

Nuclear Disasters

We Avoided By A Hair

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The atom bombs that brought Japan to its knees at the close of World War II changed the face of the world forever. The two world superpowers that emerged from the chaos of the war entered into an arms race to develop doomsday weapons that gave them the power to destroy the entire world—several times over.

Fortunately, the Cold War passed without a nuclear holocaust, but only since its end has the truth begun to emerge about how close we came to nuclear catastrophes. In 1961, for instance, North Carolina was very nearly wiped off the face of the Earth “by accident.” Be prepared to read stories that will shock and lead you to think that only heavenly intervention prevented humanity from wiping itself out.

In October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union stood on the brink of a nuclear war. In what would become known as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US discovered nearly-operational nuclear missiles in nearby Cuba. On October 22, President John F. Kennedy made a national broadcast to a frightened audience, in which he said: "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."

The entire world now knew that the slightest misstep could trigger a global armageddon. Among the measures the White House took to avoid such a misstep was an order to all its pilots to completely avoid Soviet airspace lest it be misinterpreted as an act of war.

On Saturday, October 27, 1962, at 1:45 PM, the phone rang in the Oval Office. President Kennedy lifted the receiver. On the other end of the line was Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. He had terrible news to report. An American U-2 spy plane disappeared near Alaska and apparently wandered into Soviet airspace. At the best of times this would have been an international incident, but under the present circumstances in the current showdown it could be all that was needed to trigger the nuclear war that Kennedy was so desperately trying to avoid.

October 27 became known in the White House as "Black Saturday." Five days had

passed since Kennedy had spoken to the nation.

The situation appeared to be spiraling out of control. Hours before, an American U-2 spy plane was caught flying over eastern Cuba and was shot down. At about the same time, American warships were caught up in a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse with nuclear-armed Soviet submarines in the Caribbean off the Cuban coast. All Kennedy needed now was for the Soviets to believe that they were coming under attack from the US.

Several minutes after McNamara's call, the State Department's intelligence chief Roger Hilsman arrived anxiously from the office of McGeorge Bundy, the National Security Advisor. Hilsman had just discovered that the Soviets had sent MiG fighter jets to search for the missing U-2. The US Air Force responded by launching American fighter jets to confront the Russian planes. Hilsman was on the verge of panic.

Upset by the latest news, Kennedy remarked, "There's always one fool who doesn't listen to what we tell him." For the past few days almost no one in the White House had been able to sleep. Now it looked like nuclear war was inevitable.

To understand just how tenuous the situation was, consider the words of Kennedy's aide, historian Arthur Schlesinger. He later described that Saturday as "the most dangerous moment in human history." The US military upped its alert status to DEFCON-2, just one level below an actual nuclear

war. Nearly 3,000 nuclear warheads were pointed at the Soviet Union. Fidel Castro visited the Soviet embassy in Havana to ask Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to use his nuclear weapons to liquidate the imperialist enemy to the north once and for all.

Kennedy was not aware of it at the time, but the Soviets had planted nuclear missiles at two sites in Cuba where they were armed and ready to destroy US targets. On that Saturday, the Soviet troops delivered nuclear missiles to within 15 miles of the American Navy base in Guantanamo Bay, prepared to pulverize the base at a moment's notice.

The U-2 Strays

U-2 pilot Charles Maultsby received a routine order that Saturday to take off from Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska and fly in the direction of Novaya Zemlya Island. It was a boring job. The island was used by the Soviets for nuclear testing. Maultsby was to gather samples from the air and use special equipment to inspect the radioactive clouds that formed near the island after the nuclear tests.

This was a routine espionage mission that helped the US keep tabs on Soviet nuclear activities. It did not call for the spy plane to fly over Soviet territory. A search-and-rescue plane joined the U-2, though the chances of being able to assist Maultsby if something happened to his U-2 were slim. Even if he successfully ejected from his plane over land, the rescue craft could not land on ice.

It was midnight in Alaska, 4:00 AM in Washington DC, when Maultsby lifted off from the runway. He flew due north for an hour with the search-and-rescue unit accompanying him as far as Barter Island, off the northern coast of Alaska. As the two planes parted, the search crew wished Maultsby success and promised him they would leave a light on in their plane's window to guide him back on his return in six hours.

Maultsby was an experienced pilot who had flown a number of combat jets for the Air Force. He spent 600 days in Chinese



President Kennedy (sitting in front of middle window) during a critical cabinet meeting. To his left is Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.



Fidel Castro (left) asked Khrushchev to liquidate the imperialist enemy to the north once and for all.



Diagram shows how the Soviets secretly placed nuclear missiles just 15 miles from Guantanamo Bay.

Secretary McNamara's office called at 1:47 p.m. The party stated the U-2 concerned was on an air sampling mission and it operates generally between Alaska and the North Pole in an area which is one hundred to two hundred miles from Russia. This aircraft had been operating for sometime on the mission which has been previously cleared and approved.

Document containing some of the information McNamara presented to Kennedy regarding the errant U-2.



US Ambassador to the UN Adlai Stevenson presents to the UN spy images of nuclear warheads the Soviets had denied they had stationed in Cuba. Right: US airplane on spy mission above Cuba.

