

## **Above & Beyond: A Near Fatal Flight and a Cover-up**

**(U-2 Pilot Jerry McIlmoyle shares a harrowing tale from the Cuban Missile Crisis)**

Major Richard “Steve” Heyser flew his top secret U-2 Spy Plane an incredible 13 miles above the communist island of Cuba. The pilot wore a fish-bowl sized helmet and a skin-tight pressure suit that had a hose running to an emergency oxygen supply packed beneath his seat. Should the cockpit lose pressure in the thin air of the stratosphere the oxygen would inflate Heyser’s suit and literally prevent his blood from boiling and a quick death. The mission was of high risk because he would be entering enemy airspace where Soviet radar would track him. The U-2 was safe from Soviet MiG’s scattered on the island-- they could not climb to Heyser’s lofty flight path to shoot him down. But below the pilot were Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) which most certainly could. In fact it was a Soviet S-A2 SAM that brought down the U-2 operated by Gary Powers over Russia just two years earlier. Heyser must avoid that fate and guide his unarmed aircraft over western Cuba and photograph specific targets.

The date was October 14, 1962 and the U.S. needed to know the extent of the Russian military buildup on the island. The Soviets had assured President John F. Kennedy that they were there strictly to protect the island and that none of their installations or equipment were for offensive purposes. John McCone, Director of the CIA, was not so sure, and it was he who insisted the President authorize Heyser’s U-2 flight. McCone explained to the president that a U-2 overflight of Cuba was the only way to effectively determine if the Soviets were lying and installing nuclear missiles.

McCone's hunch was right. Heyser was only over Cuba for seven minutes, but those few minutes were critical. The cameras aboard Heyser's aircraft captured images of Soviet medium range nuclear ballistic missiles capable of reaching Washington D.C and New York City. President Kennedy immediately ordered more U-2 flights over Cuba to uncover the readiness of the missiles and establish the full extent of the Soviet nuclear capability.

An elite team of U-2 pilots was chosen for the task, and among that group was Major Rudy Anderson and Captain Jerry McIlmoyle. Several flights were flown by this group between October 17 to the 24<sup>th</sup>. Jerry was scheduled to make his second over-flight of Cuba on October 25. Prior to Jerry's upcoming mission the Soviets had their radar locked onto every flight yet they did not unleash their SAM's. None of the pilots knew when or if the Soviets would change their mind. President Kennedy thought there was a likelihood that this lack of response from the Soviet missile batteries may not last. He informed the Air Force that if a pilot was shot down he was to be told immediately and he would then respond with force, and at a minimum have the Air Force take out the offending SAM site.

Jerry did his best to put the concern about SAM's out of his mind – he had to give his temperamental U-2 his full attention when he launched from McCoy Air Force Base in Florida. Only a few pilots could master “dragon lady” as the U-2's were called, because the aircraft combined both the latest technology and some old fashion practicality, such as the “pogo sticks” used to keep to keep the wing tips from touching the tarmac. The plane had a 103 foot wing span and looked like a big glider, but with a jet engine!

As Jerry barreled down the runway, the pogo sticks dropped away and the pilot pulled back on the yoke, became airborne, and raised the landing gear. The blonde hair, blue-eyed pilot pointed the plane south and his airspeed rose to 160 knots. Then when he reached 72,000 feet he

eased up on the power and settled into his safe cruising speed between 100 to 104 knots. Cuba was just 45 minutes away.

When Jerry entered enemy airspace near Havana all his senses were in a heightened state, yet the 33 year-old-pilot also felt a sense of calm and was glad to see cloud-free skies below him for optimal photographing. As he maneuvered the plane for an overflight of the first target he turned the plane's camera on, got the pictures he needed, then moved on to his next target, approximately 40 minutes away where he secured more photographs. *So far, so good*, he thought.

He continued on to his third and final target near Banes, took the necessary photos and then turned the camera off, turning the plane toward home. Suddenly, motion in his rearview mirror caught his eye. A starburst. An exploding SAM sent contrails in all directions behind the plane. *They're firing at me!* Then he saw a second SAM streaking upward, but luckily it detonated approximately 8,000 feet above his plane. Instinctively he turned the plane and reactivated the camera – he had been trained to take pictures under pressure, and this certainly fit the criteria. When he knew he had the starbursts on film, he got the hell out of there and headed toward home, knowing he was lucky beyond words.

