

A Two Weeks All Expenses Paid Vacation In Sunny Florida

Life Experience

By

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The logo for Silver Arts, featuring the words "Silver Arts" in a stylized, cursive script. The word "Silver" is in a light blue color and "Arts" is in a dark blue color. The script is fluid and elegant, with a horizontal line passing through the middle of the letters.

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Title of Entry: "A Two Weeks All Expenses Paid Vacation In Sunny Florida".

Category: Literary Arts

Sub-Category: Life Experiences
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"Swanson," I heard a faint voice from my deep slumber, "Get up. You have to go to the flight line and be there by 1400 hours." I thought I was dreaming; kept my head on the pillow and eyes shut. There was always the remote possibility that I was dreaming. The only people on the flight line were air crews and people who were going somewhere and I didn't have orders (the printed variety) to go anywhere.

Again, the voice importuned this time with a palpable insistence in the tone, "Wake up and get your gear together." Evidence for the "this-is-all-a- dream- hypothesis" was quickly vanishing. There really was someone in my room nudging me to wakefulness. I was coming to my senses; it was Sergeant Brown from the Orderly Room.

"Aw, Sarge," was my feeble reply, "We had two deliveries late this morning and I didn't get to bed until 10." (I was working as a delivery room technician at the 832nd Tactical Hospital at Cannon Air Force Base, Clovis, New Mexico and my duties pertaining to the delivery of newborns, were extensive and ranged from the paraprofessional (handling a newborn) to the mundane, e.g., cleaning the delivery room after a delivery) "Besides, I have class tonight." Certainly that last retort should magically make him go away.

"Your college career will just have to wait. Duty calls and the call is for you to be in your fatigues (work uniform) and be at the flight line...now get moving." With that last bit of motivating speech, he walked out of my room and slammed the door. I had exhausted my pertinent excuses but Sergeant Brown was steadfast in his insistence that my weary body was needed elsewhere, and that was that. He never once said please; my mother would not have approved of his manner.

The uniformed services of the United States have this rather quaint expression that covers just about everything you can think of (or imagine) that is connected with conduct of any and all persons wearing

“the uniform”: ***The needs of the service come first.*** What the individual person needs, wants, covets or prefers is way, way down on the list. When the phrase applies to any specific circumstance or situation you don’t have a lot of choice in the (military) matter: you “do it” or face the consequences of being obdurate in the face of “the call.” I got up and did what I was told. I dressed and found my place to the hangar on the flight line where I was told to assemble. If I didn’t show up I would be faced with the charge of “failure to repair.”

Carrying my bag, I walked to the flight line which was about ¾ mile from my barracks. I knew it was nearby because when the atmosphere was just right the roar of jet engines would rattle the window panes of my room; the sound could be deafening. Once passed the security station, I found my way to staging area of the 474 Tactical Fighter Wing. Like me there were a couple of hundred other enlisted personnel of various ranks and specialties dressed in their green fatigue uniforms all with their appropriate tools and luggage. They all knew about as much as I did about why we were assembled or where we would be going. These other men were support personnel as well, e.g., mechanics, technicians, ordnance handlers, just as I was support for the medical complement for the group. We were flanked by several A.P. (air police) personnel that had very shiny shoes and white ascots and topped off with side arms and carbines with real bullets. It was not so much that we (the assembled) were going start fights or steal anything but this whole area of the base was one of strict security and they meant to keep it that way.

Cannon Air Force Base was a part of the Tactical Air Command, a major unit of the Air Force that employed jet fighter aircraft. (During my tenure at Cannon the plane of choice was the F-100 endearingly known as the “lead sled.” I can only assume that it received this moniker because of its propensity to return to earth with great alacrity if the engine suddenly stopped.) Each base in the TAC command (there were about 8 bases in the United States) was further organized into Wings. My

hospital group (832nd TAC hospital) was part of the 474th Tactical Fighter Wing which consisted of 5 operational squadrons of aircraft per wing. The other wing based at Cannon was the 27th TFW.

