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WOL Oral History Supplement

Recollections of the Cuban Missile Crisis
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Where were you during the Cuban Missile Crisis? During that stressful, fright-filled week in October 1962, most NOL employees were at their work places at White Oak. As for me, I was in down town Washington, D. C. participating in a week-long middle management training seminar at Harry Diamond Laboratory, then on Connecticut Avenue and Van Ness Street (just behind the old Bureau of Standards buildings). Thus, I was just a stone's throw from what could become ground zero in the event of a nuclear exchange with the Russians!!

To refresh your memory (and mine), in October 1962, U. S. intelligence people detected the presence of USSR missiles in Cuba aimed at U. S. east coast targets, including Washington, D. C., and this is what precipitated the crisis. When Russian navy missile re-supply ships were spotted in the Atlantic Ocean en-route to Cuba, President Kennedy told Soviet Premier Khrushchev that if he did not turn the ships around and also remove the missiles from Cuba, there would be dire consequences. Kennedy imposed a sea and air quarantine on Cuba and dispatched U. S. Navy ships to intercept the Russian ships if they did not turn about. At first, Khrushchev refused to back down, and it was believed that a nuclear encounter was imminent. All DOD installations, including NOL, were put on emergency alert basis and strong steps were taken to increase security. Every one was traumatized at the specter of a nuclear exchange between the two super powers. People were preparing their homes with survival kits, emergency food and water, nuclear fall-out protection, etc. In my own family, my mother-in-law, that week, traveled 100 miles by bus to our home, "so she could spend her last days with us."

And, there I was, almost at ground zero, about 10 miles from NOL and some 40 miles from my home in Catonsville, Maryland (a suburb of Baltimore) wondering like others, what was going to happen next. The thing I remember best is that one of the persons attending the management seminar, worked at the Organization of American States (OAS) in D. C. This man ("John") was getting first hand dispatch information from his office during our coffee and lunch breaks regarding the progress of negotiations between Kennedy and Khrushchev, where the two opposing naval flotillas were, etc. John was nice enough to share his information with us. (In those days, we did not have 24-hour TV news to give us minute-by-minute updates on the crisis.) Each break, John would stand before the class and brief us on the latest developments.

In a way, this made it more scary; it was like sitting on the 50-yard line, with the score tied, and only 2 minutes left to play!!

As you will recall, it all ended on a happy note----Khrushchev blinked first----he recalled the Russian supply ships, and his missiles were removed from Cuba. Following this, the U. S. agreed to remove our missiles based in Turkey, which were aimed at the USSR. Historians later said that the missiles in Turkey were obsolete and were no longer needed. I believe, probably, because by then the first Polaris missile and Fleet Ballistic Missile submarines were already on station during the crisis.

Nevertheless, it was one stressful, frightening week that I shall never forget. We'll never know what would have happened if Khrushchev had no blinked first!! Perhaps, I would not be here telling this tale, and you, perhaps, would not be around to read it anyway!!!

Editor Note: During this crisis, the Marine guards were stationed at the gatehouse on New Hampshire Avenue. Each car entering the Lab was carefully inspected. This is the only time that I remember that gate house was used for security purposes. What is your memory of this crisis from the perspective of what went on inside NOL at this time? Let us know, and we will include in the Summer LEAF.

WOL Oral History Coming Attractions

***Building 90.** Frank Koubek is planning to write an oral history of his reminiscing on Building 90 with its beginning as a Marine Guard Barracks, and the long-term use of parts of the building by the Non-metallic Materials Branch.

***F-4 Aircraft Connector Problem.** Frank is thinking of preparing an oral history of the role NOL played in solving the F-4 aircraft electrical potted connectors problem during the Viet Nam War. He noted that, “Dr. Joseph Augl, one of our cracker-jack polymer chemists solved the problem and made it possible for the Navy to get some 900 fighter planes back into the air. This is covered briefly in the LEGACY book, but there is a lot more to tell about this problem.” He noted that he is still in touch with Dr. Augl, who lives in Arizona, and plans to contact him about this history.

***Plastic Lab on Georgia Avenue.** The NOL plastic laboratory began in World War II, and was located on Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring, Maryland. Frank notes that, “Bob Barnet was involved in the plastic’s laboratory during World War II, and he was a Navy Lieutenant and Chemical Engineer graduate, who the Navy assigned there in 1943. Al Lightbody, who was a Navy Commander, was also assigned there, coming from DuPont. The plastic laboratory was moved to White Oak in 1948. Apparently, Bob Barnet played an important roll in the move of the equipment from Georgia Avenue to White Oak.” The history on Georgia Avenue and the move to White Oak would make a great Oral History.