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Talk for Cuban Missile Crisis Anniversary

Introduction:

Thank you Anton and I am most pleased to meet Col. General Esin. I look forward to your comments and it does my heart good to see that we are both working to bring the nuclear genie completely under control. I am sure we both now have grandchildren and we live in a time when hope is really an option.

Let me set the stage for my comments and go back to 1962. As the year opened I was stationed at Pacific Headquarters in the Targeting Directorate and awaiting orders for my next assignment. I had started an Air Force career – after initial training -- by being assigned to Japan, and to Tokyo – actually the area that is now the Olympic grounds for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. As a 2nd Lt. with a political science degree and a certificate saying I had completed the Basic Intelligence Officer Course, I threw myself into learning Japanese and following international events in Northeast Asia. I am still following international events in Northeast Asia, but as an academic, not a practitioner.

During this assignment to Japan, through a wonderful turn of events, I met the lady who became my wife – Mitchie please stand up – and she has put up with me for 53 years – and counting. We met as a result of my father teaching in Japan in 1946 right after World War II. He met a missionary who – believe it or not – introduced us in an unplanned meeting over coffee. As soon as I put in my papers for authorization to marry, in April 1959, I was shipped to Hawaii to let me “cool off.” In those days, marrying across racial lines was against the law in about half of American states. Coming from Ohio, it was legal, just not appreciated.

Now Hawaii is not a bad place to be stationed and I was assigned to the Headquarters of the Intelligence unit I worked with. Very importantly, when that organization was deactivated, because new technology was going to give us all the information we needed. I was assigned to PACAF Headquarters in the Targeting Directorate. That began a concentration on targeting that lasted well into my Air Force career.

When time came for reassignment everyone in the Directorate waited eagerly to see where I would end up. When word finally came through that I would be assigned to Headquarters SAC – the Strategic Air Command – in Omaha,

Nebraska, it was clear that Mitchie and I had made the right decision to stay in the Air Force – it was a wonderful opportunity to expand my professional competence.

We arrived mid-year at Offutt Air Force Base and entered a world that was unique. SAC was famous or notorious for security and the Commander of the Air Force at that time, General Curtis Lemay, was well known for unannounced inspections when his plane would land on some SAC base and all hell would break loose.

To give you an understanding of the degree of security, let me tell the story of a friend of mine, a Lieutenant, who failed to have his ID photo changed when he shaved off his mustache. On entering the tunnel to approach the underground command post at SAC Headquarters he was stopped by the guards for the photo that did not match reality. When I walked by, he was naked, spread eagle against the wall with two guards holding weapons at the ready. There was no room for error in those days. When he finally reported to work, he had a new ID card and was fully dressed.

When I reported in to SAC, I was immediately detailed as a SAC Augmentee to the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff (JSTPS) that actually made the master nuclear war plan. My

desk was immediately adjacent to the War Room/Command Post where the total plan could be displayed using the latest state-of-the-art computer assistance. In retrospect, we were driving a Model T Ford but of course didn't know it. A violent thunderstorm hitting the surface three stories above could play havoc with the stored data, but several Colonels who had memorized the entire plan would save the day and rebuilt the entire file in a matter of hours. Remember, punch cards were still looked upon as being very modern.

My job was to insure that all critical targets were "covered" that is had several weapons assigned against them within three days so as to meet the guidelines of 75% assurance of destruction. And in that sense, I worked closely with the Intelligence Directorate. As they identified new targets, or known targets that for some reason now had a higher priority, it was my job to check the coordinates, make sure that they were in our data base resource files and pass the information with a proper priority assignment to the folks in the War Room where the actual assignments were made.

The environment of the entire operation was one that did not appreciate error. I remember as a Captain accompanying – on occasion --"my" Colonel to weekly meetings with the

Commander of SAC (General Thomas S. Power) where he met with his staff. As a Captain I was seated next to the wall; only the "principals" were invited to sit around the rather large table.

