

The War was Averted (Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba, 1962)
Report of Lieutenant General Nikolai Beloborodov, head of the Soviet nuclear arsenal in Cuba

During my many years of military service, the most dangerous and stressful periods were the years of the Great Patriotic War, and the months of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. They made an indelible imprint in my memory and left their mark on the rest of my life.

These two events are incomparable in their importance, yet they have significant similarities and differences: if we were allies with the United States in defeating Nazi Germany, then during the period of the Cuban missile crisis we faced each other as adversaries.

Time has brought some clarity to the history of the emergence and resolution of this extremely dangerous conflict.

The events centered around the Republic of Cuba in 1962 served as a trigger for a radical change in the views on the role of nuclear weapons in resolving conflicts between states; they gave an impetus to the process of nuclear disarmament.

As a participant in these events who was directly involved in the nuclear-technical support of the strategic operation “Anadyr,” I would like to share with the readers my memories of this historic and unique military operation.

The implementation of tasks related to nuclear warheads was organized and carried out autonomously and in a highly centralized way, with major restrictions and special oversight by the leadership of the country, Minister of Defense Marshal R. Ya. Malinovsky and Chief of General Staff M. V. Zakharov. Operational support and general command of the entire complex of the nuclear issues in the operation was carried out by the General Staff of the Armed Forces and the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff. On June 13, 1962, directives from the USSR Minister of Defense, following the decisions of the country’s leadership, assigned the chiefs of armed forces and the heads of the main and central directorates to carry out operational, organizational, and technical measures to plan the operation within a defined timeframe.

All organizational and practical activities associated with nuclear warheads that were a part of nuclear-technical support of the strategic operation “Anadyr” were carried out by the 12th Main Directorate of the USSR Ministry of Defense [headed by] Colonel General V. A. Bolyatko. [The 12th Main Directorate] cooperated with commanders and the General Staff of the Armed Forces, the main and central directorates of the Ministry of Defense, the Ministries of Medium Machine Building, Transportation, the Navy and other agencies; it was responsible for the condition of the weapons and the maintenance of their combat readiness. Units of nuclear support troops subordinate to the 12th Main Directorate assembled the load of warheads by numbers and inventory, carried out maintenance and transport. The responsibility for the practical implementation of nuclear-technical support for strategic operation “Anadyr” directly in Cuba was assigned to unit “S” No. 713, which was headed by Colonel N. K. Beloborodov.

The support [tasks] included:

1. Receiving orders directly from the commander of the 12th Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defense Colonel General V. A. Bolyatko. Studying the specifics of its execution. Selection of personnel and organization of work (June 1962).

2. Mechanical preparation of the full set of nuclear warheads, reserve components, tools, equipment and supplies—taking into consideration the special conditions of execution of the task (July-August 1962).
3. Selection and assessment of the specific means of sea transports for use in safely transporting nuclear warheads over great distances (July 1962).
4. The design and development of methods for loading nuclear warheads from the pier into the holds of the ships by means of on-board lifting devices, as well as design and development of diagrams for rigid fixing of the cargo in the holds, to exclude the possibility of the cargo shifting in any type of storm at sea (July-August 1962).
5. Transportation of nuclear warheads by rail, sea, and road from permanent storage facilities at unit “S” No. 713 to the units of the nuclear support troops (missile-technical base and field missile-technical base [RTB and PRTB]) in Cuba (September-October 1962).
6. Stand-alone maintenance in Cuba of nuclear warheads in combat readiness in the RTB and PRTB conditions; a functioning state of technical equipment for the specified warranty period of not less than one year (October-November 1962).
7. Organization and implementation of the return of nuclear warheads and components to the permanent storage location. Assessment of their mechanical condition after the completion of the operation (November-December 1962).

Colonel General V. A. Bolyatko issued a directive to prepare the special equipment for long-distance transport by sea, to maintain high quality of its mechanical condition and to supply everything necessary to ensure its combat readiness for a period of at least a year without additional assistance from the outside. Special attention was given to the implementation of security measures, operational camouflage, secrecy and a thorough consideration of all actions to prevent information leaks. These requirements could be met by carefully selecting the personnel, limiting the number of people with access to the work and documents, and placing severe restrictions on the transmittal and use of information and on correspondence. To ensure prompt operational decisions on all questions, personal responsibility was placed on deputies of the head of the Main Directorate, Generals N. P. Yegorov, M. K. Nikolsky, V. F. Timoshenko, Ye. F. Durnov, heads of the directorate and the departments General V. S. Tyutyunikov, colonels A. D. Iskra, I. A. Savin, A. T. Sukharev, A. P. Khitrov, I. M. Atanov.

