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On the Cuban Missile Crisis front lines

By **Howard Altman**

The U.S.S. Gearing had just pulled into Mayport on Florida's east coast when the commanding officer gave out a frantic order.

Shore leave was cancelled.

Everyone had to get back on board. Quickly.

It was Oct. 22, 1962. The venerable destroyer, which was first launched near the end of WWII, was about to sail into history.

"We were a green crew," said Ken Baker, 19 at the time and, like most of his shipmates, on his maiden voyage.

Those on the ship originally were headed to Guantanamo Bay for training. But, unbeknownst to electronics technicians like Baker, this would be no drill.

A week earlier, a U-2 spy plane discovered missile installations in Cuba. The Gearing and its crew were sailing into what would become the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Baker said the urgency of the departure gave the crew an inkling that something was out of the ordinary. That vague sense of foreboding hit home at about 5 a.m. on Oct. 25.

"The Russian tanker Bucharest came into contact with us," Baker said. "We wanted to board it, but we were denied that request by squadron commanders. The only thing they would let us do is stay about 200 yards off portside and take pictures."

The crew still didn't know the frantic transoceanic game of nuclear chess being played by Washington and Moscow.

"We just knew it was something with the Russians," Baker said. "We figured we might go to war, sure. It was a worry, no doubt about it."

For the next several days, as Russian technicians continued to build up the missile sites on Cuba, the Gearing sailed back and forth, maintaining the blockade.

On Oct. 27, the crew got a sense of just how unpolished they really were.

At 6:26 a.m., the shrill siren announcing "general quarters" began blaring.

"We had made contact with an unidentified aircraft," said Baker. "We didn't get to our stations in time. Being green sailors, we were not up to the task."

Fortunately, it was a friendly.

"If it was the enemy," Baker said, laughing, "we would have been in big trouble."

Later that day, President John F. Kennedy wrote a letter to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev saying the U.S. would not attack Cuba if the missiles were removed. And the next day, Khrushchev told the world the same thing.

A few days later, the Gearing arrived back at Norfolk, Va.

"I don't remember realizing that we were on the front lines of WW III," Baker said. "But when we got back to Norfolk, we found out real quick."

Baker left active duty in 1969, eventually joining the Coast Guard, from which he retired in 1987 as a lieutenant commander. After that, he became a teacher, educating students at Lyman High School in Longwood about math, physics and electronics — but not history.

On Wednesday, Baker and about 45 others who sailed aboard the Gearing during its three decades of service will show up in Tampa at the Crowne Plaza Tampa Westshore for the annual crew reunion.

In Tampa for the first time, the reunion will feature a tour of the city Thursday with lunch at the Columbia Restaurant, a Friday cruise and a Saturday auction and business meeting.

There might even be an adult beverage or two consumed, Baker said.

"The stories get better every year," he said.

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