

My GTMO Sea Story by Ron Hinkel (14)

Reading posted Sea Stories by Classmates reminded me of a short but exciting and funny time associated with the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Fall of 1962. Along with classmate, Stew Seaman. we were in VF-62, an F-8U Crusader squadron operating out of Cecil Field, FL called "The Boomerangs" for the appearance of the wings. The squadron was sent to Cuba on our ship USS Shangri-La (CVA-38) and ordered to go ashore on GTMO base to set up rotating detachments on a 24/7 operation as CAP, Combat Air Patrol. That is, we were there to defend the base from any airborne attacks.

When we arrived near Cuba, we learned that the base's main runway of 8000 feet was under repair and was not going to be available for our use indefinitely. Instead, we could use the 5000 foot "Prop" runway that was located in the actual base area of offices, housing, etc., as opposed to the jet runway which was away on Leeward Point. Contributing the uncertainty of take offs and landings was that this runway was not only a raised plateau but also there was a 200 +/- foot drop-off at either ends of the runway. In other words, you did it right or you crashed either on take-off or landing. The solution was to install a Marine SATS site, a short field arresting gear system used by Marine air to support their operations. Operationally we had no problems because with full afterburner, take offs were pretty routine and we were already carrier qualified for arrested landings and these were softer roll into the wire rather than the fly into onboard ones. All this has been setting up for the fun part.

Fun 1) I was not on the first F-8 detachment on McCalla Field, if I remember its name correctly, but the guys coming back from that one were laughing and laughing up a storm. Here's why! It seems as though the people on base never got to see any jets fly around at low altitude. All they got were helos and slow prop aircraft like the base aircraft. The guys said that as soon as F-8's showed up hundreds of sailors, marines and civilians poured out of the offices and buildings; some including children with lunch and picnic baskets. Everyone was there for an air show. When it was my turn, the same thing happened, of course we exaggerated the use of afterburner and made high speed section breaks into landings and all kind of nonsense for our most appreciative audience. Nothing that a relatively new fighter pilot wouldn't do to show off.

Fun 2) While we were there, I ran into my 14th company mate, Dave Marquis (sadly, no longer with us), in the O'Club. He informed me that his VP Squadron was stationed in GTMO and that the noise from our aircraft were keeping him and his squadron mates awake. Seems as though their quarters were located right at the bottom of the cliff at the end of the prop runway. I explained that we needed afterburner because of the short runway, but happily grinned as an evil thought crossed my mind. I mentioned this situation to squadron pilots, and I do not recall if any acted upon it. However, on my next night takeoff, I gave tribute to my good friend and fellow Navy aircrews by allowing the aircraft to settle lower off the end of the runway in glorious full after burner. As I climbed slowly upward in the dark, clear night. Like Santa, I thought, "Ho-Ho-Ho boys, Cheers and Good Night!"

Fun 3) This one is on me. One early night as duty alert pilot. I really showed my dumb JO-ness. When you are on alert, for those who don't know, you have the aircraft all set to go, armed and fueled. The alert pilot either sits in the aircraft or, in my case, flight gear on and in the ready room. I took a phone call and thought that I received the order to launch the CAP. I ran out of the hangar down to the flight line, jumped into the cockpit, taxied out and cleared take-off. I was really pumped sure that this was my chance to be a hero and bag my first Cuban Mig. After clearing tower frequency and switching radio to combat control and calling in expecting a vector to the target I heard nothing. Silence! Then control came up and started asking questions, like what are you up for? This now, is my first clue that I was not going to end up a hero. Result luckily was pretty mild. When the XO spoke to me, as XOs can, all that the Admiral said was, "Who launched the CAP?" I never heard anything more.