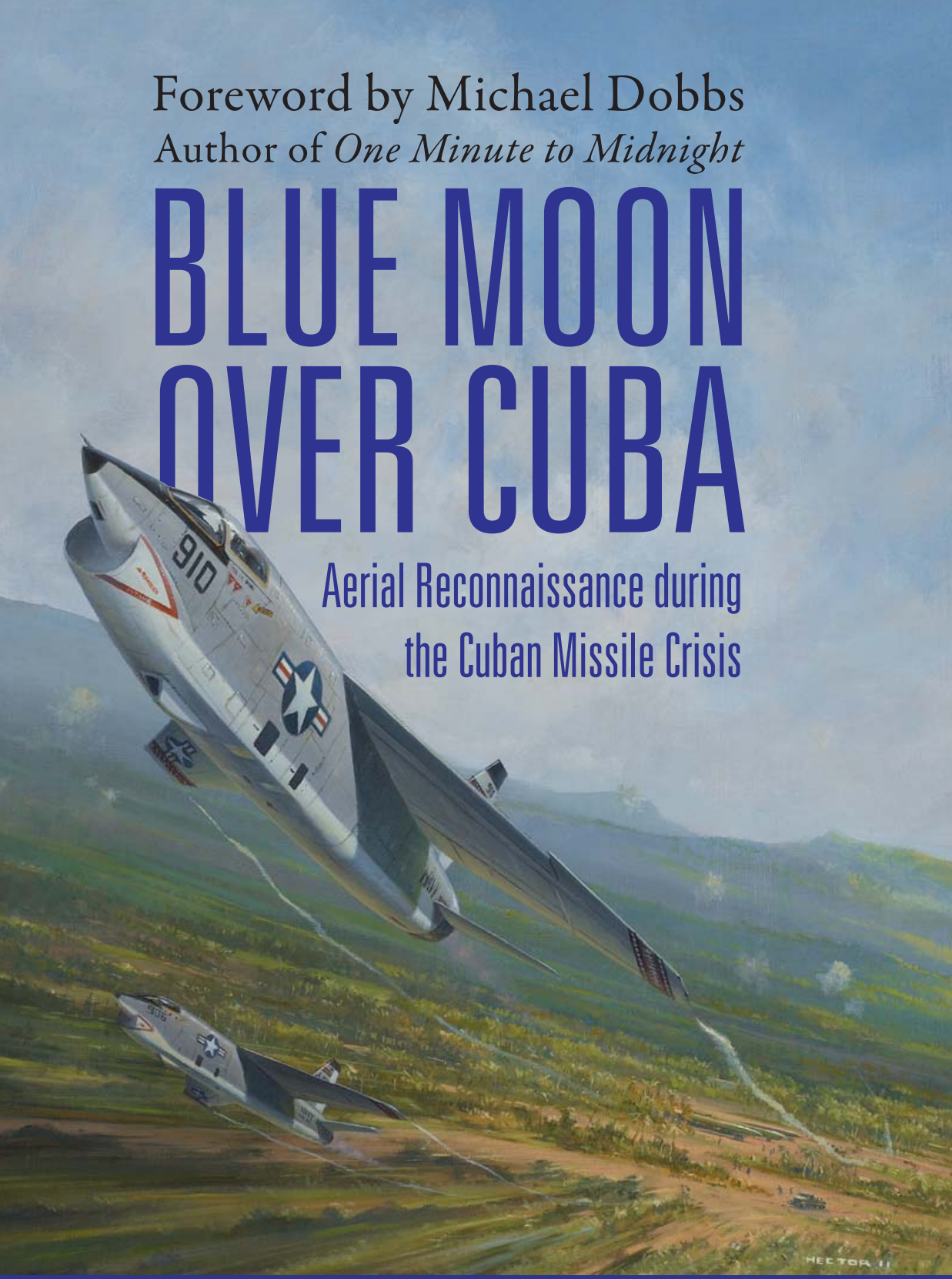
Foreword by Michael Dobbs
Author of *One Minute to Midnight*

BLUE MOON OVER CUBA

Aerial Reconnaissance during the Cuban Missile Crisis



Capt William B. Ecker USN (ret.) & Kenneth V. Jack

In memory of
Capt. William B. Ecker, USN (Ret)

Dedicated to
Mrs. William B. (Kit) Ecker
and
The Officers and Enlisted Men of Light Photographic Squadron 62 (VFP-62)

BLUE MOON OVER CUBA

JFK'S CUBAN MISSILE HUNTERS

Captain William B. Ecker, USN (Retired) & Kenneth V. Jack

Foreword by Michael Dobbs

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As a first-time author, I've learned that writing is a demanding process – a jealous mistress if you will. I have been fortunate to receive the guidance, support, encouragement, and contributions from many who have believed in this project as I have. I would first recognize Capt Ecker's memoir, which forms the backbone of this book. His consultation and trust during the first months of the writing effort gave me the motivation to go forward. Sadly, he did not live to see his memoir come to life in this book. Fortunately, David Ecker saw the promise in his father's writing, transformed it into digital format and put his faith in me to perpetuate his father's legacy. To both, I'm humbly grateful.

I'm fortunate to have had a diverse group of reviewers who critiqued the various drafts of the manuscript. Foremost in that group is Cdr Peter Mersky USNR (ret.), the author of *Osprey Combat Aircraft 12 - RF-8 Crusader Units Over Cuba and Vietnam*, among many other books and articles. Peter's instruction, critiques, and patient nudging forced me to reach for a higher standard of excellence that helped me to understand the mechanics and high demands of writing a serious book. His review resulted in an extensive rewrite of the original manuscript. Peter followed that up with providing a second review, connections to the publishing world, and sources of additional research and photographs. I will always be indebted to him for his mentoring, leadership, and friendship.

Peter recommended reviewer, naval analyst, and author Norman Polmar, whose expertise on all things military provided a critical assessment and put me on a path of researching and adding more historical information to support my premises and technical information.

