

ML.101.The Most Dangerous Day of the Cold War

SAC was very honorably dissolved - stood down, in military language - in 1992, succeeded by the U.S. Strategic Command. The nuclear threat that we face today, and that which future generations will face, is somewhat different from that of the past - and from the flashpoint that was narrowly resolved in 1962.

Though the nation's civilian leadership negotiated the resolution of the Cold War's worst crisis, key roles were played at SAC and its underground command post.

As former Secretary of the Air Force Thomas Reed once told me: "SAC was the Cold War, and Omaha was SAC."

SAC was a post-World War II baby boomer. Organized in 1946, it came to Omaha and Offutt Air Force Base in 1948. In the 1950s, school children practiced air-raid drills, crouching under desks - as if that would have helped in a nuclear attack. When the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1958, the possibility of what that could mean - the enemy orbiting a device over our heads - scared us.

But on Oct. 22, 1962, nothing was more frightening than President John F. Kennedy's announcement that Soviet ballistic missiles had been discovered in Cuba. From 75,000 feet, SAC planes had taken pictures, which were flown to Offutt and analyzed, confirming the nuclear threat.

The president's words to the nation were chilling: "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."

On Oct. 23, William B. Ecker, an Omaha native and a graduate of the old Tech High School, was sent for a closer, more dangerous look - low-level flights at 350 to 400 feet - that produced photos proving the existence of ballistic missiles in San Cristobal, Cuba. Ecker received the Distinguished Flying Cross. He died in 2009, and his flight suit hangs at the Smithsonian Institution.

The Cold War nearly turned deadly hot on Saturday, Oct. 27, 1962. By 4 p.m., it was later revealed, the military Joint Chiefs had recommended that the U.S. attack Cuba to destroy the missiles.

We weren't aware of that detail then, but we knew very well that tensions ran extremely high. Soviet ships, some with nuclear firepower, sat in the waters off Cuba behind a quarantine line that the president had ordered.

Even by a mistake, World War III could start any time. And although the focus was on the Caribbean, the alert went worldwide.

Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Max R. Moore of Bellevue recalls the crisis well. He was a SAC navigator who had arrived at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey on Sept. 27. He was preparing to enjoy R&R in October when all leaves were suddenly canceled. He still has his log book from those days. On Oct. 24, his RB-47 reconnaissance crew from the 55th Wing (based at Forbes AFB near Topeka, Kan., until it moved to Offutt in 1966) prepared to fly a mission north across the Black Sea toward the Crimean Peninsula, about 900 miles south of Moscow. "Because of the tension," Moore said, "I recall vividly that the command post at Incirlik sent messages back to SAC headquarters to confirm that they wanted this mission."

Confirmation came: Proceed. As the plane flew north off the coast of Turkey and over the sea, Moore said, "The world just lit up." By that, he meant that scopes - his and those of three electronics warfare officers - showed incredible activity, some of it in the air. "When I looked on the radar," he said, "I saw more ships under us than I'd ever seen before. The Soviets were very

aware we were airborne and pointed at the Crimean Peninsula. They probably launched airplanes after us. We were being scanned by all kinds of radar."

The RB-47 crew soon got the message from its commanders to abort the mission and head back to base. This was not a time for a confrontation.

As the crisis ensued, the president on Oct. 27 didn't agree to order an attack on Cuba. Negotiations continued.

Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles in return for JFK's assurance not to invade Cuba - and, as we learned later, for his agreement to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey. Less than six weeks later, on Dec. 7, President Kennedy arrived at Offutt to visit the underground command post and to thank SAC. He expressed his belief that "peace and security can be maintained directly with the will and courage of the people of the United States and the strong right arm which is the Strategic Air Force."

Three decades later, the Soviet Union eventually fell apart. SAC - to the continuing dismay of its veterans - was disbanded. At Offutt on the rainy night of May 31, 1992, Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs, pronounced amid much pomp and circumstance that the long, bitter years of the Cold War were over. "America and her allies have won overwhelmingly," he said. "So thank you, SAC. Job well done. Enjoy your retirement."

Robb Hoover of Bellevue, a SAC retiree, recalls sitting that night next to Robyn Lorys, daughter of Maj. Rudolf Anderson, who was shot down and killed by a surface-to-air missile during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Though he was the only fatality of that crisis, some 250 Americans died or went missing during the Cold War. They were remembered at the stand-down ceremony. In the years since, the world has changed. Terror groups and rogue nations are now the focus. The U.S. has said it cannot tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran.

Offutt isn't going anywhere, though. The point is not to fight nuclear war, but to prevent it. In October of 1962, SAC was there to help.

- by Michel Kelly - excerpted from the Omaha World-Herald, 28 October 2012