Adrenaline was coursing through his body, and his mind raced. *Why didn't the red light on my control panel warn me that I'd been locked onto by a SAM's radar? Maybe the Russians turned the guidance system off so as to surprise me without warning. Or maybe my detection system malfunctioned.* Jerry knew that what saved him was his initial turn toward home just a second or two before he noticed the missiles. Just one piece of shrapnel hitting the U-2 in the engine could have blown it to pieces. And even if the shrapnel missed the engine, a hit to just

about any other area would have crippled the fragile plane, sending it tumbling thirteen miles down before it smacked into the Cuban earth.

The flight back to McCoy Air Force Base in Orlando seemed to take longer than the forty-five minutes to fifty minutes it actually was. Jerry replayed the scene of the exploding missiles in his mind over and over. He had to warn the other pilots that the Soviets were now firing on the U-2's.

Once safely landed and seated in the de-briefing room at McCoy, Jerry looked at his superiors and members of the intelligence team and told them exactly what had happened. He was met with skepticism.

“Are you sure?” one of the men asked, furrowing his brow.

“Yes, sir, I took pictures of the missiles’ contrails,” Jerry replied with confidence. “They stretched from the ground all the way behind and above my aircraft.”

The men questioned Jerry for almost an hour and then dismissed him. While the young pilot returned to his quarters, the debriefing notes went immediately to the Pentagon.

Back at the barracks where the pilots lived, Jerry gave his fellow U-2 “drivers”, as they were called, fair warning. He repeated the details of how he had eluded two SAMs and got photos of the contrails and starbursts.

Some of the pilots took him at his word; others peppered him with questions. One of McIlmoyle’s flying mates did not appear overly concerned by the details of his near-death experience. Major Rudy Anderson asked no questions as the answers might allow fear and hesitation to enter his mind. Anderson could not let that happen: he was determined to fly more missions over Cuba than any of his fellow pilots. Anderson was both patriotic and competitive.

Operations Officer Anthony Martinez described him as “very dedicated. He was an absolute perfectionist.”

The U-2 pilots at McCoy had no reason not to believe Jerry’s account, but all of them would have flown over Cuba if instructed, despite knowing they could be targeted by SAM’s. Each pilot knew they were flying over or close to SAM sites, and that the next mission might be their last. Yet they viewed their Cuban missions as absolutely essential for the safety of the country, and possibility of death in the air was something they all had come to terms with. Now, all they could do was wait and see when and if they would fly next. What the military might do in response to the Soviet SAM’s fired at Jerry, was out of their control and not something they discussed.

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Jerry was on the tarmac the next morning when a man he had never seen before shouted, “I’d like to have a word with you.”

Jerry took in the man’s heavily decorated uniform and immediately realized it was a three star general. The general explained that he had flown down from Washington, DC, that very morning for one purpose: to deliver a stern message to Jerry.

“There was nothing on your film,” said the general. “Therefore you were not shot at.”

Jerry protested. “But I got those pictures.”

The general was unmoved. “You were *not* shot at, so we are going to destroy your intelligence report. Is that okay with you?”

Jerry knew what had seen, and snapped back, “No, it’s not okay,” Jerry replied firmly, “because I know I was fired on.”

The general shot the captain a piercing look. He had not flown from the nation's capital for argument or debate. "Well that's what we are going to do, because we don't think you were."

"Do whatever you want," replied Jerry, "but I know what happened."

Looking into Jerry's eyes, the general glared at him, shaking his head no. The message was delivered.

Jerry, frustrated, held his tongue and walked away, not sure why this general was so adamant that he had not been shot at. But it hardly mattered: a senior officer had flown all the way to Florida to tell him in person. That was all he needed to know.

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No U-2 flights were scheduled for October 26, the day after Jerry's narrow escape. Then on the 27<sup>th</sup>, known later as "Black Saturday", Strategic Air Command decided that a single flight was needed to cover the eastern part of Cuba in the same vicinity that Jerry had been shot at. Rudy Anderson volunteered for the mission and his wish was granted.