[Information about] the task at hand was transmitted down the chain of command to the appropriate categories of staff only in the amount that was necessary to carry out the functional duties of their office. Specific assignments were given to Deputy Commander of the unit Colonel B. S. Malomuzh, as well as G. Z. Miroshnikov, K. I. Stolbin, A. M. Nekhoroshev.

At unit “S” No. 713, the work with nuclear warheads, individual components to them, instruments and equipment was undertaken in 3 assembly units placed in special facilities No. 1-bis, 10 and 501, equipped with automatic technology control systems. For work with the warheads, the best, usually the newest, equipment was selected with the maximum margin of time on its technical warranty; with stable results in inspections of parameters within tolerance; with no defects in the hermetic sealing of the packaging, the attached fittings, the protective coatings and electrical circuits and vacuum lines. The execution of all operations was monitored by the engineers of the testing laboratory (2nd department) and additionally by officers of the Center operations group, assigned to accompany nuclear warheads during transportation and transfer to temporary storage in the RTB and PRTB of relevant forces [Army, Navy, Air Force].

All results of the work were documented according to an established order in protocols; the outcomes were entered into logbooks. The high level of professional training of the personnel and effective control of the entire cycle of work in strict accordance with the technical documentation ensured a high-quality condition of the equipment and its combat readiness.

Nuclear support troops and industry, in developing, testing, manufacturing and exploiting nuclear warheads, had extensive experience of transporting this equipment by road, rail, and air transport. There existed an elaborate operational and technical documentation for transport operations. Special V-60 railway cars existed for transportation by rail, as well as vehicles based on the KrAZ vehicle with isothermal trunks 8M-211, special-purpose vehicles based on the ZIL-157 and ZIL-164 cars. There was no experience in development and use of ships to transport nuclear warheads by sea.

This problem had to be solved quickly—to develop documentation, technical means for lifting work, and to prepare loading crews while providing reliable nuclear safety. To develop the practical solution of this problem, in early of July of 1962, representatives of the Main Directorate Generals N. P. Yegorov, M. K. Nikolsky and Colonel N. K. Beloborodov started their work in the city of Murmansk. An inspection of the ships showed that transportation was possible in vessels that had protected and isolated holds with elements for securing cargo, cargo handling gear, equipped with at least two independent brakes on winches and a sufficient radius of the boom, capable of lifting cargo up to 10 tons, and with reliable means of communication, navigation, and fire protection. Taking into consideration the specific characteristics of the ships, we had to develop technology and documentation for the handling operations and prepare calculations for this work. The layout and securing details for the cargo were worked out at unit “S” No. 713 in ground structure No. 502, in a compartment that adequately resembled the hold of a cargo ship in size and configuration. The nuclear warheads were transported in individual metal containers of four types, according to the nomenclature. The four types of containers were made with the same principal features: a powerful lower base with fasteners for the warheads and external components for lifting, fixing mechanism in the transport vessels, and a protective upper half of the container. The four types of containers had the following external appearance: a long box with a thick flat base, which allowed for skid towing; a cylinder with strong outer ribs, which made it possible to roll them when moving; cylinders on metal skids; and finally, vertically standing short cylinders. All individual components in standard containers were placed in sturdy packages, and supplies were packed in wooden boxes.

For the practical implementation of work with special equipment on the dock and loading it on the ship, a special crew of twelve people was assembled: physically strong officers and extended service men, skilled in lifting work and familiar with the special characteristics of the cargo, which ensured that security measures would be met. The naval officer, Lieutenant Commander V. N. Shishkin brilliantly carried out the task of developing the documentation, preparation of the crew and its work supervision during the entire loading operation of the ships “Indigirka” and “Aleksandrovsk” and unloading of the ships “Aleksandrovsk” and “Arkhangelsk” upon their return to Severomorsk. Crew members were well equipped and had identification insignia on the sleeves of their overalls. The essential tools were stored in special mobile boxes (saw, hammer, ax, sledgehammer, metal scissors, chisel, crowbar, screwdriver). In separate boxes there were expendable materials (nails, clamps, spikes, wire, and chain). To move cargo inside the hold, PT-1000 freight carts were used, and powerful crowbars with wheels.

