested in the passenger terminal when not in the aircraft. He spent a few days at St Louis, went home for a change of clothes, then spent several days on alert at the Minneapolis-St Paul airport.

The B-52 airborne alert force was increased from 18 aircraft to up to 65 aircraft in the air, loaded with nuclear weapons, ready to go to war. The rest of the B-52 force was on ground alert.

The recon B-47s began flying missions around Cuba along with the missions on the edges of the Soviet Union. A pilot from the 55th SRW at Forbes told me he would fly as deep as he dared into the Soviet Union - sometimes as much as 400 miles - before sensors told him it was time to back out if he wanted to survive. The 55th lost three RB/EB-47s during the crisis - not to enemy action, but to accidents at takeoff at Forbes and Kindley Field, Bermuda. The six crewmen on each aircraft perished.

Alert at Hahn

Our Matador and Mace force, along with the USAFE fighter force, was on full alert in Europe and the Pacific.

ICBMs

For those of us in missiles, it was a tense time. Every unit had two combat crews at every site - one crew fully awake and at the consoles while the second crew rested. Any time a crewmember had to leave the console, another took his place. Every crew stayed as close to launch as possible, all the time. That meant almost constant back to back alerts - it took most of the crew force just to maintain this schedule. We

were reminded often to "keep everything on alert" and advised to accomplish any required servicing as quickly as possible to minimize off alert time.

Titan I Crew

The crews sat ready to launch, like this four man Titan I crew at their consoles at Beale AFB.

Atlas E

The missiles sat ready - horizontal or vertical in their launchers, ready to take on propellants if launch came.

Minuteman

We were building the Minuteman wings - Wing I, the 341st SMW at Malmstrom, was due to come on alert in the next year. President Kennedy asked General LeMay if he could get some of these new missiles ready right now - the Air Force and the contractors went to work to try.

Friday - 26 October

On Friday, we moved even closer to war - SAC was directed to DefCon 2 - once again a defense condition none of us thought we would ever actually go to - but suddenly we were there. Normally, changes in DefCon were directed by a coded, formatted voice message over the Primary Alerting System, transmitted to control centers, command posts and aircraft around the world. But not this time - instead, the Commander in Chief, Strategic Air Command, General Thomas Power, personally picked up the red telephone in the SAC Underground and told us - and the world - "This is General Power - I am directing SAC to DefCon 2 immediately - do it quickly, do it safely, do it correctly, in accordance with your tech orders and directives - and if you have any questions, ask your commander." Tension had just ratcheted up another notch - we were the closest to nuclear war we have ever been in our history. Not a lot changed as far as our routine - we were already operating on a 24 hour schedule across the base, and everything was on alert - we just didn't stray very far from the launch switches.

Friday, 28 October

On Friday, an amazing feat was accomplished. The members of the 341st SMW, teamed with the contractors and the Site Activation Task Force, got the first Minuteman missile on alert at Malmstrom, at site A-06. The other nine missiles in Alpha flight followed in the next few days. In October, just a few weeks ago, the Association of Air Force and the wing commemorated that feat with a special ceremony at A-06. Over 600 people, including the senior leadership of 20th Air Force, the commander of Strategic Command and the vice commander of Air Force Global Strike Command, took part in this ceremony. I use the word "commemorate" because you don't "celebrate" an event like the Cuban Missile Crisis, you just remember it and hope it never happens again. We had a number of people at the ceremony who were at Malmstrom - and at A-06 - when the first missile was put on alert in 1962, or at other missile and aircraft bases around the world during the crisis.

The Crisis is Slowly Defused

Over the next few days, President Kennedy and Premier Krushchev worked hard to ease the crisis. In those days, diplomatic actions were indirect and slow - everything was done with letters and emissaries - there was no direct contact between leaders. Some of the most important information between the two leaders was relayed between an ABC reporter, John Scali, and a Soviet KGB resident in Washington, Alexander Fomin, who met several times and passed information to the president and Krushchev.

Both sides made mistakes along the way - the Soviets shot down an American U-2 over Cuba, killing Major Rudolph Anderson, the pilot. One of U-2s strayed into Soviet airspace, and both sides continued to test missiles and nuclear weapons - probably not smart when the two powers were the threshold of nuclear war. There were many questions about the effectiveness of the command and control process on both sides.

But things began to happen - the Soviet ships either stopped or reversed course as they neared the quarantine line. Krushchev agreed to remove the missiles if we agreed "never to invade Cuba." We found many years later that the US also agreed to secretly remove the Turkish missiles "soon" but that the Soviets could not reveal this fact.

Slow return to Normal

We slowly began returning to "normal" conditions in the military and SAC. Officially, we returned to DefCon 4, then our normal defense condition, on 20 November. But those of us in SAC were maintained at high alert - still working 24 hours a day - until the following Monday - the Monday after Thanksgiving. Some of us thought this was because the senior leaders were afraid that if they released us for a four day holiday, we could lose a lot of folks to auto accidents. But finally, we returned to "normal" - but never quite as normal as it had been in the past. We had stood face to face almost at war, and in the end, deterrence worked - we backed away to the status that was day to day in 1962.

Could it Happen Today

One question to ask - did we learn anything, and could it happen again? A lot is far different today.

Satellite...

We had limited recon capabilities in 1962 - one satellite, with indirect data retrieval, a new U-2 force - but an opportunity for Krushchev to take covert actions that we could not detect. Today we have many platforms, from satellites to aircraft to unmanned vehicles that provide data. And we have folks with cell phones who observe and photograph actions around the world and put pictures out there for all to see.

Options...

In 1962, we had very limited alert and execution options - we put the whole force, or none of the force, on high alert. If we went to nuclear war, we relied on massive retaliation - we didn't have selective options, limited options and other very specific actions to employ.

Conventional...

Our conventional responses in 1962 were also much more limited. President Kennedy asked General Walter Sweeney, the commander of Tactical Air Command, if he could guarantee that he would destroy

all of the Soviet missiles with an airstrike. General Sweeney told the president that he could guarantee 95 percent - one that one or two missile might get off the pad - that we might lose one or two of our cities. Today, we have stealth aircraft, standoff weapons, cruise missiles, unmanned vehicles, special forces - a wide variety of conventional forces that could effectively remove the threat with a very high level of confidence.

Communications...

We also have much more direct communications and contact between the leaders of major powers. One result of the Cuban Missile Crisis was the Hot Line, a direct telephone link between the US president and Russian leadership.

The Cuban Missile Crisis most likely could not occur like it did in 1962 - we may see tensions rise and actions that almost lead to war today, but not in the same way that it happened 50 years ago.

Good Movies

I would like to leave you with two recommendations - films that will help you understand 1962 and our history better.

"A Gathering of Eagles" was filmed in 1963 at Beale AFB, California, at a real SAC B-52 and Titan I wing. It is a good, factual story about life in SAC in those days - using actual aircraft, with many of the roles filled by real SAC crewmembers and maintainers.

The second is a 1974 television drama "The Missile of October." The film's dialogue was based on actual transcripts from official documents, and tells the story of Kennedy and the ExComm truthfully and factually.

Both are available through sources on line.

That concludes my presentation - any questions?