Additionally, Peter's friend and colleague during his naval career, Capt Louis R. Mortimer USNR (ret.), provided technical insights into photo interpretation, as well as needed encouragement.

Of the pilots that provided personal memories, I'm most indebted to Lt Cdr Tad Riley USN (ret.). Tad was on the first day's missions over Cuba, and made many after that. His input is detailed, insightful, and provides us with a rare look into a fighter pilot's experience over Cuba. He also reviewed and provided improvements to the first draft.

Another pilot contributor, Capt Jerry Coffee USN (ret.), flew one of the first Cuban missions and provides interesting details on how he captured evidence on the existence of tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba. A true national hero, he was a prisoner of war for seven years in North Vietnam after his RA-5C Vigilante was shot down in 1967. Jerry is a fine writer himself and has a knack for making a story live.

Other pilot contributors were Capt Ed Feeks USN (ret.), Cdr Newby Kelt USN (ret.), Lt Col Dick Conway USMC (ret.), Capt Len Johnson USN (ret.), and Col Edgar Love USMC (ret.). Capt Phillip J Smith USN (ret.) provided his never-been-told story of clandestine missions over Cuba before the crisis. He also reviewed the book and encouraged me to go forward. Thanks are also due to Capt Ron Knott USN (ret.), who was an F-8 fighter pilot who gave me permission to include a story of US Navy fighter escorts from his book *Supersonic Cowboys.* All these aviators provided important details on their missions.

Capt Jim Curry USN (ret.) provided the information on the night photographic missions over Cuba. In 2008, Jim signed the canopy rail of the restored RF-8A that he flew over Cuba which is now an exhibit at Battleship Park in Mobile, Alabama.

An important contributor and reviewer was Col Wayne Whitten USMC (ret.), who provided information for the chapter on VMCJ-2's augmentation detachment to VFP-62. "Flash" (his call sign) helped me see discrepancies in the as-written timeline of the original draft. He also provided connections to Marine aviators who flew missions over Cuba. He is an excellent author of a number of articles on Marine aviation. Most of all, I appreciate his hearty endorsement of this project. Along

with Col Whitten, LCpl Jack Hayden provided the humorous details of Marine pranksters at Naval Air Station (NAS) Boca Chica, in Key West.

I am very grateful to the prolific author and former *Washington Post* reporter Michael Dobbs for his permission to use many passages from his superbly detailed book *One Minute to Midnight* – an important scholarly resource for any researcher of the Cuban crisis. His volume sets the standard for excellence and his writing skills make history read like a suspense novel. Michael also provided one of the final reviews and graciously agreed to write the Foreword to this book.

Another author and reviewer is the former high official at the CIA's National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) during the crisis, Dino A. Brugioni. Dino's excellent book *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis* provided many excerpts and supporting material, which I gratefully appreciate. Dino also provided one of the excellent low-level photographs included in this book. He knew Capt Ecker and had a high regard for his leadership. He told me how Capt Ecker would train his pilots to pick out an intersection of a road and place it in the center of a photograph.

VFP-62 squadron members Capt Adam Miklovis USN (ret.), who was the photo intelligence officer on my USS *Forrestal* (CVA-59) detachment during the crisis, Pete Wallace, former VFP-62 aviation mechanic and co-sponsor for our website, www.vfp62.com, and his wife Betty read the manuscript carefully and provided important suggestions for improvement. Former VFP-62 enlisted men Vinnie Zabicki and Richard Flake provided details of the all-important VFP-62 groundcrew at NAS Key West. Vinnie also provided the rare photograph of the VFP-62 detachment at Key West.

Pilots get the glory but they know their lives are in the hands of young men with the huge responsibility for keeping the aircraft ready to fly. Only one mission was aborted because of mechanical failure.

My gratitude is also due to former VFP-62 personnelman George Montgomery and aviation electrician's mate Frank Schrader for their written input on the evacuation of dependents from Guantanamo Naval Base (Gitmo) and the secret photo mission during the Bay of Pigs

invasion. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Bill Newby PHCS USN (ret.) for his assistance in providing the technical information on aerial cameras.

And, I need to acknowledge the information obtained from William T. Hocutt PHCS, USN (ret.) by way of his unpublished document on the Cuban Missile Crisis. Chief Hocutt's document provided many insights into photo interpretation and accounts of the handling of U-2 photography. Along with that information came a wonderfully detailed description of mission planning at VFP-62 by Lt Cdr Bernard W. Kortge.

I owe much gratitude to the good people at Osprey Publishing for first putting their faith in this book, and for their professional contributions to the many details that resulted in its production. One in particular, my editor Tony Holmes, read the proposed manuscript way before it was truly ready, saw the potential in it and recommended it to Osprey for commissioning. Tony has a huge reputation in the publishing world, and his gentle nudging encouraged me to expand the book to reach its potential. His insightful edits demonstrated his expansive expertise in military history of all eras. And, my kudos and gratitude go to Charly Ford, development editor at Osprey, who provided a friendly, helpful interface to the publishing hurdles that almost overwhelmed me, but produced our great maps, photos, and cover. Gareth Hector's artistic talent is obvious when one looks at our cover. He accurately captured the majesty of the RF-8A Crusader climbing out after a Cuban photo mission.

Finally, I owe everything to my loving wife, Darlene, for her support, skill as a critical reviewer, and willingness to share three years of her life with my obsession for this project.

FOREWORD

BY MICHAEL DOBBS

Shortly after noon on October 23, 1962, a US Navy commander named William B. Ecker took off from NAS Key West and headed south toward the island of Cuba. He was accompanied by his wingman, Lt Christopher Bruce Wilhelmy, in an identical RF-8A Crusader. Their mission was to take high-quality, low-level photographs that could be used to prove to the world that the Soviet Union had deployed medium- and intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Cuba, in violation of promises made to President John F. Kennedy by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

The photographs that Ecker shot that day – showing Soviet soldiers working frantically on a nuclear bunker, and missile equipment lined up in neat rows – provided dramatic evidence of Soviet duplicity. Over the next few days Ecker's Light Photographic Squadron (VFP) 62 brought back some of the most important intelligence collected by the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ecker was summoned to Washington, D.C. to brief the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), but was not permitted to grant press interviews. He and other US Navy reconnaissance pilots remained largely unsung heroes. Their role in resolving the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War only became known decades later following the declassification of top secret government documents.