In late August, 1962, preparations for the operation at unit “S” No. 713 were completed.

The fundamental stage of nuclear-technical support of the strategic operation “Anadyr,” which was complex in its execution, required very careful monitoring of the completeness and quality of all operations with technology, documentation, the preparation of personnel and the means of material and technical support. Monitoring functions were performed by officials holding permanent appointments: head [of group], special engineer-inspectors of testing laboratories under the direction of Colonel A. Ye. Kabanov and ten officers of a specially created Center operations group.

Commander of unit “S” No. 713, Colonel N. K. Beloborodov carried out the duties of acting chief of the Center group. It consisted of officers-specialists: V. A. Anastasiev, V. Ye. Belousov, A. I. Bryunchikov, Ye. I. Zabelin, A. Ye. Kabanov, Ye. K. Konev, N. I. Savchenko, I. I. Tyrin, I. K. Shakhmametyev.

After it was reported that the work was completed, the head of the 12th Main Directorate of the USSR Ministry of Defense Colonel General V. A. Bolyatko visited the unit and personally verified the practical fulfillment of the assignment, the preparedness and the state of equipment of the units for completing the phase of sending off the special maritime transport.

In early September 1962, we received an order to send the first echelon with personnel, equipment and supplies, who would receive the warheads and place them on the ship.

It was determined that the Vaenga station (Severomorsk) would be the arrival point for the trains, where the head echelon with the support means was located on the secure [KGB-controlled] territory of the base of the Northern Fleet troops. The letter-coded echelons with nuclear warheads were arriving here regularly at specific intervals. The dock in Okolnaya Bay was identified as the place to load the ships. The road from Vaenga station to Okolnaya had a complex profile and passed through populated areas. To ensure secrecy and security, transport took place at night in convoys of 8-10 cars with head and tail cover; traffic control posts were placed along the route. Passing the convoys and oncoming traffic of single cars was not allowed. The delivery route was studied ahead of time by the drivers and the captain of the car echelons. Deputy Chief of the unit’s automobile base Captain Ye. A. Klimov carried out the automobile support for the operation during all stages.

On the pier, our teams loaded the ship with the help of the crane operator from the ship’s crew.

The entire operation to prepare and send the special maritime transport, and coordination with the command of the Northern Fleet and representatives of the General Staff were carried out by Generals N. P. Yegorov and Ye. F. Durnov from the 12th Main Directorate of the USSR Ministry of Defense.

The diesel-electric ship “Indigirka” was used to deliver nuclear warheads to Cuba on the first voyage. This ship had a solid double-hull, speed of 13.2 knots, water displacement of 10 thousand tons; it was 120 meters long, 18 meters wide, had four holds with three levels each, and had 16 booms. There were also places for up to 220 passengers in cabins.

The “Indigirka” was sailed by a professional and highly cohesive and disciplined crew under an experienced and distinguished sea captain, A. F. Pinezhaninov, first mate Yu. K. Yegupov, senior navigator V. A. Kuroptev, and chief mechanic F. V. Korganov.

The captain of the “Indigirka” was later awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labor for the successful delivery of the special cargo to Cuba. Special cargo was placed only in the two

forward holds. Loading lasted four nights. After it was finished, and we tested whether all the cargo was fastened reliably, we invited Captain A. F. Pinezhaninov to check the load. He found no deficiencies.

The two aft holds and the deck were loaded with the equipment of the naval nuclear support unit under the command of Captain 2nd rank V. P. Shevchenko. The bodies of the special vehicles were located in the hold, while mock up wooden bodies were placed on the car chassis on the deck..

We read with great interest in the Murmansk newspaper “Polyarnaya zvezda” [North Star] from September 12, 1962, the TASS statement regarding the worsening of the situation around Cuba. It said, in particular, that the “weapons and military equipment supplied to Cuba were designated solely for defensive purposes.” This gave us confidence in the success of the operation.

After the loading of “Indigirka” was finished, on September 13, 1962, all officers received a set of civilian clothes and military uniforms designed for hot climates from the storage depot.

