

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

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Junior Scholastic

In 1962, 19-year-old Robert O'Hanneson had a daunting assignment. At the time, he was a member of the U.S. Air Force, based in Okinawa, Japan. If commanded to do so, O'Hanneson would have had to fire nuclear missiles at the Soviet Union. "At any moment, I could be asked to open [an order to fire] ... and place our missiles into launch mode," he later wrote.

For 13 terrifying days in October 1962, it looked as if O'Hanneson might get that order. The U.S. had just learned that the Soviet Union was placing nuclear missiles in Cuba. The missiles lay about 90 miles off the coast of Florida, posing a direct threat to many U.S. cities. President John F. Kennedy threatened to bomb and invade Cuba unless the missiles were removed.

At the time, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were locked in a Cold War (1945-1991)- There was no actual combat between armies. But the Soviets' actions in Cuba — and Kennedy's response — brought the two sides to the brink of nuclear war.

Target: Castro

In 1959, revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro toppled a corrupt dictatorship in Cuba. Soon, Castro alarmed the U.S. by seizing American-owned businesses. Declaring himself a Communist, he allied Cuba with the Soviet Union, then the world's most powerful Communist country.

In April 1961, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) directed a secret invasion of Cuba. The invasion was carried out by anti-Castro Cuban exiles at a place called the Bay of Pigs.

The attack ended in failure and embarrassment for President Kennedy. Even so, he pressed ahead with other secret plans to topple Castro.

Both Castro and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (KROOSH-choff) feared another U.S. invasion of Cuba. Khrushchev also worried about his own country. The U.S. had placed nuclear missiles in Turkey, near the Soviet border. Khrushchev felt that positioning Soviet missiles in Cuba was a way to even the balance. "It was high time America learned," he later wrote, "what it feels like to have her own land and her own people threatened."

"Eyeball to Eyeball"

The Soviet missiles were first spotted by CIA planes flying over Cuba. Kennedy

learned about them on October 16. He understood the grave danger they represented. Such missiles could destroy Atlanta, Dallas, or Washington, D.C., in a matter of minutes.

Some of Kennedy's top advisers favored a surprise air attack, followed by a ground invasion. But U.S. military leaders could not be sure that such an attack would knock out all the missiles.

That kind of approach posed other dangers. Kennedy knew that the Soviets would retaliate. They might even launch nuclear missiles and bombers from the Soviet Union. In the end, he chose a more measured response. He ordered the Navy to set up a quarantine (blockade) around Cuba, to halt the shipment of military equipment.

On October 22, Kennedy gave a televised address to the nation. Americans learned about the crisis for the first time, as the President described his decision to quarantine Cuba. "Our unswerving objective," he said, is to "prevent the use of these missiles on this or any other country."

Americans supported Kennedy's actions, but many people panicked. Supermarket shelves emptied of food, water, and other supplies, as families prepared for nuclear war.

One tense day followed another. On October 24, Soviet ships approached the quarantine line. A confrontation was imminent. Then, one by one, nearly every Soviet ship either slowed or reversed course. "We're eyeball to eyeball," said Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "and I think the other fellow just blinked."

Avoiding Catastrophe

The crisis was not over. Kennedy planned to invade Cuba if the Soviet missiles were not removed. Tensions peaked on October 27. The day started with a U.S. spy plane straying into the Soviet Union's air space, raising alarm on both sides. Later, a Soviet officer disobeyed orders and shot down a U.S. spy plane over Cuba, killing the pilot. Both acts fed a growing hostility.

Despite the pressure to go to war, Kennedy and Khrushchev both wanted to avoid conflict without looking weak. The two leaders exchanged letters and sent secret messages through aides. They carefully worked out a deal. Khrushchev would remove the missiles from Cuba. In exchange, the U.S. would privately pledge not to invade Cuba. In secret, the U.S. also agreed to remove its missiles from Turkey.

On October 28, Khrushchev announced that the missiles in Cuba would be dismantled and sent home. No one was more relieved than Robert O'Hannesson.

"My whole body shook," he said later. "The gravity of how close we'd come to nuclear disaster hit me."

The Cold War lasted another 28 years, but the two sides never again came so close to catastrophe.