The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962

Doug Braudaway
Southwest Texas Junior College, Del Rio, Texas  78840
(830) 703-1554; dbraudaway@swtjc.edu

In 1957 a wing of the now famous spyplanes—the U-2s—was stationed at Laughlin Air Force Base in Val Verde County. The U-2 was a project originated by the Central Intelligence Agency and approved by President Eisenhower. The planes were administered jointly by the CIA and the Air Force and were an important intelligence gathering tool during the Cold War. July 29, 1955 saw the first taxi test and first flight, which was accidental, by test pilot Tony LeVier. The first official test flight happened August 4 of the same year. The aircraft could be tracked by Russian radar, but Russian anti-aircraft weapons could not reach U-2 cruising altitudes.\(^i\)

The 4080th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing was moved to Laughlin April 1, 1957. The first six planes arrived on June 11. By August training flights were underway for High Altitude Air Sampling (HASP).\(^ii\)

While there were some security violations, the U-2s and their missions were generally kept secret. Missions were often flown at night, and aircraft maintenance was done in secret. In 1960 Laughlin AFB was acknowledging the presence of U-2s as evidenced by a press release printed on May 5 after the shoot-down of a U-2 over the Soviet Union. Col. A.J. Bratton, the 4080th commander stated that none
of the Laughlin U-2s were missing. President Eisenhower visited with pilots and saw the aircraft on October 24, 1960 while in Del Rio to sign documents starting the building of Amistad Dam and Reservoir. It was his first direct observation of the aircraft even though he knew of it well. Francis Gary Powers had been shot down during Operation Overflight over the Soviet Union earlier in the year, and Eisenhower was forced to admit the existence of the plane and the mission. The U-2s were publicly displayed for the first time on November 2, 1960 at Patrick Air Force Base in Florida. The U-2s were made public at Laughlin on May 14, 1961.iii

The U-2 mission at Laughlin, Operation Crowflight, included the sampling of air at high altitudes for radioactive materials. The Defense Atomic Support Agency was investigating the effects of nuclear detonations, concerned about increasing amounts of uranium and plutonium and other radioactive isotopes in the air. By figuring out how much material was in the high atmosphere, the Agency might be able to figure out how much could come down. And so beginning in October 1957 for seven years, the U-2s flew thousands of miles at altitudes between 50,000 and 70,000 feet, channelling air through special filters to collect the particles. The U-2s were also used by the Central Intelligence Agency for intelligence gathering.iv

The 4080th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing at Laughlin played an important role in the Cuban Missile Crisis.
“The CIA’s Detachment G staged missions from the SAC U-2 base at Laughlin Air Force Base near Del Rio, Texas. CIA photo-interpreters went to Del Rio to develop and review the photography after these missions. The two Kick Off flights, on 26 and 27 October 1960, were long missions, each covering 3,500 miles and lasting more than nine hours. Because of cloud cover over Cuba, the results of both missions were poor. The CIA accordingly asked the Special Group to approve additional missions. The Special Group granted authorization and Detachment G conducted three missions—Operation Green Eyes—on 27 November and 5 and 11 December 1960, all with good results. Overflights of Cuba continued after John F. Kennedy entered the White House….”

The film images from 1961 and early 1962 showed new surface-to-air missile emplacements, coastal defense facilities, and radar stations.

On October 14, 1962 Major Richard S. Heyser, newly trained on the U-2C at Edwards AFB, took off from McCoy ARB and flew over Cuba. The films showed evidence of ballistic missile sites become developed. The next morning Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr. shot photos of similar sites giving the U.S. government conclusive evidence of the introduction of Soviet long-range missiles into Cuba. Numerous other U-2 flights were ordered and carried out (in U-2A’s and U-2C’s). All of the flights were flown out of McCoy, except for one lone mission from Laughlin. vi
The rest of the story can be found in many history books. President Kennedy addressed the nation; the Ambassador to the United Nations made his presentation to the world. The U.S. Navy encircled the island of Cuba and put it under blockade. On October 24 Soviet freighters were stopped en route to Cuba. The Crisis was resolved by the Soviets' removal of offensive missiles from Cuba and (secretly and a few months later) the American removal of offensive missiles in Turkey.

Only one American was killed by enemy action during the Crisis. However, Major Anderson was that casualty. During the morning of October 27, Anderson was flying a route over Cuba away from known surface-to-air missile sites; nevertheless, an SA-2 missile was launched at him and exploded, downing the plane and killing the pilot. vii “Anderson would be the only U.S. combat casualty of the missile crisis and his aircraft was the third in history to be downed by a SAM.” viii

The Del Rio newspaper reported news on the crisis in Cuba with front page headlines, but no mention of the pilots and aircraft was made until Anderson’s loss. In fact, the only pilots mentioned by name were Anderson and Heyser.

“LAUGHLIN U2 PILOT MISSING ON RECON MISSION OVER CUBA” led the news on October 28 in bold, all-cap letters more than an inch high. The sub-headline continued: “Major Anderson reported lost.” He was listed as
“missing in action” at that time with a note that “members of his family said, ‘We knew he was on a highly secret mission.’” Heyser was mentioned on October 31 as having been the U2 pilot who briefed the White House on the overflights of Cuba. He was mentioned again on November 4 under the headline “Major Rudolf Anderson’s Family Leaving Laughlin”: “Serving as military escort for the family will be Major Richard Heyser, the Laughlin reconnaissance pilot, who with Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay, went to the White House to discuss the surveillance operation with the President of the United States.”

“Air Force U-2s continued overflights of Cuba without incident for a year after the missile crisis. Then, on 20 November 1963, another U-2 and its pilot[,] At about 11 a.m., Article 350 piloted by Captain Joe G. Hyde Jr. disappeared from U.S. radar screens.” Search found oil and wreckage; however, “No remains were recovered.” U-2 flights by the CIA ended in 1963, but the Air Force continued monitoring the Caribbean for many years.

The U-2s completed their mission at Laughlin on July 12, 1963 when the 4080th left for Davis-Mothan Air Force Base near Tucson, Arizona. At 10:30 a.m. the last of the aircraft lifted off from the runway, circled the town of Del Rio, “and vanished into the clouds.” Major Patrick J. Halloran was the pilot. From there 4080th began to fly missions over Vietnam as the hostilities there escalated. During the Wing’s time at Laughlin, “hundreds of medals were awarded to officers
and men” including the posthumous award of the Distinguished Service Medal, “the highest decoration which can be presented outside of war time,” awarded to Major Anderson.xi

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was one of the scariest times of the Cold War. In today’s War on Terrorism with people worried that a bomb might be detonated, it can be hard to remember that the United States and the Soviet Union had thousands of bombs, nuclear bombs, each easily capable of destroying whole cities. In aggregate, enough bombs existed to eliminate the human species. People went to work, raised their families and lived their lives knowing that—generally—the two sides were not going to destroy each other. Except for those few days in October.

Bibliography—
Del Rio News-Herald articles.
Laughlin Air Force Base Border Eagle articles.
Del Rio News-Herald articles.


Pocock, *Dragon Lady*, page 78.


Del Rio News-Herald articles. An article on November 5, headlined “Major Rudolf Anderson Rites Slated Tuesday,” noted the pallbearers being members of the 4080th: Major Raleigh Myers, Major Buddy Brown, Captain Richard Callahan, Captain Charles Stratton, Captain Dan Schmarr, and Captain Gerald McIlmoyle.