On direct orders from the highest leadership in Moscow, the Northern Fleet command used specialists to secretly install explosive charges on the ship in locations specified by the chief mechanic. These explosives were to be used to blow up the hull and scuttle the ship in case of capture by the enemy. The controls to this system were put in a separate room near the captain’s cabin, after which the room was locked and sealed. I always had the key to the room and demolition device on my person, as the head of the military echelon. According to instructions, the captain and I were to make a joint decision to scuttle the ship: the captain would report to the Center, and I would carry out the decision.

To strengthen the ship’s defenses against possible attack, 37-mm machine guns with 1200 rounds of ammunition per gun were installed on the tank and aft of the ship. The guns were carefully disguised as bays for mooring ropes. According to international maritime law, the presence of weapons on board a civilian vessel and their use in combat turned this ship into a military vessel and deprived it of legal protection. Captain A. F. Pinezhaninov knew this and received the decision to arm the ship with undisguised alarm.

On September 15, 1962, officers from the General Staff delivered to the ship and handed me a packet to give to the Commander of the Group of Forces in Cuba, Army General Pliyev, as well as a special packet with instructions to open it together with the ship’s captain after we arrived in the area of the Faroe Islands. By the end of the day on September 15 everything was ready for departure, which took place at 16:00 hours on September 16, 1962.

When we reached the area of the Faroe Islands, we opened the packet from the General Staff. We were instructed to proceed to Cuba, to the Mariel naval base. We sailed across the Atlantic to the Bahamas, past Acklins Island and through Crooked Island Bay to the eastern coast of Cuba, and moved west along the coast past Havana to enter the Port of Mariel. During the entire time of our sea voyage from September 16th through October 4th while we were crossing the Atlantic Ocean we managed to avoid encounters with other vessels. However, on our approach to the Bahamas and the territorial waters of Cuba, American military planes started flying over “Indigirka” once or twice a day at dangerously low altitudes. From the ship we could

easily see the pilots, who sometimes made threatening gestures. The crew did not react to the American pilots' antics, they just ignored them.

Because of secrecy, we were only allowed to go on deck at night. Passing along the coast of Cuba we could see how every day around noon, storm clouds gathered directly above the island. Heavy dark clouds, oversaturated with water, dumped powerful streams on the island, and at the same time everything thundered and was illuminated with countless zigzags of electrical discharges. Life came to a standstill on the beach, transport stopped. The madness of water, thunder, and lightning lasted around 15-20 minutes.

Approaching the Port of Mariel, we were met by a Cuban service boat with border guards, customs officials and a sanitary inspector on board. The appropriate inspection, provided for by international rules, did not take long, and with the guidance of a Cuban pilot our ship took its place in the harbor. Together with the officials from the Group of Forces who met me, I departed for Havana to make a personal report and to deliver the packets for the command.

The nuclear warheads stayed on the territory of the Republic of Cuba under the dependable protection of soldiers-internationalists of the USSR Armed Forces and the Revolutionary Forces of the Republic of Cuba for 59 days, from October 4th, 1962, when they arrived in the Port of Mariel on the diesel-electric ship "Indigirka," until December 1, 1962, when the motor ship "Arkhangelsk" departed from Mariel to Severomorsk with all the nuclear warheads on board. The unloading of "Indigirka" and loading of the motor ship "Arkhangelsk," with nuclear warheads and the means of ensuring combat readiness, took place at a separate pier in the harbor of Mariel, under a strict regime of security measures for the pier from land and sea. Several times a day on a regular basis, the underwater parts of the ships was inspected by specialist divers to check for sabotage mines. There was constant monitoring of the approaches to the ships from sea. At the same time as the nuclear warheads were being loaded and unloaded at the separate pier, other work was conducted at various piers of the harbor around the clock. Launchers were being unloaded as well as military equipment and support means, which masked the "quiet" work with the nuclear warheads—there was no conspicuous activity like Cuban guard escort motorcycles that accompanied the transport of missiles and other bulky equipment.

The unloading of the diesel-electric ship "Indigirka" started on the night of October 4th, 1962, and went on for three nights. During the day we unloaded equipment and means of transport for the nuclear support troops of the Navy (Shevchenko). The work was organized and monitored for safety measures by the officers from the operational group that accompanied the cargo. The personnel of the RTB (PRTB) received the nuclear warheads and their accompanying equipment, loaded them into vehicles and delivered them to the permanent deployment areas. Delivery was organized in small convoys up to 20-25 cars. The warheads were placed in canvas-covered military vehicles; there were many of these cars on the roads of Cuba. For camouflage, visibly placed utility goods were loaded onto the trucks as well. Service vehicles were included in the convoys and measures were taken to ensure that the convoys had the appearance of regular military transports of the kind that was present on every road. The delivery routes covered all districts of Cuba from west to east. Thus, warheads were delivered to the mountainous region between Guantanamo and Santiago de Cuba, a distance of over 1100 km from Mariel. We did not have any prior experience with such complex automotive transport.

