

Navy Beach Jumpers, remembering the 1960's

by BM3, Vincent Piscitelli, BJU2, 1960-64



The Cuban Missile Crisis through the eyes of a Beach Jumper who was there.

This is a story that I've written about my memories of being a Beach Jumper during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I could have written more, but I just wanted to get the point across. In the early years of us Beach Jumpers, we worked in small teams and every thing was of a Top Secret nature as [many] of you are probably aware of today. I am now 57 years old*, and after all the years that have passed, am starting to feel proud of my military service to my country. You see, back then, we did our jobs and went on our ops and didn't talk about it. We were told not to talk about it. I cannot begin to tell you how you (addressed to Tom Hawkins), and the Association have made me feel about myself and my service to my country. I am very proud to be a member of both the [UDT-SEAL] Museum and a Lifetime member of the [UDT-SEAL] Association. As I said before, I never talked about my service to my country or about what we did until recently and still have not said that much. I would hope that I'll enjoy many wonderful years of membership with both the Museum and the Association. All of you have made me proud that I served my country in wartime and peace. I hope that someday we Beach Jumpers can and will become permanent members of the Association. Some of us Beach Jumpers—not to be confused with Beachmasters—have a brick at the Museum. We also hope to add more of our history to its collection. Again, thank you for what you're doing and how you have made myself and fellow Teammates feel.

I'm telling this story to the best of my memory, and it was some 38 years ago, so some of the information surrounding the identity of individuals and exact time of incidents may be incorrect.

Before the Crisis, we Beach Jumpers, who did finally get deployed to the area that we were to defend, realized that something was about to go down. In military terms, "Happen!"

A hand full of us had demolition, hand to hand combat training, and weapons training from UDT 21 and SEALs to prepare us for whatever. CDR Bill Clemente and LT Bill Haley were very instrumental in our training, as were members of the UDT/SEALs at Little Creek, Virginia.

I was also trained as an assault box coxswain to operate our training and recovery boats, of which we had two. We Beach Jumpers did a lot of training with the NSW community, all of which were "highly top secret." At the time, I was a seaman of around 18 years of age and never even realized what we were doing or why. We were always told by our superior officers, keep your mouth shut about what you're doing and don't ever disclose your whereabouts. I never asked any questions.

I was at the time the best shooter (expert pistol, rifle) of the bunch and was highly trained to operate the B.A.R. It was at the time of the Cuban Crisis I realized just how important I would be to the team.

We had approximately fifteen team members that finally ended up going into the crisis. I don't know even to this day if I am at liberty to discuss our whereabouts. So I'll say that we were in the "hot zone." If we ever did go to a full-scale war, I'm sure that I wouldn't be writing this documentary today.

A high-ranking officer told me just a few years ago that the Russians and Cubans knew our position. Our position was ill prepared for an attack from the enemy, believe me!

I've been kind of reluctant to discuss this information for obvious reasons, but after all these years and all of our security leaks, I feel that I can disclose some of the happenings during those tense times of the Missile Crisis.

As I said, most of us were 18 and 19-year-old kids. We had one or two officers. I can't remember their names except that the officer in charge of our team was an engineering officer and was a tough son of a gun.

Most, if not all, Beach Jumpers (commandos) were either excellent athletes, or in good condition. Now that I look back on those days, I'd say we represented a bunch of pirates or castaways. A real tough bunch of bastards.

Myself, Red Dahl, George McCue, an ex-fighter from Brooklyn, NY, Gerald Meeze, Hargrove, Cox, Dunsmoore, Ering Joel Ryle. All of us were in top condition. The only ones that were deployed to the crisis with myself was ET3 Hargrove, RM3 Cox, BM1 Davis, myself a Seaman, and others whose names I cannot remember.

When we deployed for the crisis zone, we were told to pack and never told where we were headed or what we'd be doing. We left Little Creek, Virginia on a convoy headed to the Florida Keys. I can't remember how long it took us to get to the Keys, but once there, we had landing craft boats waiting for us to board with our gear. I can't remember how many landing crafts we had. All that I can remember is that it took a long time to get to our destination.

Once we arrived, we unloaded our gear and set up our defense area. I can remember that we had B.A.R's, demolitions, hand grenades, carbines, smoke pots, an assortment of assault rifles, and plenty of ammo.

I thought we had an extremely large perimeter to cover and not enough men to do it effectively, and I thank God today that we didn't have to defend our area in an all-out assault. We were sitting ducks and we all would have been killed. We were on our own, as I saw it, and as I look back on it today, at the time, I didn't even know if anyone with us had actually seen any combat duty. I surely didn't up to that point. I can't even remember being scared.

The night patrols were scary, while walking the perimeters. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face and when I was out on patrol, I had my safety off and I was locked and loaded ready to fire.

Our living conditions were not the best. It was damp, hot and humid. We ate plenty of k-rations, but once in a while we had a good meal. My responsibility was to stand guard over the communications area.

We had a connex box that we used to do whatever, I never knew what. My first night standing duty on watch over the box, the C.O. said let nobody near or in. If we were attacked, kill the first person that comes near and ask no questions. I was armed with a 45 pistol on my hip, my carbine, four hand grenades, survival knife and plenty of ammo. And believe me when I say this, I wouldn't hesitate to kill someone. I was ready! And scared!

What made the conditions such was the damn surf making noise against the shore. You couldn't hear very well, and all that I could think of was someone coming ashore that I couldn't hear or see. I was, needless to say, on high alert all night. It was a relief to be relieved by the next person to assume the duty to guard the box. At the time, we really felt that we were going to war. What else could you think?

At night I used to look out to sea and try to pick up lights from the ships in the blockade. Sometimes thinking that I saw the lights. I don't know if I ever did. If we were going to war, I was ready to defend our position and my country at any cost!

During the nights, it was total lights out and dark. During daytime, things were a little more relaxed as could be expected. Lights gave a sense of security. Every once in a while, there could be a helo that would drop in and bring mail and supplies. Other than that, we had very little, if any contact with the outside world. We all slept with our combat knives and weapons at our sides. It was a tense time and nobody knew what to expect.

I believe that the Crisis lasted a few months or so. I can't really remember. Once things cooled off and there was no threat of a war, it sure was relieving. The tension was off and within a few days, we were ordered to pack our bags and get ready to move back to Little Creek. The Crisis was over!

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