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William B. Ecker and Kenneth V. Jack, *Blue Moon over Cuba: Aerial Reconnaissance during the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Long Island City, NY: Osprey Publishing, 2012. Pp. 287. ISBN 978-1-78096-071-5.

Review by Michael E. Weaver, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell Air Force Base (meweaver@icloud.com).

Blue Moon over Cuba argues persuasively that low-level tactical reconnaissance was a key element in resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis peacefully. While U-2 photographs revealed the missile sites the Soviets were installing on Cuban soil, the high-resolution photos taken by Navy RF-8A Crusader reconnaissance jets provided detail that U-2 images could not, confirming positively that ballistic missiles were present in Cuba and posing difficult policy decisions for the Kennedy administration. The book explains that the Navy's low-level imaging was better than the Air Force's because the RF-8A's more advanced cameras could take sharper pictures at very low altitudes and nearly supersonic speeds. Since the Air Force's RF-101C tactical reconnaissance jet could not match this performance, the Navy provided the president with better data. William Ecker and Kenneth Jack—respectively, a former Navy pilot who commanded the Navy's RF-8A squadron in 1962, and a photographer's mate serving around the same time—support their pro-Navy position with relevant facts and only rarely disparage their Air Force counterparts.

The authors assert that the Navy's reconnaissance effort has not received its due because its personnel were very reluctant to discuss their classified—in fact, top secret—missions with the press. By contrast, “their USAF counterparts discussed the missions freely with the press. Consequently, the press—looking for details to print—made it seem as if the USAF had done it all, much to the ire of the US Navy pilots “ (120). The Air Force chief of staff, Gen. Curtis LeMay, jealous of the Navy's superior reconnaissance capability, refused to congratulate Navy pilots for their contributions. He did, however, recognize the superiority of the Navy's KA-45/46 cameras and ordered them installed in RF-101Cs; the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral George W. Anderson Jr., shared half of the latest production run with LeMay. The Air Force was then able to provide excellent low-level photographs to the president.

Ecker and Jack clarify aspects of the Cuban Missile Crisis with several important observations: for example, that frequent low-level reconnaissance flights would not have deprived conventional air strike forces of the element of surprise, because, as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara himself surmised, the Soviets were used to US aircraft overflying Cuba. More importantly, photo-reconnaissance enabled President Kennedy “to gauge how much time he had to work on a peaceful resolution” of the crisis (228). That was certainly a critical contribution that Light Photographic Squadron 62 made to the resolution of the crisis. In addition, the Executive Committee also used reconnaissance flights as a means of coercion, which suggests avenues of additional historical research. Finally, low-level reconnaissance verified the removal of Soviet nuclear weapons from Cuba without potentially confrontational on-site inspections.

William Ecker's unpublished memoir, written in the 1980s, inspired the present book.¹ It was intended to set the record straight regarding the role of tactical reconnaissance in the missile crisis. Readers will wish for more of the Air Force story, but Ecker and Jack note the paucity of available primary sources. It is true that the history of Strategic Air Command in the crisis remains classified, but, the history of the RF-101C wing, the 363rd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, was declassified in 1996; that of its parent organization, Tactical Air Command, was declassified after 2004. Though the authors do not use those sources, neither is exactly a mother lode of information.

1. Among other sources, the authors also rely on *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. 10: *Cuba 1961-1962*, and vol. 11: *Cuba 1961-1962* (Washington: GPO, 1997); Mary S. McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962* (1992; rpt. Washington: GPO, 2001); and the collections of the National Security Archive at Georgetown University.

Oddly, the role of maritime surveillance of Soviet ships during the missile crisis is not treated in this book lauding the Navy's efforts. The authors list only one documentary source from the Naval Historical Center, perhaps the consequence of a slow declassification schedule. For these reasons, *Blue Moon over Cuba* cannot be called a definitive account of reconnaissance (aerial or other) during the crisis.

A few assertions in the book will not pass muster with those familiar with the documentary evidence concerning the missile crisis. We read, for example, that "The historical records show that the military chiefs, particularly Gen. Curtis LeMay, did not seem to distinguish between nuclear or conventional weapons" (224). But the operational plans for destroying the missiles discussed by the Executive Committee stipulated conventional weapons. The book also makes the common mistake of overemphasizing the pledge not to invade Cuba as decisive in resolving the crisis; the key factor instead was Kennedy's secret promise to Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin to remove American medium-range ballistic missiles from Turkey within six months, barring any public claim by the Soviets that they were being removed in a quid pro quo to get the missiles out of Cuba. It is also wrong to suggest that the Americans ignored the presence of Soviet tactical nuclear weapons on Cuba. It simply did not register with them that the missiles were nuclear-tipped, even though they were known to have that capability. Otherwise, the short-range missiles would have been on the 7 November list of weapons to be removed.

Ecker and Jack compare their own experiences with those portrayed in the docudrama *Thirteen Days* (2000; dir. Roger Donaldson). They remind readers that Kenneth O'Donnell never actually telephoned Commander Ecker, who plays an important part in the movie because in real life he flew the first RF-8 missions over Cuba. Furthermore, no one actually suggested to Ecker that he falsely claim his aircraft had not been hit by anti-aircraft fire. Another interesting vignette recounts how Ecker flew his RF-8 straight to Anderson Air Force Base and, hiding from the press in the back of a limousine, was whisked to the Pentagon, where a panel of senior officers questioned him while other officers from a room full of the Joint Chiefs of Staff peered through the door, waiting to ask more questions. The authors also provide yet another reason to lose sleep over what could have happened in 1962: an F-8B (an armed variant of the Crusader) asked permission to bring down a Cuban Mig-17 that was *not* committing a hostile act. Fortunately, the ground intercept controller denied the pilot permission to shoot.

Blue Moon over Cuba takes the reader from the Executive Committee meeting room venues of the Cuban Missile Crisis to the experiences of those who ensured the security of the nation from their cockpits and ships, reminding us yet again of the value of history written by its participants. The engrossing narrative never strays off course—a testament to the writing skills of so-called amateur historians! It will reward every reader, from Cold War buffs to Cuban Missile Crisis historians.