Ecker returned to Cuba in October 2002 with an American delegation led by former defense secretary Robert McNamara. In Havana, they met with Cuban leader Fidel Castro and retired Soviet generals, reminiscing about the Thirteen Days when the world came

closer than ever before – or since – to nuclear destruction. When the conference was over, the participants were taken to see what was left of the San Cristobal nuclear missile site that Ecker had photographed four decades before. A journalist asked Ecker – then 78, and living in retirement in Florida – what it was like to be back.

"I don't know," he replied in his usual gruff, no-nonsense manner. "I was only here for about two or three seconds the last time."

William Boyce Ecker passed away in November 2009 at the age of 85, but he has left behind a book (co-authored by Kenneth Jack) that will serve as a living memorial to the exploits of a remarkable band of brothers. In an age when intelligence is routinely scooped up by satellites and unmanned drones, it is easy to forget the vital contribution of a handful of brave pilots in gathering the intelligence that gave America the edge in the longest war in its history.

As the name implies, the Cold War was largely an intelligence war. Spies and code-crackers played a role but the most useful, actionable intelligence, particularly during the Cuban Missile Crisis, was usually that gathered by reconnaissance pilots like Ecker. Operating long before the invention of automated GPS systems, the pilots had to rely on primitive (at least by today's standards) navigation techniques, using maps and compasses as their primary guides. Flying over the treetops at near-sonic speed, they used visual aids like bridges, railroads, and rivers to reach their targets. They had to operate a battery of cumbersome cameras while keeping an eye out for "suspicious activity," such as construction sites, military vehicles, or other unusual goings on. In order to take useful pictures, they had to keep their platforms steady and level for the all-important few seconds when they were actually over the target. They had little time to worry about the risk of mechanical failure or getting shot down, which was more or less continuous from the moment they arrived over enemy territory.

This book tells the story of the Cuban Missile Crisis from the vantage point of the pilots who risked their lives to bring back the intelligence required by Kennedy for each stage of his high-stakes poker game with Khrushchev. Ken Jack has succeeded in weaving the dramatic accounts

of Ecker and the other VFP-62 pilots into a much larger narrative. He has shown how the photographs helped shape the president's actions and decisions during the crisis, in addition to winning the propaganda war with Khrushchev.

JFK had first learned about the deployment of Soviet missiles on Cuba from high-level imagery shot by US Air Force U-2 pilots, but he came to depend on the lower-level photographs to keep abreast of day-to-day developments. The photographs taken by VFP-62 revealed just how close the Soviets were to completing work on the missile sites. They also exposed overnight exercises of the missile equipment. Although there were no nighttime reconnaissance flights over the missile sites, intelligence analysts were able to identify nighttime activity from tracks left in the rain-soaked mud the following morning. Armed with this intelligence, the president was able to figure out how much time he had left before ordering the destruction of the missile sites and/or an invasion of the island.

VFP-62 pilot Lt Gerald Coffee veered off course to take the first photographs of nuclear-capable short-range FROG missiles in Cuba on October 25. This was a particularly ominous development, as it demonstrated that the Soviets might be preparing to use nuclear weapons to destroy American beachheads in the event of a US invasion of Cuba. Once it was known that the Soviets had probably deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba, in addition to the medium- and intermediate-range missiles capable of reaching American cities, US generals began demanding similar weapons of their own. The consequences of a US invasion are alarming to contemplate – a limited nuclear exchange on the island of Cuba could have escalated very quickly to an all-out nuclear war.

The photographs taken by Ecker and his men were pored over by analysts from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and formed part of the president's daily intelligence brief throughout the crisis. When the crisis was over, thousands of cans of raw intelligence film ended up on dusty shelves, and were eventually transferred to a National Archives facility in Kansas. There they remained, for more than a decade, until a

former CIA analyst named Dino Brugioni alerted me to their existence while I was doing research for my book, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*.

I was stunned to discover that I was the first researcher to actually request the cans, which provided a unique day-by-day record of military activities in Cuba during the missile crisis. There was only one hitch – most of the finding aids to the cans remain "classified." I could detect little rhyme or reason to the numbering of the cans, making the research process roughly equivalent to looking for needles in haystacks. The Archives airfreighted the cans from Kansas to Washington, D.C. for my inspection, in batches of 20.

Reeling through hundreds of cans of intelligence film, I was able to vicariously immerse myself in the experiences of the US Navy pilots who flew over Cuba during the missile crisis. The series of black-and-white negatives captured the cameras being checked at NAS Key West, the Crusaders flying low over the Florida Straits as surf splashed up against the fuselages, crossing the beaches of Cuba and heading over the mountainous spine of the island. There were intimate photographs of peaceful plazas and baseball diamonds, alongside images of missile sites and military airfields. It was as if I was suddenly peering down into the island through a miraculous time machine, long before the invention of Google Earth. The most jarring images of all were a series of shots of a landscape going suddenly haywire as the pilot detected antiaircraft fire in his rear view mirror, and banked his airplane sharply. Reeling through the five-by-five-inch negatives, I felt as if I was in the cockpit alongside the pilot, holding my breath as he escaped back over the mountains to the open sea.

