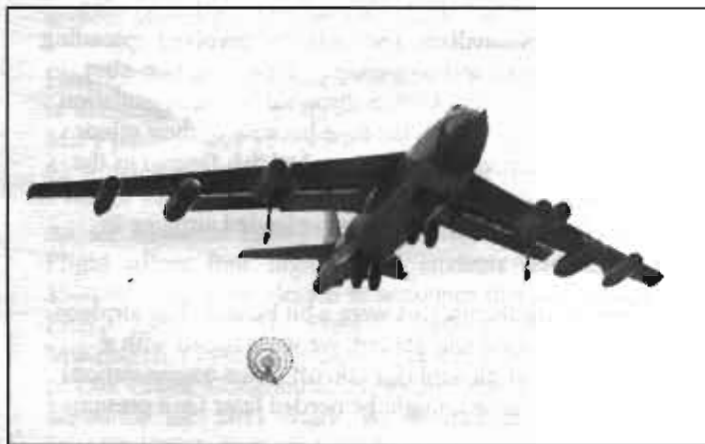


# THE MILITARY AT GENERAL MITCHELL FIELD

## 1962 CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS:

### STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND NUCLEAR DETERRENT

By Bill Streicher



*One of the SAC B-47E bombers approaching General Mitchell Field for landing. Note the approach chute trailing behind the aircraft. This was a sixteen foot diameter chute used to enable the pilot to approach at a higher power setting without increasing speed. This allowed for a safer go-around, if necessary, due to the long "spool up" time of the J-47 engines used by the B-47s. (Photo via Ken Borkowitz)*

In October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a serious superpower confrontation. The cause of that confrontation was the discovery that the Cuban and Soviet governments had begun to secretly build bases in Cuba for medium-range and intermediate-range offensive missiles. The missiles had the ability to strike most of the continental United States with nuclear weapons. Since the missile bases were roughly 90 miles from Florida, their location allowed virtually no early warning in the event of attack on the U.S. mainland. The only major U.S. city not within range of any Cuba-based missiles was Seattle.

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On October 16, 1962, President John Kennedy was informed that construction of the missile sites had been detected. After seven days of intense debate within the government, Kennedy decided to impose a naval blockade around Cuba. He wished to prevent the arrival of more Soviet offensive weapons on the island. On October 22, Kennedy publicly announced the discovery of the installations and his decision to "quarantine" the island. He also proclaimed that any nuclear missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as an attack on the United States by the Soviet Union and demanded that the Soviets remove all of their offensive weapons from Cuba.

Tensions began to build on both sides. By October 19, frequent U-2 reconnaissance flights showed four operational missile sites. As part of the blockade, the U.S. military was put on high alert to enforce the blockade and to be ready to invade Cuba at a moment's notice. The 1st Armored Division was sent to Georgia and five army divisions were alerted for action. The Strategic Air Command (SAC) distributed its shorter-ranged B-47 Stratojet medium bombers to civilian airports and sent aloft a significant number of its B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers on airborne alert.

This was the point at which General Mitchell Field became directly involved with the heightened military alert. SAC's 307th Bomb Wing at Lincoln AFB, Nebraska ordered four of its B-47E bombers to Mitchell Field and another eight to Duluth Municipal Airport. At Milwaukee, the four B-47s were parked at the Air Force Reserve's 440th Tactical Airlift Wing ramp. Security was very tight because each bomber was loaded with nuclear weapons and fueled for the mission that everyone hoped would not be necessary. The following account was written by Lt. Pete Todd, a co-pilot on one of the SAC B-47s dispersed at Mitchell Field in October 1962. This appears in the 307th Bomb Wing Association web site <http://www.307bwassoc.org/>.

**The Crew That Made Milwaukee Famous**

In October 1962, I was a B-47 copilot at Lincoln AFB, Nebraska, a huge SAC base with two B-47 wings and a tanker squadron. I had just finished a week on alert and was enjoying a weekend at home. I think it was early on a Sunday afternoon when I received a cryptic call from my aircraft commander telling me to pack enough underwear and flight suits for an extended absence and report immediately to the squadron.



*Another view of the B-47E landing at General Mitchell Field trailing its approach chute.*  
(Photo via Ken Borkowitz)

The atmosphere at the base was "controlled confusion": no one seemed to know what was behind the directed activity, but the activity itself was being carried out with crisp, brisk professionalism. The "activity" involved uploading and cocking additional alert airplanes and preparing to deploy the non-alert bombers and crews to various Reflex or CONUS dispersal bases. Speculation was rampant; India was much in the news at the time because of their minor punch-up with Goa and some of the squadron pundits had this figured as the source of the "crisis!" My crew was directed to the Target Intelligence Center to study and brief a follow-on combat sortie, then to an uploaded airplane to preflight and launch to Milwaukee.

The takeoff and deployment flight themselves were a bit bizarre. The airplane was heavily loaded: a nuclear payload was aboard; we were fueled with a heavy (but not full) fuel load; water-alcohol (for takeoff thrust augmentation) was loaded, but not to be used because it might be needed later for a presumed

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combat mission. We might even have been carrying an ATO rack (30 bottles of rocket propellant to be ignited for takeoff, then the rack jettisoned), but I don't remember that specifically.

The flight to Milwaukee was conducted under unusual and somewhat conflicting procedures. We were told to fly at least four hours so our flight pay would be protected; no telling when training flights would resume. But we didn't have a full load of gas because we had to make a "dry" takeoff (no water alcohol injection). Also, we had to fly at an altitude low enough to keep the water-alcohol from freezing and breaking lines, which turned out to be about 10,000 feet, not the optimum altitude for max endurance cruise.

We knew it might be a little tight getting four hours of flying time out of the bird under those conditions, so upon arrival we were assigned a holding pattern permitting a quick approach and landing. There we were...a nuclear loaded B-47 orbiting at 10,000 feet right for nearly two hours over the unsuspecting citizens of downtown Milwaukee! While we were holding, we tuned in the President's speech on the ADF and the purpose of the "exercise" and stakes involved suddenly became clear.

What wasn't so clear anymore was the weather below. When we arrived, weather conditions were CAB and we could see the city and the runway clearly. During the last turn in the holding pattern, though, a nighttime fog started rolling in off Lake Michigan. What had looked like a VFR approach now became a sweaty-palmed GCA through thickening fog with not much fuel to go anywhere else if we were still in milk at minimums. I was visualizing the headlines all the way down final. Fortunately, my AC was a good stick and we landed uneventfully, but the day had provided more than enough drama for THAT young lieutenant.

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The previous is only a small part of what took place during the "Cuban Missile Crisis." Aside from the many books written about this historical event, there have also been several movies. One movie available on DVD is the docudrama *Thirteen Days*, released in 2000 and starring Kevin Costner.



*B-47E clearing the runway at General Mitchell Field after landing. (Photo via Ken Borkowitz)*