When Rudy launched at 9:10 a.m., Jerry McIlmoyle and Steve Heyser were outdoors relaxing at McCoy Air Force Base. They were playing golf on the base's course, and Jerry said to Steve, "There he goes, he's passing you." Jerry meant that Rudy would now have more missions over Cuba than Steve. Heyser smiled, he was not in a competition, yet knew it was important to Rudy to fly as much as possible.

When Rudy reached Cuba the weather held, and he looked forward to photographing his targets as best he could and then exiting enemy airspace. These were the types of missions Rudy preferred: serving his country without dropping bombs.

Thirteen miles below Rudy, two Soviet generals tracked Anderson's flight, labeling it "Target 33". One of them said "Our guest has been circling above us for more than an hour. I

think we should give the order for downing the plane.” The generals first sought permission from the top ranking Soviet in Cuba, but were unable to reach him. That’s when they decided to take matters into their own hands, feeling that a U.S. invasion was imminent and immediate action was called for before the spy plane could escape with more intelligence and military targets for the Americans to bomb. They contacted the SAM installation in Banes and gave the orders, “Target 33 is to be destroyed.”

It is likely that Rudy Anderson never saw the SAM blasting toward him. The SAM did not make a direct hit, but exploded close enough to both cripple the plane and send shrapnel into Rudy’s pressure suit.

Anderson was likely rendered unconscious within a second or two, and the plane began spinning until it slammed into the Cuban earth below. Villagers found the main wreckage of the plane, minus the tail and wings, with the dead pilot still strapped his seat.

Back at McCoy, it soon became clear to Jerry and Steve, that Anderson was overdue, and they feared the worst. A couple hours later Operations Officer Tony Martinez informed Heyser and McIlmoyle that there was still no word from or about Anderson, and that he likely had been shot down and killed. Steve and Jerry was absolutely devastated. They both knew that their would be no miracle that Rudy could still be alive. If he was, he would have ejected and that would have triggered a beacon and SAC would know exactly where he was.

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Years later, Jerry had risen to the rank of brigadier general and was working in Washington, where he able to confirm what he had known all along: the Soviets had in fact launched two SAMs at his U-2. At this time Jerry was in charge of the nuclear codes, serving under newly elected President Ronald Reagan. He had just briefed the president, and some CIA

people were also at the meeting. When the discussion adjourned, one of the CIA men said to Jerry, "If there's anything we can do for you, just ask."

Jerry asked. He explained about the incident over Cuba many years earlier and inquired if the CIA men could locate the photo analysts who examined the film he had shot on that October day in 1962.

It took a few phone calls, but the CIA found the analyst who had studied the photos Jerry took decades before. The analyst called Jerry and after introducing himself, said, "Sir, you were most definitely shot at by two SAMs."

Jerry finally had his answer, but there was another question where clarity would remain elusive. First and foremost, why did the three star general destroy the intelligence report about SAM's fired at Captain McIlmoyle and essentially cover-up the whole incident? Jerry's belief is that someone at high level in Washington did not want word of Jerry's close call to reach the President, because the Commander in Chief might have stopped all U-2 overflights of Cuba at a time when the intelligence from those flights was essential for both decision-making and for potential air strikes.

Jerry's belief is supported because the incident was never revealed to President Kennedy. The President secretly recorded all of the meetings regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis held in the Cabinet room with his selected team called the Executive Committee or ExComm. Nowhere on the audio tapes is there any mention of SAM's being fired at U-2's before the death of Major Rudy Anderson on October 27<sup>th</sup>. In fact, the main discussion of the Soviet SAMs centered on what the U.S. response would be if a spy plane was brought down. And on this issue Kennedy had decided that at the very least the Air Force would destroy the offending SAM site. However when word of Anderson's death reached the President late in the day on the 27<sup>th</sup>, Kennedy did

not give the go-ahead for a retaliatory strike. Instead he would give Khrushchev one last chance to make a deal. That decision may have saved the world from nuclear Armageddon.

(Michael J. Tougias is a N.Y. Times bestselling author of 29 includes. His latest book, co-authored with Casey Sherman is Above & Beyond: John F. Kennedy and America's Most Dangerous Cold War Spy Mission. To watch a video of Jerry McIlmoyle, visit [www.michaeltougias.com](http://www.michaeltougias.com) )

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