

The Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)

In 1958-59, the United States, fearing the spread of Soviet communism, established nuclear-armed medium range ballistic missile bases in Europe and the Middle East that threatened the USSR. U.S. policy held that a communist state could not be allowed to exist in the Western Hemisphere, and following the Cuban Revolution (1953-59) had sponsored the Bay of Pigs Invasion (April 1961), which failed to overthrow the communist government of Cuba. On 13 October 1962, aerial photoreconnaissance of Cuba confirmed U.S. suspicions that guided missile bases were being constructed there by the Soviet Union. Such bases would enable the Soviet Union to strike much of the United States mainland with nuclear-armed intermediate-range ballistic missiles.

The American reaction was swift. The U.S. response to the presence of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil was to establish a naval blockade of the island to prevent the arrival of further missiles and military equipment. The U.S. also declared that an attack on the U.S. by missiles from Cuba would be regarded as an attack by the Soviet Union and that U.S. retaliatory action would follow.

Aircraft were alerted, invasion forces quietly assembled, and the U.S. Navy brought out in force. The naval blockade was enforced by ships of the U.S. Navy with the assistance of ships from Argentina, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic. On 17 October, the commander of U.S. Atlantic anti-submarine forces flew to Halifax to brief Rear Admiral Ken L. Dyer, Flag Officer, Atlantic Coast, on the developing situation.

Dyer already had four escort squadrons— the 1st, of old destroyers, the 5th of Restigouche Class destroyer escorts, and the Prestonians (modernised River Class frigates) of the 7th and 9th— either at sea or on short notice. The Canadian aircraft carrier HMCS *Bonaventure*, less her Banshee jet fighter squadron, which had disbanded on 30 September, was in British waters with the Tribal Class destroyers of the 1st Escort Squadron. The other east-coast squadron, the 3rd of old destroyers, was on reduced manning. The only active west-coast squadron, the St. Laurents of the 2nd, were alongside at San Francisco. Dyer also had operational control of the RCAF's maritime patrol squadrons and, should the crisis escalate, he could deploy the two British training submarines assigned to his command.

On the night of 17 October, Dyer's forces made their first contact with the Russian submarine 300 miles off the Canadian coast. Eleven more contacts followed over the next three weeks. While the submarine was tracked by both Canadian and American forces, the tension between Washington and Moscow over the missiles in Cuba heated up. Canadian maritime forces, both naval and air, were on a high state of alert and actively engaged in the preliminaries of the crisis, when Kennedy's speech of 22 October shocked the world. Certainly, as Peter Hayden observed in his *Canadian Naval Chronology*, "Kennedy's speech that evening was a complete surprise to the Canadian political system and to the population as a whole." Kennedy demanded an unconditional withdrawal of the missiles and established a quarantine around Cuba to stop further shipment of military equipment.

With the crisis now in the open, the American government pressured Canada to raise its state of alert and to deploy forces in support of the quarantine. Diefenbaker dithered. The American "quarantine" was technically illegal, but the Canadian government was never convinced that it was necessary to go to the state of military readiness and activity that the Americans demanded. It was not until 24 October, two days after Kennedy's speech, that the Naval Board authorized the recall of the Canadian Navy aircraft carrier *Bonaventure* and the 1st Squadron from Europe, and Dyer was allowed to go to a higher state of readiness. He deployed his forces in accordance with the existing plans. While the Americans established a barrier operation southeast of Newfoundland along the line of their underwater sound surveillance system, intensely supported by RCAF aircraft, RCN ships patrolled key areas off Nova Scotia and in the approaches to New York. The 5th Squadron patrolled southeast of Halifax, the 7th rotated into Sydney for fuel, while the 3rd, brought to a full state of manning, was sent to watch Georges Bank. The two Royal Navy submarines were deployed to patrol areas on the north-eastern side of the Grand Banks. The public explanation for all this activity was on-going fleet exercises with the United States Navy. In reality, the Canadian Navy was deployed for war and was actively pursuing Russian submarine contacts. If there was any doubt about the presence of Russian submarines, Dyer had only to look out his office window. There lying in Halifax Harbour, was the Soviet submarine replenishment ship *Atlantika*. She sailed on the 27th for Georges Bank.

With the bulk of U.S. Navy forces committed to the quarantine around Cuba, the RCN was soon asked to extend its patrols further south. Dyer obliged. But he got little firm direction from Ottawa, and no authorization even for the additional fuel allocation required. As Hayden writes: “Dyer’s problem was that he could not convince Ottawa that the Soviet submarines still presented a potential threat to North America, and he remained frustrated by Ottawa’s refusal to see the situation in a tactical light.” There is no record that any “unofficial” authorization emerged from Ottawa. Dyer signalled his intentions, and went ahead with them when no one objected.

The crisis was resolved on 28 October 1962 by an exchange of letters between the Washington and Moscow to the effect that in exchange for the Soviet Union’s removal of the Cuban missile bases, the U.S. would remove the naval blockade of Cuba and guarantee not to use military force against the communist government of Cuba. The naval blockade was duly removed on 20 November 1962 after the U.S. was satisfied that the Soviet missiles and military aircraft had been removed from Cuba by sea.

Unfortunately for Dyer, a high level of Soviet submarine activity in his zone remained. Only on 30 October did Dyer receive an equivocal direction not to exceed his annual fuel allocation. Like Nelson at Copenhagen, Dyer turned a blind eye to Ottawa’s indifference and kept his ships and aircraft at sea. The peak of operations came on 5 November, with the carrier *Bonaventure*, some 24 escorts and two submarines deployed across an area over 1,000 miles long and about 250 miles wide. Two days later HMCS *Kootenay* made contact with the Soviet Foxtrot Class submarine near Georges Bank, one of eleven being tracked by plotters. Confirmation that it was a submarine came when two nearby Soviet trawlers charged the destroyer in an attempt to break to contact. *Kootenay* held on and passed the Foxtrot over to the United States Navy for further prosecution. In the end, between 23 October and 15 November 1962, some 136 and submarine “contacts” were made in the Atlantic in or near the Canadian zone. The navy prided itself on its effective response to the crisis and the smoothness with which existing North American and NATO defense preparations worked. In contrast, the government and even the senior leadership of the navy seem paralyzed by the crisis. As Tony German concluded, Dyer “was a courageous leader who had done what had to be done when Canada’s political leadership had so shockingly failed the test.” Hayden, concurred: “One cannot find fault with Admiral Dyer’s decision to take action without direction from Naval Service Headquarters; he merely did what he believed was in the best interests of the fleet and national defense. That the national headquarters was frozen with inaction was a systemic problem.” Decades after the Cuban crisis, naval officers recalled with pride the time when the navy went to war because the government lacked the will to do so.

Sources:

Milner, Marc. *Canada’s Navy: The First Century, Second Edition*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010)

Haydon, Peter. *Canadian Naval Chronology, 1945-1964*. Unpublished, no date.

German, Tony. *The Sea is at Our Gates: The history of The Canadian Navy*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. 1990)