As General Power presided over the individual briefings, the situation could become very tense if the briefer was asked a question and was found wanting. Often, the exchange with the General, if faulty or incomplete, would end with an invitation to find new employment. In fact in those days "Off my base by sundown!" was heard not infrequently throughout the SAC base system. Thus, when that happened access to base housing would be immediately terminated and families would be relocated as the Colonel looked for a new assignment.

I realized that people thought very highly of my work when on one Saturday morning when I reached the first Guard Post, I was told to immediately report to the War Room. When I entered the room besides the normal haze of cigar smoke (General LeMay liked cigars and set the standard throughout the Air Force) a number of chairs had been arranged in a circle in the center of the room. In these chairs were seated Generals and Colonels evidently waiting for me. My immediate boss, said "John, would you stand in the center." Then from around this 360 degree "firing zone" came one question after another using English not

normally taught in our Learn English Academies. Maybe that was why I only weighed 145 pounds in those days, but it was an experience I will never forget.

I had missed one of those extremely high priority targets and the ranking officer present finally said, "John, that was one, there will never again be two, right?" I realized at that point that they really thought I was doing a good job or I, Mitchie and our two-year old daughter Charlene, would have been on the road to who knows where Air Base – by sundown.

The Guidance for compiling the SIOP came from the Pentagon and the joint planning staff crafted an overall plan that would incorporate that guidance to provide the President with as much leeway as possible in choosing his response. As I now understand it, President Kennedy was not all that pleased with the SIOP as it did not provide the flexibility he required. The staff had been working for some time to give this flexibility by the time I got to Offutt, and the record shows that it was briefed to the President on 14 September 1962. While I was not present at the briefing – only very select principals – I do recall that a special rocking chair with a high back was obtained so that President Kennedy could take the briefing and be as comfortable as possible in light of his back problems. I remember that so clearly

as when President Johnson visited sometime later to take the SIOP briefing he requested that the same chair be provided for him. Not being a "Principal" I am not sure the chair was provided, but knowing the tenor of the times, I am sure all possible efforts were expended to have it there.

As the situation in Cuba came to the attention of the U.S. Intelligence Community, being in the Underground at SAC Headquarters and working on the SIOP did not necessarily make me privy to developing events in Cuba. In essence, in those days I was a customer of intelligence output and material covering Cuba was out of my area of responsibility – it was something special and would have to be handled in a special way.

However, when President Kennedy spoke to the nation on television and the Defense Establishment went to DEFCON 3 our attention was focused. The next day (23 October) General T. S. Power put SAC at DEFCON 2 and many SAC aircraft were launched in a status of Airborne Alert. Thus, they launched with weapons, went to prescribed loiter points and waited for the necessary codes for actual attack. Of course, the orbiting in race track fashion was not new. A friend of mine who also worked at SAC often relayed accounts of when he would be on airborne alert and well into the flight he would be greeted by a charming

voice that welcomed him to his duty station and asked how his wife and family were – and they used his real name. We were closer to each other than was commonly realized.

General Power's reaction to the increased tension was reflective of Air Force doctrine at the time – may still be. As a result of the devastating raids at Pearl Harbor and Manila at the opening of World War II, the Air Force learned the hard way some lessons about the vulnerability of air craft in such situations. I am sure. Gen. Power was reflecting these lessons and was determined to get as many aircraft in the air as possible to permit a systematic relay of aircraft in the air, aircraft ready to take to the air, and aircraft returning for rest and refueling.

As the operational force got itself up to peak readiness something absolutely unusual began to happen. I will call it the raid on the "Hanger Queens." Hanger Queens was the term picked by the operators – to describe aircraft that loved to be in hangers being repaired and not on the flight line ready for combat. Now most of these "birds" were capable of flying. It was a matter of some system within the aircraft that needed to be repaired for it to be 100% combat ready. All of the sudden we received a flood of additional aircraft available for combat and target assignments. Aircraft were being declared "mission ready,"

even though the altimeter might be down, or something else – anyway additional aircraft became available requiring additional air crews.