By October 10, 1962, all the warheads had been dispersed to the areas where the troops were stationed, secured in warehouses and taken under heavy guard. This concluded the most

difficult stage of organization and practical implementation, a very dangerous stage of nuclear-technical support of the operation “Anadyr” on a foreign, very distant territory, under martial law, and under the eye of U.S. intelligence and air reconnaissance. Even the process of driving the delivery vehicles was very dangerous. The soldier-drivers were in unfamiliar circumstances where the Cubans used American cars with powerful engines and blinding headlights, which they never switched to low-beam. The Cuban drivers always drove over 100 km/h, constantly passed or wedged into our convoys. Therefore, for safety reasons, the transport of nuclear warheads took place only in daylight hours. The operational and technical difficulties of group transport of nuclear warheads were successfully overcome due to the professional excellence and sense of personal responsibility of the officers and enlisted personnel, their diligence and discipline, alertness, good physical shape and morale. The thoughtful, unconventional organization of movements, which was appropriate to the situation, with reliable counterintelligence cover, implemented by Captain 1st rank A. M. Tikhonov and Colonel S. S. Shornikov in cooperation with the Cuban side played a crucial role in the success of the operation. This is confirmed by the fact that when I met with the Americans 30 years later, they were very interested to find out about the places where the nuclear warheads were actually located in Cuba in 1962. It is obvious that they did not have accurate information, which in the event of a U.S. military action would have excluded [the possibility] of impact on the warheads.

The warheads for the R-12 medium-range missiles were located in the Bejucal region (Romanov), the warheads for the operational-tactical “FROG” were in the region of Managua (Vasyukov), the warheads for the front cruise missile (FKR) in the region of Santiago de Cuba (Trifonov); there were nuclear warheads in other places as well.

When I visited the headquarters of the Group of Forces on October 4th, 1962, the day of our arrival, I had extensive discussions with the First Deputy Commander General P. B. Dankevich and the Chief of Staff General P. V. Akidinov. We defined the principles of organizing the interaction between the Center’s operations group and the Group [of forces]’s headquarters, the units of nuclear support troops (RTB) and supporting services. The top priorities were to ensure the secrecy of the warheads’ location, to maintain the warheads’ combat readiness, and to strictly comply with maintenance requirements and nuclear safety measures. We decided not to use communication lines or correspondence, and we were not to hold meetings. All orders and instructions were to be given orally, performance reports were to be received personally. Contacts with persons not related to the work of the task force was to be limited. To ensure the secrecy of our work and to house the group’s personnel, a separate house was provided in Havana, in a special secure residential quarter near the house occupied by the leadership of the Group of Forces.

The Center’s operations group was divided into two subgroups. One, consisting of N. K. Beloborodov, A. Ye. Kabanov, I. K. Shakhmametyev, I. I. Tyrin, and N. M. Savchenko, was based in Havana and frequently traveled to the Group headquarters and the units of the nuclear support troops to address issues on site. The second subgroup, consisting of V. A. Anastasiev, E. I. Zabelin, V. S. Belousov, A. M. Bryunchikov, and E. K. Konev, was stationed with the nuclear support troops, monitoring the condition of the nuclear warheads and assisting in technical matters.

With our arrival in Cuba the most critical stage of nuclear-technical support of operation “Anadyr” began. The goal of this stage was to conduct thorough mechanical inspections of the

warheads with measuring equipment and support services, to make them ready for storage and release for combat use.

The temperature in underground and secure facilities never dropped below 25° C. Humidity was always high, above 80%. Such climatic conditions are not optimal for nuclear warheads. Therefore we had to use special moisture-absorbing materials which, combined with the sealed containers, provided a low level of humidity in the storage containers. The main technical risk for the nuclear warheads was temperature above 20° C, as due to the natural heating of the nuclear material from the spontaneous fission process a high external temperature could impair the physical tuning of the nuclear device, reducing the warranty period of its operation. With the use of residential air conditioners and food service ice, which is produced in great quantities in Cuba, we were able to maintain temperatures below 20° C in the storage facilities.