Examining these images four-and-a-half decades later, I was able to resolve mysteries about the Soviet military deployment that had flummoxed the CIA. The agency was unable to respond to the president's repeated queries about the location of Soviet nuclear warheads. This was a crucial piece of information since the missiles could not be fired until they were "mated" with the warheads. In the end, the CIA concluded that the warheads were probably stored somewhere near the port of

Mariel. This turned out to be wrong. By analyzing the raw intelligence film shot by low-level American reconnaissance airplanes, and interviewing former Soviet military officers, I showed that the warheads were actually stored near a town called Bejucal, a few miles south of Havana airport. Successive Blue Moon missions photographed the Bejucal nuclear storage bunker – complete with specially configured vans waiting to transport the warheads to the missile sites – without knowing what they were photographing.

It is sobering to consider what might have happened had the CIA interpreted the intelligence correctly. There are various possibilities. If JFK had known where the warheads were stored, he might have been tempted to order a pre-emptive strike to destroy them. The mission could have been a success, strengthening Kennedy's hand against Khrushchev. Or it could have gone badly wrong, resulting in firefights between Americans and Soviets guarding a nuclear weapons site. We will never know. What we do know is that the CIA misinterpreted the evidence collected by the reconnaissance pilots about the Bejucal bunker, leaving Kennedy in the dark. Armed with only partial intelligence on what the Soviets were doing, the president ended up displaying great restraint. That, too, is part of the Blue Moon story, told so expertly here by Kenneth Jack and the late Bill Ecker.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Even in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the looming threat of more harm to come from al Qaeda, I don't sense the same national paranoia that my generation experienced during the Cold War. The lingering horrible images of the total destruction of two Japanese cities by two relatively primitive atomic bombs were still imprinted on the American psyche, and the arms race that produced ever more powerful thermonuclear weapons made the Cold War years fraught with danger – both real and imagined. That, combined with the Korean War stalemate, the Soviet's ruthless blockade of West Berlin and their tyranny in Eastern Europe, as well as the startling debut of a beeping Sputnik in outer space, made us anxious and fearful that the communists were powerful, evil, and wanted to dominate the world and destroy us.

Our generation lived with a fatalistic expectation that the entire world could come to an end by an exchange of megaton-thermonuclear hydrogen bombs hundreds of times more powerful than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki fission atomic bombs.

A constant reminder of this impending Armageddon was the relentless above-ground testing of those horrible weapons of mass destruction undertaken by both superpowers. And it reached into our everyday personal lives with civilian defense drills, initiated by a weekly air raid siren test, commanding teachers to close windows and blinds and students to seek shelter under desks. Many families built their own bomb shelters, stocked with beds, food, water, and emergency supplies. In truth, governmental officials held a dismal view of the fallout-shelter program but pursued it to put the public at ease. Civil defense against such

weapons was useless, except for the purpose of boosting the morale of the general public.

This was the national climate on Sunday morning, October 14, 1962, when a U-2 spyplane, flown by USAF Maj Richard Heyser, crossed over western Cuba to begin a routine photo mission. Flying at 70,000ft (more than 13 miles high), its powerful camera lenses revealed that Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev had deceived us and was secretly installing medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), with a range of up to 1,300 miles (capable of reaching Washington, D.C. and New York City), on Cuba. Our eyes in the sky revealed the construction of missile installations, which would soon be operational with nuclear-tipped missiles aimed at American cities. The ensuing struggle between the world's two nuclear superpowers for their removal would trigger the most dangerous conflict of the Cold War – the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is commonly condensed to the thirteen days (October 16-28) when the world did not know if the confrontation would end in thermonuclear war. There is, however, an interesting historical intersection of earlier events – often not linked together – that predestined the crisis. The shoot-down of the CIA-owned U-2 over the Soviet Union in May 1960, the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 and the Soviet-backed military build-up in Cuba between July and September 1962 would all compound the misjudgments, adventurism and ideological struggles shared by Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Nikita S. Khrushchev, and Cuban President Fidel Castro.

This book looks at the motivating circumstances and the political imperatives that confined these leaders to the paths they chose, and the international consequences that ensued. President John F. Kennedy's demand for the removal of these offensive weapons of mass destruction would cause the world to teeter on the brink of the nuclear war we all feared.

The concept for this book arose from the 25-year-old memoir written by Captain William B. Ecker, commanding officer of VFP-62, colloquially known as "Fightin' Photo." It documented VFP-62's

selection, preparation, missions over Cuba, and the commendations and awards lavished upon it for the hard intelligence that guided President Kennedy to a peaceful resolution. Capt Ecker's memoir, which provided exceptional details of his first mission over Cuba, was used as a primary reference source for a number of television documentaries, in addition to the motion picture *Thirteen Days*. Beyond that, it languished, unpublished, until it was rescued by his son, David, who went on a search for a co-author to expand the manuscript – a wonderful story of a son's devotion to perpetuating his father's historical legacy.

There is a saying that death is like a library burning, where a wealth of knowledge is lost, sometimes forever. The pilots and young enlisted sailors who were on the frontline of history in October 1962 are now reaching advanced age, and a number are no longer with us. We are fortunate that Capt Ecker was able to consult on the book's expansion up until his death in November 2009. This volume hasn't been written too soon.

Our objective is to tell the important story of the Cuban Missile Crisis, both to those who may know something about it as well as to those who don't, in a fresh approach that highlights the important role that aerial photographic intelligence played in the resolution of the crisis. It was Capt Ecker's passion to tell the full inside story of how this US Navy commanding officer and his squadron flew unarmed supersonic RF-8A Crusaders in support of the secret low-level photographic operation codenamed *Blue Moon*. It also draws a comparison to the other military assets gathering photo intelligence for President Kennedy – the USAF's U-2 high-altitude spyplane and RF-101C Voodoo low-level photo-reconnaissance aircraft that flew missions in conjunction with VFP-62.

Often books, documentaries, and articles on the Cuban Missile Crisis quickly mention the U-2's discovery of the missiles – giving the impression that the Lockheed-built spyplane did it all – and then ignore the interesting, largely unknown, story of the full intelligence gathering capabilities that were deployed against the threat in Cuba, and the impact they made in the peaceful outcome of the crisis.

