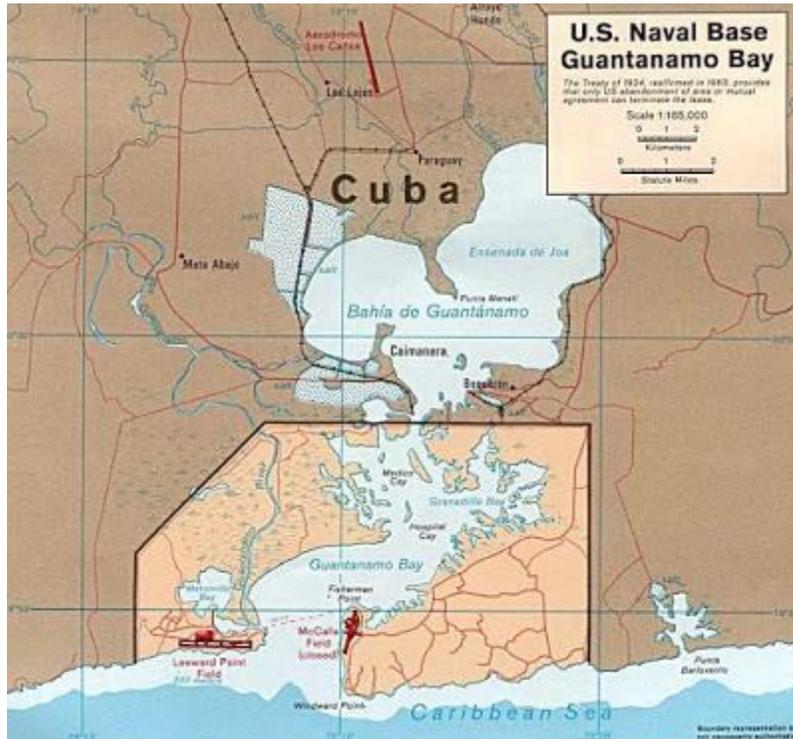


Cuban Adventure...

By: Robert Mead (62-64 - LTJG)



Guantanamo Bay

I have seen the news today about the opening of the American embassy in Havana after some 50 years of cold-shoulder relations fostered by the Cold War. I looked back at my previous posts on this blog and realized that I never had posted anything about my involvement in the Cuban missile crisis. There's no time like the present.

In early October, 1962, I was serving on the USS Hugh Purvis (DD-709), a World War II-vintage Sumner class destroyer, home based in Newport, Rhode Island. We were part of Destroyer Development Group 2, a research-oriented organization focused on the development and testing of new naval technology. We engaged often in supporting the naval research organizations in the testing of munitions, torpedoes, anti-submarine warfare devices, and other hardware. We also engaged in the "normal" activities of a cold-war naval vessel – training, gunfire exercises, engineering casualty drills, and group maneuvers and exercises. We lived in two worlds.

I was a junior officer interested in applying to submarine school, and my sub school physical had been scheduled for 23 October, at a location on Gould Island in Newport Harbor at which the navy had a hyperbaric chamber. This kind of facility was necessary to test a candidate's ability to equalize the pressure on ones ears as a submarine would descend or ascend. The only access to the island was a shuttle boat that ran from the navy base on a regular schedule.

In the days leading up to October 22, it was clear that something big was happening. Lots of ships got underway. The Purvis was among the last ships left in port. Rumors abounded. On the 22nd, I had the duty, along with my colleague, Lt. Louis Grassini. We watched President Kennedy's speech on the wardroom TV. The president notified Americans about the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, explained his decision to enact a naval blockade around the island of Cuba, and made it clear the U.S.

was prepared to use military force if necessary to neutralize this perceived threat to national security. We now understood why Newport looked like no man's land.

I asked the executive officer if I should proceed with my physical the next morning and was assured that we were not going to get underway, that we were being held back for some important research, and that I should proceed to Gould Island as planned. I did so, but when I returned to the ship around noon, I realized that we had lit off boilers, that our mooring lines had been "singled-up," and that the ship's crew was busily taking on stores. By 1:30, we were underway for Cuba.