It was an early fall day in October and the day was warm and sunny but I found a shady spot in the hangar and using my B4 bag as a pillow I laid down, and drifted off to sleep. Even as I dozed I could smell the pungent odor of jet exhaust that the open hangar seemed to capture with great ease. We stayed in that hangar for a couple of hours, milling about and passing rumors: "We were going to South America," "We were going to the Caribbean," "We were going...well we were all "dressed up" and pretty sure ***we were going somewhere!*** We remained in that state of collective ignorance generously interlarded with indolence until we were finally addressed by a young first lieutenant. It was about 1600 hrs. We were first called to attention and then told to stand at ease. He advised that we would soon be boarding our transporting aircraft (C-130 Hercules) and on our way. I genuinely don't think this young man knew anymore about where we were headed than we did. That kind of knowledge existed a bit further up the chain of command. Even though I worked in the hospital squadron I knew what a C-130 was. (This plane incidentally is *still being used* by the current military for cargo missions around the world.) I looked up and down the tarmac for as far as my eyes could see and I couldn't spot a single plane of this variety at least. All of this was a strong indication that we were in a "holding pattern" or the phrase that is still operative in the uniformed services: "hurry up and wait." We were going to sit there, stand there, lie there until our transportation got to the base and that knowledge, of when the planes would arrive, again was beyond my pay grade. I got back on the hard concrete floor of the hangar and took another nap. I was pretty sure they weren't going to leave without me

It was about 1700 hrs. when suddenly, above the normal din of jet fighter aircraft comings and goings, I could hear this high pitched whining sound of the propellers of the C-130s coming to transport us to wherever we would be going. The plane had a ramp for a back door and when opened it provided an

easy means for loading the heavy equipment used by the ground crews. On the plane I would be taking there was a large, slung low to the ground, "yellow machine" that I could only assume was used to load ordinance to the underbelly of aircraft. After the equipment was loaded the support personnel boarded the aircraft. There were about fifty of us on this particular plane, sans any flight attendants. We sat on two long parallel rows of meshed netting benches facing each other across a space of about 10 feet. There were few windows and no magazines. All of this was quite exhilarating since up to that time as a young man who had not yet attained his 21st birthday I had only had one other airplane ride in my life.

Once the aircraft was loaded and the aircraft commander was satisfied everything was in order we taxied to the end of the runway. The pilot throttled up the engines, the plane shook; we began our takeoff roll and in a matter of seconds we were airborne. I was both afraid and excited at the same time. I was embarking on a journey of historic proportions only at the time I did not realize it. I was just along for the ride. Moreover, the ride was extremely noisy; the C-130 was not made for comfort and passengers were given short shrift and little consideration in its design. Sleep? Not on this transit.

The climb to cruising altitude took about 20 minutes and we still didn't know where we were headed. Word was passed back sometime after we got to cruising altitude that we were headed for Florida. No P.A. announcement, just word of mouth. We were advised that we were headed for McDill AFB, Tampa, Florida. It was pretty common knowledge that McDill was *not* a TAC base which meant this was something out of the ordinary. All things considered the deployment was unusual in the extreme. The flight lasted a little less than 4 hours and during that time I wangled a visit to the flight deck and peeked out the cockpit window. I recall seeing the-channel of the Mississippi River from about 25,000 feet. Huck Finn could not have been more thrilled than I was to see this majestic waterway from that altitude.

We got to McDill at about 2030 hrs. When the ramp was lowered, and we were allowed to exit, we were immediately treated to a blast of warm, humid Florida air. The calendar said early October but this

humid evening said it was “early Hades.” I could hear the buzzing and roar of jet engines up and down the tarmac. The smell of jet exhaust mixed with the humid air hung heavy and was slightly nauseating. There was still some light left in the day which allowed me to see the planes and their landing lights. They just kept landing. Dimly I could see there were all manner of aircraft: fighter planes, bombers, cargo planes, spy planes, i.e., F-102. This was definitely going to be some shindig.