There are many excellent books that analyze and document the presidential-level decision-making during the high-stakes nuclear "chess game" that made this conflict so interesting and important. The best of them give insight into the dilemmas of governing, the travails of the presidency, and the inner workings of the secret world of our intelligence agencies.

Our aim is to provide a fresh approach to the sequence of events that made up the Cuban Missile Crisis from the perspective of those who execute presidential commands – the so-called "tip of the spear," whose courage and competence, or lack of it, hold the security of the United States in their hands. The reader will experience the excitement and dangers of the crisis as seen from the cockpit of an operational, low-altitude, photo-reconnaissance jet. The story is told by Capt Ecker and the RF-8 pilots (and the enlisted men that kept their jets flying) of VFP-62 and Marine Corps Composite Squadron VMCJ-2.

Declassified archival information from the Kennedy White House, JCS, State Department, and CIA provide the historical context and timeline for events. New information obtained for this book reveals how centrally important photographic intelligence was to the military, intelligence community, and the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm). That photography was obtained at great risk to the pilots, and one, USAF U-2 pilot Maj Rudolph Anderson, lost his life.

For its performance, VFP-62 would receive the respect of a grateful president. In a letter to Cdr Ecker, President Kennedy wrote:

> As I said in our meeting at Boca Chica, the reconnaissance flights, which enabled us to determine with precision the offensive build-up in Cuba, contributed directly to the security of the United States in the most important and significant way.

Twelve VFP-62 and four VMCJ-2 pilots would be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, and President Kennedy personally presented the Navy Unit Commendation to the entire squadrons.

It is our hope that, as we approach the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a new generation of readers will learn the vital lesson that emerged from this Cold War stand-off – sometimes nations act irrationally in their national interest, and the resulting unintended consequences can thrust nuclear-armed countries into a death spiral that could impact all of human civilization. This is the story of how men at all levels helped to prevent that fate.

Ken Jack
Photographer's mate second class, VFP-62, 1960–63

"Any man who may be asked in this century what he did to make his life worthwhile, can respond with a good deal of pride and satisfaction, 'I served in the United States Navy.' "

—President John F. Kennedy
Annapolis, Maryland, 1963

CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF A FIGHTER PILOT

William B. Ecker's entrance into Naval Aviation was typical of many who answered the nation's call to duty in World War II. The US Navy gave him the opportunity and leadership to succeed and serve. It is a story that continues to this day. In a newspaper interview with the *Jacksonville Journal*'s Staff Writer Jack Williams after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Capt Ecker explained:

> I guess I first got interested in flying when I was in the fifth grade. I remember writing away to the US Navy, the Army Air Corps, the Coast Guard, and civil aviation authorities to find out all I could about becoming a pilot. I don't really know why I ended up picking the US Navy, maybe it was just the old story of people from the Midwest being attracted to the chance of seeing salt water.

Capt Ecker tells how his Naval Aviation career began:

> On December 7, 1941 I was a senior in high school in Omaha, Nebraska. The following morning, Monday, December 8, all of the seniors were called to an assembly in the school auditorium, where we listened to the President ask Congress for a Declaration of War against the Japanese Empire. Immediately upon completion of the speech, a large number of my classmates rushed up the aisle, left school, and headed for various

recruiting offices. However, I had decided early on that I wanted to fly for the US Navy and be a carrier pilot.

I delayed enlisting until June, and upon graduation, with my diploma in one hand and my track letter in the other, I went to the US Navy recruiting office. Prior to the war, the US Navy stipulated that an applicant must have completed two years of college prior to applying for flight training. This requirement was waived soon after Pearl Harbor.

In an interview for the *Jacksonville Journal* 20 years later, Capt Ecker elaborated on his circumstances:

Since I had just turned 18 my mother had to sign my enlistment papers before I could join. She wanted me to wait, so we made a deal that I would wait three months and then she would sign.

At the local US Navy recruiting office in downtown Omaha I was given only a very cursory physical examination, followed by a basic mental examination as well. After passing both, they issued me a TR (Transportation Requisition or ticket) and written orders to take the train from Omaha to Kansas City, Missouri the following day. It was late afternoon when the train arrived at Kansas City, and I (with about a dozen other candidates whom I had met on the train) checked into a small hotel that was within walking distance of the Navy examination center.

At 0700 hrs the next day we began a battery of tests and examinations – everything from the "spinning chair" (test for vertigo), to depth perception, the most detailed comprehensive physical, flight physiology, and even a psychiatric evaluation. As the day progressed, I began to notice that from time to time the person who had been in front of me or behind me would disappear, having been disqualified! Finally, at about 1700 hrs, the doctors declared I was fully qualified and the ordeal was over.

Only two of the other candidates I had met on the train had made it as well. We three celebrated with a big steak dinner (only part of which was covered by our US Navy per diem), and after one more night in our Kansas City hotel we returned to our homes. I never saw either of the successful candidates again.

For the next three months I waited anxiously, day-by-day, for my orders to flight training. During this period I learned that naval investigators had been contacting neighbors, teachers, ministers, and the police, checking on my behavior, my reputation, and general overall personality and lifestyle. Finally, I received orders to report to Central Missouri State Teachers' College in Warrensburg, Missouri – about 40 miles southeast of Kansas City – and for the next three months I flew light aircraft (Cubs and Porterfields) for half of each day and had academics (mathematics, recognition, code, Civil Air Regulations, navigation, and principles of flight) for the other half. It was here, after seven hours of dual instruction, on a morning with light snow on the ground, I soloed!

For the young aviation cadet, Ecker's training continued with athletics, various academics, and accumulating 125 hours of flight time in an old open-cockpit Naval Aircraft Factory N3N biplane trainer better known as a "Yellow Peril." He continues:

I went on to NAS Corpus Christi, in Texas, where I flew North American SNV and SNJ training aircraft. This was the first time that I had flown all-metal airplanes with radios, flaps, variable-pitch propellers, retractable landing gear, guns, bombs, and closed canopies. Training involved advanced formation, aerobatics, instruments, gunnery, bombing, and some dogfighting.