After we completed the inspections of the warheads, which produced positive results, I prepared a written report to the “Director” (USSR Minister of Defense) on the condition of the warheads, their combat readiness, and the special storage conditions. At the same time I made an [oral] report to Commander of the Group of Soviet Forces Army General Pliyev. The report took place in private and lasted about an hour. General Pliyev listened to me carefully and then confirmed the instructions from the Center—that practical questions regarding nuclear-technical support should be decided with General P. V. Dankevich, and if necessary, with him [Pliyev] personally.

On the basis of this meeting, it became clear to me that General Pliyev was not adequately prepared to address the critical issues of nuclear-technical support of combat operations. This further convinced me that strategic operation “Anadyr” was intended as a preventative and intimidating measure, and was not aimed at conducting military operations with the use of nuclear weapons.

In October of 1962, the U.S. hostile actions against Cuba greatly increased. They were evident in the frantic radio propaganda in Spanish, regular daily reconnaissance flights over the island at low and high altitudes, and sea approaches.

There were instances when speedboats in the Caribbean Sea fired on Cuban fishing vessels and coastal towns. One got the impression that U.S. leaders were deliberately inciting war hysteria in their country, convincing themselves and the people of the need to attack sovereign Cuba to show the world America’s omnipotence.

During those days, the personnel of the operations group vigorously practiced coordinating actions with units of combat use, depending on specific conditions. We sought to minimize the time required for technical operations for the final preparation of the weapons. We made wide use of training nuclear warheads and support equipment; we maintained a high level of training of the nuclear support troops. The training took place in difficult conditions. By mid-October training began at the main and decoy missile systems launching sites.

Operations group officers traveled around the country, performing inspections of the warheads and their readiness for use. The sites farthest from Havana were in the east, in the Guantanamo region and Santiago de Cuba. We traveled there on IL-14 planes. One day, after rising to an elevation of 800-1000 meters, we saw both the waters of the Gulf of Mexico to the north and the expanse of the Caribbean Sea to the south. Our route stretched along the southern

part of the island, over Zapata swamp, past the Bay of Pigs where invaders landed in 1961, over the Escambray and Sierra Maestra Mountains—the places where guerilla fighters led by Fidel Castro and his comrades in arms began the liberation of Cuba. The city of Santiago de Cuba is located on the slopes of mountains and is bordered by a picturesque bay. From the air we could clearly see the oil refinery, where tankers were unloading Soviet oil. The city has many historic buildings, for example, the Moncada Barracks, the Palace of Bacardi—the tycoon who produced the famous Cuban rum, the cathedral. To our satisfaction, the troops were well camouflaged, they were located in the forests and were heavily guarded. Maintenance and storage of the warheads was done with strict adherence to specifications.

On October 22, 1962, President John F. Kennedy addressed the American people. He announced the military blockade of Cuba, the calling of the army reservists, the high alert of the army and navy and a number of other measures of a military nature. The Command of the Group of Soviet Forces and the Cuban government became more vigilant and worked on strengthening the defense of the territory and preparing to repel an attack.

We also took partial measures to move the warheads closer to very remote combat units to reduce the amount of time required for their transfer once we received the special orders.

Under conditions of the strengthening naval blockade some of our ships with military cargo, which did not reach Cuba, were recalled. Thus, the ships with R-14 missiles returned to the Soviet ports. However, the bulk carrier ship “Aleksandrovsk” successfully passed all obstacles and entered the Port of La Isabella on October 25. It delivered the nuclear warheads for the R-14 missiles and for the tactical nuclear weapons. Colonel I. S. Kurbesov (unit “S” No. 713) led the support group on the ship. We met this transport at the port and during night-time on October 26-28, unloaded and sent the warheads for land-based cruise missiles (FRK) to the military units. After this partial unloading, the bulk carrier “Aleksandrovsk” departed from Havana to Severomorsk on October 30th.

During those days the situation was extremely tense and complicated, we felt the approach of terrible events that would be unpredictable in their consequences.