To obtain these crews a call was made for volunteers for rated pilots and support crews now working at desk jobs in SAC Headquarters and the units around the States. These individuals were fully trained as pilots and support personnel, but working as administrators as part of their continuing careers. Soon, the word was that enough aircraft and crews were generated to equal 120% of the requirements of the plan. So while the SIOP equaled 100%, SIOP plus Hanger Queens equaled 120%. That is my recollection, but I would question the actual number. A flurry of target assignments were made, however, that in some cases brought the percentage of success to the required 75%, in others it exceeded requested norms. It was clear, we were ready.

Then on one day of the crisis, it might have been the 24th when the entire U.S. Defense Establishment went to DEFCON 2, or the 27th a day when all Hell broke loose with a missing U2 and an errant U2, but I cannot remember for certain. However, things were very hot and tensions were extremely high. One of my bosses – it seemed as a Captain I had quite a few – came down from the Intelligence Directorate and gathered several of us who

were working in the ante-room, just outside the War Room, and said, to the best of my memory, "Well men, I believe we have about 20 or 30 minutes until execution, why don't you call your spouses and say good bye." I am sorry I don't remember the exact time nor date, but I do remember making the call and asking some non-descript question like, "What are we having for dinner?" I think it was Wednesday the 24th, however, as it was in the morning. At that time, the folks on the surface had a better idea of what was going on than we did in the Underground. Rather like the frog in the well, I called and spoke to Mitchie. She remembers the call like it was yesterday; but like most human beings who tend to suppress extremely bad memories and look for the sunshine, I don't think she can put an exact time on the call either.

I can remember some years later being on an expert's panel with Secretary McNamara and the subject of airborne alert came up. I said something very close to "Mr. Secretary, do you remember when we launched the fleet to avoid a Pearl Harbor during the Cuban Missile Crisis?" He turned to me and said that he had never approved of such a move. I responded that he didn't need to approve a protective launching of the fleet as that was authority designated to the SAC Commander in the protocols

for emergency response. The color went out of his face and he stared at me in disbelief. Well, that is what I remember; we were very conscious that the aircraft in the air should be extremely well managed and returned for fueling or some aircraft would have to attack with enough fuel only to go one way and seek an emergency or "safe" landing area. One of us is wrong, and at 75 I can appreciate the unreliability of memory. He was exactly 20 years older than me.

As we look back on this very dark era of U.S. – Soviet relations, we all realize how close we came to the unbelievable. In the History of Knowledge, the author points out that the most important finding of the 20th Century was the fact that we could indeed destroy our world. Not a very pleasant contribution to the development of knowledge, but one that Gen. Esin and myself have been trying to moderate. Since 1991, but especially since 1995 a group of former senior military officers from China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Russia, and the United States, with great help from official observers from Argentina, Finland and France, have been working to popularize the concept for a Limited Nuclear Weapons Free Zone for Northeast Asia. Starting from the premise that maybe the only thing we can agree on is the need to reduce -- possibly eliminate nuclear weapons from Northeast Asia, we

have spent over twenty years paddling upstream. We have had great interaction with the individuals who became involved in the 6-Party Talks, and we stand ready to share our experiences with those interested in looking at cooperative security as a way to enhance peace and security in the world, but especially NEA.

Along the way, our group has become close friends and stand witness to the fact that former foes can come together in the name of peace. And we have not given up on the LNWFZ-NEA, but will keep a close eye on the negotiations to return North Korea to its non-weapons possessing status. However, with the DPRK inserting its status as a nuclear armed nation into their Constitution, we may have continuing difficulty. We think we can build a prosperous Neighborhood Asia involving all the nations of the region that integrates the concept for a limited nuclear weapons-free zone. For those who think that will never happen, I direct their attention to the Cuban Missile Crisis and how it started the process that helped make friends out of former foes.