I received my wings and commission as an ensign in the US Naval Reserve on May 20, 1944 and went directly to Operational Flight Training flying Grumman F6F Hellcat fighters at NAS Vero Beach, in Florida. This was the last training I would receive before being assigned to a fleet squadron, and the syllabus included FCLP (Field Carrier Landing Practice) as the final phase. After leaving NAS Vero Beach, I made my first carrier landing. It is a little known fact that almost all carrier pilots in the 1943–44 timeframe made their first eight landings on a side-paddle-wheel carrier in Lake Michigan. My carrier was USS *Wolverine* (IX-64) and there was a second called USS *Sable* (IX-81). These ships had been overnight

steamers that ran from Chicago to St Joseph, Michigan. When the war required training carriers that were safe from enemy submarines, the US Navy acquired these ships and mounted flight decks on them.

Lake Michigan would become the graveyard for many US Navy aircraft due to accidents, and decades later it became an historical reservoir for their retrieval, restoration, and exhibition in aviation museums.

COMBAT DUTY IN THE PACIFIC

While Ens Ecker was making his way to his new fighter squadron (VF-10), which was bound for the Pacific theater, another future VC-62/VFP-62 pilot, then Lt(jg) Howard Skidmore, was in his Grumman TBF Avenger on November 25, 1944 aboard the carrier USS *Cabot* (CVL-28). His aircraft was last in line to be launched from the starboard catapult. *Cabot* had been on patrol off Luzon, in the Philippines, conducting strikes in support of operations ashore and repelling kamikaze attacks. *Cabot*'s gunners had fought off several kamikazes when one, already flaming from hits, crashed into the flightdeck on the port side, destroying the 20mm gun platform and disabling the 40mm mounts and gun director. Another crashed alongside the carrier, spewing shrapnel and flames across the flightdeck. Skidmore ordered his crewman to abandon the aircraft and ran for cover. His hair was scorched and he had burns on his hands. *Cabot* lost 62 men killed and wounded.

In 1953, Lt Cdr Skidmore reported to VC-62 (VFP-62's predecessor squadron) as its executive officer. Nearly a decade later he would be in a Pentagon intelligence group deeply involved with receiving VFP-62's low-level photography during the Cuban Missile Crisis (see Chapter 6).

US Navy Fighter Squadron 10, known as the "Grim Reapers," originated on June 3, 1942 as VF-10 at NAS San Diego, California, flying Grumman F4F Wildcats. It deployed on the legendary USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) to the southern Pacific in 1942, where the unit fought in the battle of Guadalcanal. During its second combat tour aboard the *Enterprise* in 1944, VF-10 participated in operations in the Marshall

Islands, Jaluit, Emirau, the Western Caroline Islands, and the battle of the Philippine Sea (including the famous "Marianas Turkey Shoot"). Capt Ecker continues his story:

> In September 1944 I reported to Fighter Squadron 10 (VF-10) and began flying the Vought F4U-1D Corsair. We deployed to the Pacific as part of Carrier Air Group (CAG) 10 in February 1945 aboard USS *Intrepid* (CV-11). I had two combat tours, each of which ended early. The first combat tour ended because of a kamikaze strike on the carrier, and the second because the war ended.
>
> I flew my first combat mission on March 18, 1945. The target was the airfield near the town of Usa, on the northern-most shore of Kyushu, Japan. That same day *Intrepid* was attacked by a kamikaze but the ship's gunners blew him up about 50ft before he hit, so the ship received only superficial damage to the forward, starboard hangar deck blast curtain. Routine combat missions were flown almost every day in support of the Okinawa campaign, both before and after the landings of April 1, 1945.
>
> Then, on April 16 (this was to be a day to remember by all, the ship, the air group, and me), I started the day with a predawn launch for a Combat Air Patrol (CAP). The four-hour CAP was uneventful, with no bogies or targets sighted. Just as I was landing back aboard, the division (four aircraft) that relieved us called a "Tally ho" on a whole bunch of enemy aircraft – all kamikazes! In the ensuing fight they splashed 20. If there were any remaining in the bunch, they were either shot down by other fighters or ships' gunners, as none got through to the carriers. This was a day of heavy fighting, and we remained at GQ (general quarters) battle stations continuously.
>
> At 1100 hrs I went into Condition 10 – that is, strapped in the cockpit of my airplane on the catapult and with a warm engine. We remained like this for one hour at a time. At 1158 hrs my relief appeared in the catwalk and climbed onto the flightdeck. Just as I began to unstrap, the air officer in PriFly (Primary Flight Control) announced excitedly, "Launch the Condition 10." My relief, Ens Morrie Dubinsky, tossed me a salute and quipped, "You got it." Within a minute or so, I was airborne.

While he mentions a kamikaze attack on the carrier later, Capt Ecker fails to mention that sometime after he was catapulted from *Intrepid*, a Japanese aircraft dived into the carrier's flightdeck causing a fire, killing eight men and wounding 21. This was the second time *Intrepid* avoided being sunk, for on February 17, 1944 an aerial torpedo had struck the vessel's starboard quarter, flooding several compartments and damaging the rudder. In that incident, the ship limped back to Pearl Harbor for repairs. Capt Ecker continues his story:

> Of the four of us that launched, only three went on the mission – Lt(jg)s Wes Hays and Holly Hollister and myself. The fourth pilot, Ens Russ Carlisi, had to turn back with a rough-running engine. As soon as we checked in with the fighter controller, we were vectored to the Inland Sea area between Kyushu, Shikoku, and the southernmost tip of Honshu. Here, one of our "Dumbos" (a Martin PBM Mariner seaplane named after Walt Disney's flying elephant) was trying to land and pick up a downed pilot, but two Zeros were attacking him.
>
> We went after the Zeros but they had seen us and high-tailed it for the nearest land. We gave chase, and soon saw that they were trying to suck us right over their base, where their antiaircraft artillery [AAA] gunners could have a shot at us – trying to even the three-to-two odds. About this time, the "Dumbo" started hollering for us to come back ASAP. He had landed and picked up the downed pilot, but couldn't get back into the air because of glassy water and no wind. He was helpless – a sitting duck. We resumed our cover over him while he rigged JATO (Jet Assisted Take Off) rockets. On the next try, he blew himself into the air.
>
> We started for home with a long way to go. The PBM was so much slower than we were that we had to either weave back and forth over him or try to slow to his speed. We throttled back, put our props into full high pitch, and flew at near-stall speed. You could almost count the blades as they went by. Time went by peacefully, and as our fuel reached the point indicating it was time to head back to the carrier, we announced to the "Dumbo" that we had to leave him.