One day we were in the Mariel region at the Air Force RTB, and late at night on the sea shore officers from V. A. Anastasiev’s group and I were watching the flights of U.S. combat airplanes and helicopters near the U.S. warships that had approached Cuba. The U.S. forces, using their proximity to Cuba, numerical superiority in air forces and naval power and the presence of a strong group of marines, clearly demonstrated their intention to unleash a war. Therefore, we inadvertently faced the question of what we would personally do in case war broke out. I, as a veteran who went all the way from Stalingrad to Prague, Colonel Anastasiev, who fought as a private miner and exploded Nazi tanks near Belgorod, as well as other officers who had fought in the Great Patriotic War, all understood that we had nowhere to retreat. After a dynamic, balanced exchange of opinions we came to the conclusion that we would stand together with the Cuban people and their army, and repel the aggressors as part of the Group of Soviet Forces. All the generals and senior officers of the Group of Soviet Forces had combat experience. The majority of the junior officers, sergeants and soldiers were born before or during the last war, which to a great extent determined their high patriotism, respect for nations that were victims of aggression, and confidence in the justice of internationalist ideas.

Therefore, our thoughts at the moment are best conveyed in the words of Ernest Hemingway: “A man is not made for defeat... a man can be destroyed but not defeated.” During

the war we learned how to win, we knew what to do and how to do it, we knew how to judge the strength and capabilities of our enemy. It was clear that in the conditions of the existing balance of forces in conventional arms, which was ten to one against us, there was only one way we could repel a massive assault—by using tactical nuclear weapons against the invaders. In principle, this action would be consistent with international law on the protection of sovereignty and freedom.

But that would be the beginning of the end. Only madmen could unleash a nuclear war. We were confident that reason would triumph and this would not happen.

Our hopes were fulfilled. The military-political confrontation between the United States on one hand, and Cuba and the Soviet Union on the other, was resolved through a compromise. U.S. President John F. Kennedy and his closest advisers had the good sense and reason to give up the idea of subjugating the Republic of Cuba by force. They took the path of a political agreement.

When this decision was made, it created the conditions after October 28th, 1962, to prepare the equipment and personnel for return to the Soviet Union. According to the established order, all nuclear support troops of the Armed Forces started the preparation of the equipment and documentation to transfer to the task force of unit “S” No. 713. The troops themselves returned home following conventional procedures, as units, without nuclear warheads.

During this time A. I. Mikoyan was in Cuba. He conducted difficult talks with the Cuban leaders regarding the serious disagreements between F. Castro and N. Khrushchev.

Today, the correspondence between the two leaders is published, but at the time we knew nothing about the existing tensions in our relations, or Cuba’s humiliation as a sovereign state in the course of the Soviet-American negotiations. I remember well the meeting between A. I. Mikoyan and the leadership of the Group of Soviet Forces, where he argued at length and unconvincingly that everything was done correctly, and that the difficulties in the exchange of views between the USSR and Cuba were due to the lack of time and complexity of communication, which did not correspond with reality. Our group of forces, for example, had a permanent and reliable connection with Moscow and at any moment could have arranged a quick exchange of opinions. The main thing that struck me at the time was Mikoyan’s claim that during the discussion at the Kremlin of the possibility of stationing missiles in Cuba, the opinion was expressed that they could be hidden under palm trees in the tropical jungle. Every schoolchild knows that there are no tall tropical forests in Cuba; and in the north of the island, where the medium-range missiles were located, the palms grow at a distance from each other...

It was time to leave Cuba, the unvanquished, wonderful country, and its heroic people whom we grew to love. We felt their high sense of national identity and dignity from the first moments of our time in Cuba.

Despite the alarming situation, the country was calm and composed. Everyone was going about his or her business. Armed people in uniform, including women, were everywhere in great numbers. In Havana, anti-aircraft guns were stationed in the public squares. Hundreds of kilometers of trenches covered the famous beaches.

There were troops moving on the roads, the country was preparing for defense, to repel the aggressors.

During our trips we often gave rides to soldiers who were going home for 2-3 days of leave, or back to their place of service, always armed. In conversations, they openly and sincerely expressed their friendly feelings of certainty that the Republic's independence would be protected. The people and the army were united. We often observed how soldiers or policemen would be having breakfast or lunch by the trenches, in the circle of their wives and children of different ages, engaged in a lively conversation. At the mass meetings in Havana, thousands of people gathered by the José Martí monument to demonstrate their unity and will to freedom.