Our role, once we arrived in Cuba on 26 October, was to serve as a gunfire support ship for the US Marines who were spread out along the fence line to defend the base in the event of an attack. There were four destroyers deployed to cover three gunfire positions. We would patrol along the shore of Leeward Point or along Windward Point, or in the Bay itself. On the fourth day, we would tie up to a pier to replenish supplies and fuel. We did this for a several days until the situation was resolved. The Soviets agreed to dismantle the Cuban missiles in return for the US agreement to not invade Cuba.



Komar-class torpedo/missile boat

There are a few items I recall from that time:

1. The Navy Exchange had thrived on selling cut gemstones to crews of ships which used Gitmo as a training center. Every ship leaving overhaul on the east coast proceeded to Guantanamo for "Refresher Training." The exchange had an enormous supply of quality gemstones that they didn't want the Cubans to get if they were to take over the base (When we first arrived, there was a real concern that open warfare was about to take place. The Cubans had amassed a large army surrounding the base.). Suddenly, the exchange was selling gemstones at enormous discounts. I, as an Ensign, earning \$222.50 per month, had no money to spare on such items. Many of the senior crew members and officers took advantage of the situation.
2. When we were in the bay, we could see the tips of Soviet surface-to-surface missiles sticking out among the trees on the mountainsides surrounding the base. It was apparent the if something broke loose, our ship would be a sitting duck for the rocketeers.
3. When we were on the patrols off of Windward and Leeward Points, it was common to be harassed by Soviet-built Komar-class torpedo/missile boats that were now part of the Cuban navy. We were not permitted to fire first, so we had no choice but to watch these fast craft approach, first by radar, then visually. They sometimes came in two's or three's. They would approach at high speed, then make a hard turn within a few yards of our beam, and then disappear in the direction where they had started. It was nerve racking, not knowing their intentions.

4. When we were alongside the replenishment pier, it was common for the off-duty officers to head for the Officers Club. We were required to carry side arms while off the ship, so we'd be issued a holster with a .45-caliber automatic and several clips as we crossed the quarterdeck. But when we arrived at the O-Club, the management wisely felt that we should surrender our weapons before imbibing. So we handed our holsters and pistols to a little Cuban lady who ran the cigar stand at the club's entrance. When we left the club, because most of us had overindulged, the guns would be given to the driver of the truck that returned us to our ship. I always was amused that we were voluntarily handing our weapons to a Cuban citizen for "safekeeping." At the club, all drinks were \$0.10. That's right. A dime a drink. Movies were free. Dinner could be had for less than \$5.00. It was Ensign's paradise except that there were absolutely no women in sight except for the Cuban cigar lady.
5. There was a real concern about Cuban "frogmen" because of a training facility not far from the base where the Cubans allegedly trained their underwater demolition teams. As a result, I was required to wear a belt of impact grenades and spend a good part of all night watches patrolling the main deck looking for frogmen in the water when we were in the bay. We had bright lights rigged to illuminate the water around the ship in hopes of spotting any such swimmers. None showed up.
6. For reasons I never understood, some of the ships participating in the blockade and related activities received the Navy Expeditionary Medal. Others did not. The Purvis was one of the fortunate ships whose crew got to wear this medal.
7. The ship ran out of cigarettes. The ship's store hadn't had time to fully replenish their stock while in Newport. The crew was rolling their own really crude cigarettes using the paper from the plotters in the Combat Information Center and pipe tobacco. It's amazing that no one died of asphyxiation!

I look back on this incident and reflect on how naïve I was as a young Ensign. At the time, I don't think I fully comprehended the gravity of the larger situation.

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Editor's note - On one occasion during our stay in Cuba, the Hugh Purvis was called out to look a sonar contact another destroyer had. We had special "New" experimental equipment installed earlier in 1962. But that is another story for another time.

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