Within a couple of minutes of having set our course for *Intrepid*, a voice came up on the radio with our call sign and ordered, "Stay with the 'Dumbo'!" We countered that we did not have enough fuel to see him to his base and still get back to our carrier. Again the voice repeated, "Stay with the 'Dumbo'!", and this time it authenicated with the proper sign for that day so that we knew that it was not a Jap trying to con us. We escorted the "Dumbo" to his base on Kerama Retto – an island just southwest of Okinawa – and just after he landed, we heard him call for assistance. He had run out of fuel while taxiing in. He had been airborne for about 14 hours.

By now it was almost dark, and as we flew up the west side of Okinawa the whole invasion fleet, of about 400 craft, was blinking for a recognition sign from us. Because we had had no intention of coming near the invasion fleet, we did not know the recognition signal for that day. So, we slowed up, flew at an even 1,000ft, and turned on all the exterior lights on our airplanes. Thank God for our inverted gull bent wings and just enough daylight. If just one trigger-happy young seaman gunner had fired just one round that would be all she wrote.

We landed on a Marsten-matted (perforated steel plates) strip called Yonton Field on Okinawa just as the first of the night raids came in and attacked the base. I just pulled back the mixture control (to kill the engine) and let the airplane coast to a stop at the end of the strip, whereupon I jumped out and headed for the nearest fox-hole or slit-trench.

After the raid, some ground troops gave us a five-pound can of Spam, some crackers, and a big can of grapefruit juice. This was the first of many "dining experiences" that would come along in the next couple of weeks. We spent about half the night in a tent, perforated with many bullet holes, on a cot with bare springs, and the other half in a slit-trench. After three or four needless trips to the shelter, we said the hell with it and stayed put. I did, however, on the advice of the ground troops, sleep with my knife in my hand because my gun was back hanging on the ready-room wall – nobody ever gets launched from a Condition 10!

I spent a part of the next day informing various naval authorities of our situation, and asked that the squadron be informed of where we were.

It was at this point that we learned that the ship had been severely damaged in a kamikaze attack. With dead and wounded, the vessel had left the battle zone the previous afternoon. Had we returned to the rendezvous position, there would have been no carrier to land on – a carrier pilot's most dreaded situation.

Late in the afternoon, we were given 233 gallons of gasoline for our main tank, but none for our external belly-tanks. Earlier, a Curtiss SB2C Helldivier dive-bomber had landed on Yonton Field, and from him we got the authenticator code and the "YE-YG" navigation Hayrake wheel for the day. Hayrake got its nickname from the shape of the antenna used as a navigation homer to return to the carrier. The wheel was a circle, cut into 12 segments, each with an identifying letter. This lettering was changed every day. Thus by picking up the letter by radio, the pilot simply flew toward the center of the wheel. Also, each carrier had its own code and homer frequency. The SB2C was from "Wonder Base." We were ordered to fly out to it, now!

As we approached "Wonder Base" I could see that it was the USS *Essex* (CV-9). Although it was late in the afternoon when we took off, the vessel was only 40 to 50 miles off Okinawa. Since we were the last airplanes of the day, we were taken aboard immediately and the ship then left the battle area to be in a position for replenishment operations the next day.

As we were climbing out of our airplanes, we were told that the Rear Adm Fred Sherman wanted to see us up on the bridge. He asked us what ship and squadron we were from, and then offered us the option of either staying with him and joining one of his squadrons or of returning to our own unit, VBF-10 – just before we left California VF-10 had been split into VF-10 and VBF-10, the latter ostensibly being a fighter-bomber unit. We elected to return to our own outfit and he said okay, but that he was keeping our aircraft! This was not at all unusual as it saved him the effort of having to ferry out replacement fighters to cover his losses. We were given written orders back to *Intrepid* and VBF-10, along with a pair of grey pants and a grey shirt, plus a parachute bag for our gear. Somewhere along the way I later acquired a tooth brush and a razor, as well as a towel and a bar of soap.

> During the replenishment evolution (replenishment of everything – fuel for both the ship and the 80 to 100 aircraft, food stores, ammunition and bombs, mail, candy, medical supplies, spare parts, and sometimes even people), which took place the next day, we were highlined – riding in a big canvas sack across a wire or cable – over to the tanker USS *Escalante* (AO-70).

Ecker's odyssey found him once more being highlined to a destroyer and once again to a jeep carrier. Finally, he departed Guam on a Marine Corps Curtiss R-5C Commando aircraft bound for the Ulithi fleet anchorage, in the western Pacific, where *Intrepid* was undergoing a temporary face-lifting repair job before returning to the Naval Shipyard at Hunters Point, California. Ecker had been gone for exactly two weeks.

Intrepid and Carrier Air Group 10 returned to the war in late July. The conflict ended on September 2, 1945. Capt Ecker concludes:

> After the holidays, I was ordered to another F4U squadron, VF-74, at NAS Oceana, Virginia. While attached to this unit I applied for a regular US Navy commission, and in the spring of 1947 I was assigned to the regular Navy, now as a lieutenant, junior grade, USN. Almost immediately after becoming regular Navy, I was ordered to Stanford University, California, where I studied until late 1949. The US Navy figured it was easier to educate a two-tour combat pilot than it was to provide a college graduate with flight training and combat. The tour at Stanford was intended to bring my educational level up to that of my peers from the Naval Academy.
>
> While attending Stanford, I married my wife of more than 60 years, Kit, an American Airlines stewardess.