In the evenings, according to tradition, the Cubans would gather in the numerous cafes, drink strong coffee with ice water or a shot of rum with Coca-Cola and discuss for hours their affairs and the situation.

It is absolutely true that during the most critical days of October-November of 1962, the cultural and social life in Cuba did not stop; people were very active. In the streets you often met groups of people singing and dancing. All clubs, cinemas and sports facilities were open. The National Ballet of Cuba was very popular, led by the prima ballerina Alicia Alonso.

During the rare hours of leisure we were able to visit the beautiful Zoological Park of Havana. In large enclosures the lions and tigers felt like they were in a real jungle. It was especially interesting to look through the glass wall of the enormous aquarium on the beach at the great variety of exotic inhabitants of the Caribbean basin, with fantastic colors and rare shapes.

We also visited the house on the hill overlooking the sea, where the great American Ernest Hemingway lived and worked. The village and its inhabitants are masterfully portrayed in the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. A military unit guarding the coast was located at the villa. The villagers and soldiers carefully preserved everything related to the great author, who was a real and sincere friend of the Cuban people.

On November 25, 1962, we started pulling back the nuclear warheads and nuclear support troops to the Port of Mariel to the familiar separate pier. The loading area was carefully guarded from land and sea.

On November 30th, the loading of the bulk carrier "Arkhangelsk" was complete, and at 09:00 hours on December 1st it left the harbor and headed east across the Atlantic to its native shores. Though it was already December, the weather was warm until we reached the Archipelago of the Azores. When we were approaching Great Britain the ship was caught in a heavy storm, which was impossible to get around. The strength of the storm reached 10 points and the ship, despite its large size, tossed in the waves. The rolling was particularly dangerous because the ship was underloaded and even the additional load in the form of precast reinforced constructions did not significantly improve its stability during the storm. The captain of the "Arkhangelsk," taking into account the situation, proposed to change course and hide from the storm in the neutral waters of the Irish Sea between the shores of Ireland and the UK, and to go to the Hebrides. The storm severely shook the vessel. The ship flew up like a feather on the crest of one giant wave after another that covered the entire ship to the bridge. Movement on deck was prohibited. Radars and searchlights were operating. The radio constantly transmitted warning signals. Suddenly, a trawler jumped out from an oncoming wave and passed the left side of our ship at a high speed. The radar probably missed it because of its small size. After the storm, we quickly reached the North Cape and turned into Murmansk harbor, which met us with a thick

fog. Given the nature of the cargo, special measures were taken to safely guide “Arkhangelsk” to Severomorsk. This operation was supported by the Northern Fleet and was led by Admiral Lobov. To avoid collision, the ship was accompanied on approach and from the stern by specially dedicated warships. Sound and light signals were transmitted constantly, the radar and radio tracking systems were in operation. All ships headed in our direction were stopped and gave us the right of way, no ships were allowed to pass us. A day later the fog began to lift, and on December 20 the bulk carrier “Arkhangelsk” moored at its native shore. The Cuban campaign was successfully completed.

The content and manner of execution of operation “Anadyr” was starkly different from previous local wars and armed conflicts. The presence of nuclear weapons in the operation was intended to exclude the possibility of military action, therefore the military objectives were to ensure nuclear safety, [ensure] strictly restricted access to nuclear warheads to eliminate the possibility of unsanctioned actions, and to ensure operational, engineering and technical camouflage.

The sound and exact actions of the forces of the Group and of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba, their composure and restraint were a reliable guarantee against provocation by the U.S., and ensured the success of the ultimate goals of the operation.

The most important political result of the strategic operation “Anadyr” was that the leaders of the USSR and U.S. realized the unacceptability of nuclear war and found a peaceful resolution to the crisis. The difficult process of nuclear disarmament began. The impact of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 on world history is indisputable. The international conferences on this subject with the participation of senior officials made it possible to more deeply and objectively understand the essence of this historic event.

The servicemen of the Soviet Army and Navy who prevented aggression against Cuba in 1962, who defended the rights and freedoms of its people, deserve appreciation and gratitude. The author does not claim to possess the full picture of the events in which he participated. These notes reflect only his personal opinion.

[Source: *U kraya yadernoi bezdny* [On the edge of nuclear abyss] (Moscow: Gregory-Paige, 1998), pp.204-213. Translated by Anna Melyakova and Svetlana Savranskaya for the National Security Archive.]