In June 1954, (then) Lt Cdr Ecker underwent training in jet fighter photographic reconnaissance at NAS Pensacola, Florida – training he would not use until eight years later as the commanding officer of VFP-62 during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

CHAPTER 2

"EYES OF THE FLEET"

As previously noted, the US Navy's VFP-62 was also known colloquially as "Fightin' Photo." In the 1950s the squadron had had a contest for a squadron motto, and the winning entry was "Fleet Eyes." Later, that got changed to "Eyes of the Fleet," and both VFP-62 and VFP-63 (the West Coast photo-reconnaissance squadron) shared it. The unit's mission was to provide carrier task force commanders with an integral intelligence gathering capability for pre-strike planning intelligence and battle damage assessment (BDA).

The US Navy had learned the importance of aerial reconnaissance during World War II, when attempting to land troops off invasion beaches in unknown depths of water often meant needless deaths. Photographic reconnaissance was often no more sophisticated than a photographer hanging out the open hatch of an aircraft, with a heavy camera strapped to his body. As naval aerial photography progressed, cameras became an integral part of the aircraft, allowing the pilot to both fly the airplane and operate the camera equipment.

In the years following World War II, the US Navy had a small number of combat-experienced photo pilots attached to carrier air groups, but there was no standard syllabus or specialized training for replacement Naval Aviators. Late in 1948, Fleet Aircraft Service Squadron (FASRON) 3 at NAS Norfolk, Virginia, formed a photographic detachment. On January 8, 1949, 13 officers and 88 men attached to this photographic unit mustered to watch the birth of a unit – Composite Squadron (VC)

62, predecessor to VFP-62. Similarly VC-61 was formed on the West Coast. VC-62's mission was to train and maintain the readiness of units tasked with carrier-based photographic reconnaissance of designated targets in the area of naval operations.

The first aircraft complement of the new squadron consisted of ten Grumman F8F-2P Bearcats and four F4U-5P and two F4U-4P Corsairs. Usually, a single camera was mounted in the fuselage aft of the wings in these aircraft. Since photographic reconnaissance was only a small part of the mission being performed by Naval Aviators assigned to VC-62, the unit's training syllabus then provided for proficiency flights in aerial gunnery, rocketry, and bombing. Navigation and instrument training were also emphasized, for getting home was of great importance to the photo-pilot because his mission was not completed until the finished prints were delivered.

In 1950 the squadron was moved to NAS Jacksonville (referred to colloquially as JAX), Florida. VC-62 had transitioned to the McDonnell F2H-2P Banshee by mid-1951, this machine being the answer to a photo-pilot's prayer. Powered by a Westinghouse J34 turbojet engine, the Banshee had tremendous versatility thanks to its 600mph+ top speed and service ceiling in excess of 40,000ft. The F2H-2P was fitted with three cameras, all of which could be rotated from the cockpit. The aircraft's photo-viewfinder gave the pilot a complete view of everything beneath his aircraft, as well as the ability to center his pictures exactly. The quality and quantity of photographs increased accordingly.

By October 1953 the first examples of the Grumman F9F-6P Cougar had been added to VC-62's stable of Banshees, giving the squadron a higher performance jet configured with a multitude of cameras – the unit also operated a handful of Lockheed TV-2 jet trainers and piston-engined Beech SNB-5Ps photo/liaison aircraft.

By the early 1950s it had become clear that faster airplanes required faster cameras, as existing cameras did not recycle fast enough at low altitudes.

On August 9, 1955 VC-62 made the first jet flights into a hurricane, taking aerial photographs of Hurricane "Connie." Photographs from on top, and then into the eye of the hurricane, were published around the world.

VC-62 was redesignated VFP-62 on July 2, 1956.

In many ways the Bearcats and Corsairs had been unsuited for their mission, but as long as the photo-pilot flew a piston-engined airplane, he could shoot back. Not so with the unarmed jets that replaced them. Speed, maneuverability, and superior head work were the photo-pilot's only defense in combat areas from 1951.

In early 1958 the squadron's F9F-6Ps and -8Ps and F2H-2Ps were replaced by the sleek F8U-1P (redesignated RF-8A in 1962), the photo-variant of the Vought F8U (fighter) Crusader. The US Navy's first supersonic jet, the Crusader could attain speeds of over 1,000mph. The unarmed F8U-1P variant had four camera stations – three aft of the pilot and a forward-pointing bay beneath the air intake. The cameras were controlled by state-of-the-art electronics that received altitude and speed data (which was either manually input by the pilot or calculated automatically by an optical device called a scanner) to take sharp images from very low altitude up to 50,000ft.

At the speeds that the Crusader flew, the image would have been blurred on the light-sensitive photographic film had it remained stationary during exposure, even at shutter speeds (the time it takes light to pass through the lens) of one one-thousandth of a second. To obtain these high-resolution, focused pictures required an enormous amount of optical, mechanical, and electronic equipment that implemented a technique called image motion compensation (IMC).

In the RF-8A, a cockpit-mounted "black box" called the Master Control coordinated the aircraft's altitude and speed with other electronic components to move the light-sensitive film in the camera at the appropriate speed and in the *opposite* direction of flight precisely at the moment that the shutter opened. The whole objective of IMC was to keep the movement of any point on the ground (relative to the aircraft passing over it) "fixed" on a precise point on the film as its reflected light came through the lens at the time of exposure. The exact sequence was as follows – a vacuum sucked the film flat against a device called a shuttle; the shuttle moved the film in the *opposite* direction of flight; the shutter opened and exposed the film; the vacuum released the film to advance