About an hour after we landed, blue painted school buses began showing up to take us to our night’s lodging. By this time I found the other three corpsmen (Sergeant Rush and Airmen Peterson and Gent) who, like me, were part of the medical support personnel for the mission. We boarded the bus, left the flight line and were driven down a palm tree lined avenue about 3 miles to our barracks. We found our assigned room and told where to have breakfast the next morning. Even with all the excitement of the day I had no trouble sleeping. I was exhausted.

We assembled in front of the barracks at 0700 hrs. and boarded the shuttle for the return to the flight line where we met with the two physicians assigned to our medical team: Drs. Dodge and Corker. We were told to “sit tight” and await further instructions. That afternoon the first game of the World Series was televised; I found a T.V. and watched the Giants play the Yankees. There was nothing else to do. This “stand-around-and-do-nothing” went on for two more days. We were then told that on the fourth day we would assemble for the flight back to Cannon! That was it? Finished? Well, not exactly.

About two weeks later I was awakened the same way I described above. It was déjà vu all over again. Only this time when we landed at McDill there were *even more planes and personnel than before*. There were so many arriving personnel in fact they had to billet us off-base. We were housed at the Hotel Floridian in Tampa! The windows on the bus were down and the humid air had the pungent smell of salt water as we drove to Tampa. There was a jovial atmosphere on the bus. This was beginning to be fun.

We assembled at 0800 hrs. the next morning and were driven back to the base and the flight line. Again we unpacked the crates and the kits and set up a medical clinic and were ready for business but we were again in a "hurry-up-and-wait" holding pattern. I think, however, we all had a feeling that the first time was only a practice run and we hadn't yet participated in the "Big Show." Was this all some sort of exercise? No one knew. Our clinic was just feet away from an area in the hanger completely off limits to *all unauthorized* personnel and guarded night and day by the A.P.s. This was the pilots' ready room where their briefings and orders were discussed. They did not include the medical team.

About 1700 hrs. we were dismissed for the day and told us to return the next morning at 0800 hrs. Getting back to the hotel room I found myself alone; my assigned roommate had yet to show. I turned on the T.V. and was greeted to one of those messages that said: "*We interrupt this program for a special announcement,*" We were advised that President Kennedy would be addressing the nation at 1900 hrs. The station then went back to the regular programming. Did the massive buildup at McDill have something to do with this? We were all about to find out. The designated time came soon enough. In sum and in substance the President advised us that the Soviets had ICBM missiles parked in Cuba capable of hitting almost anywhere in the U.S. These missiles could be tipped with nuclear warheads. *The U.S. would not allow this situation to stand.* The President averred that the island of Cuba would be "quarantined" and **no** further ships now on the high seas would be allowed to land. It was immediately apparent that the military personnel I could see with my own eyes were all part of a first strike contingent. *We were not having an exercise we were having a showdown!* (The flight time for the fighters from McDill to Havana was about 15 minutes.) They purposely eschewed the word "blockade" as being too provocative. After the President finished his message the pundits took over and weighed in. We were told that there was in fact a Soviet vessel on the high seas headed for Cuba and set to arrive in a day or two. The ship would **not be allowed to cross the imaginary "quarantine" line** the U.S. had established. What would the captain of the Soviet vessel do? What would "we" do if he crossed

that imaginary line?! I would have an answer to the second question when I got to the flight line and my assigned duty station the next morning. I felt numb about the whole thing. The excitement and euphoria of the previous evening had faded to somber reflection on my life and future. I wondered if we were all going to all be gone in a blinding flash of light.

When we got to the base the next morning (0800 hrs.) the place was already buzzing with activities. The jets (F-100) from Cannon were all neatly lined up on the tarmac and *pilots were already sitting in their seats*. The day dawned hot and bright and the pilots were already sweating. They could not leave their planes *for any reason*. Our medical unit was assigned a type of ambulance referred to as a "Cracker Box." (If you have seen an old re-run of the M.A.S.H. T.V. show you have seen a Cracker Box.) One corpsman drove and the other (me) climbed the ladder resting against the fuselage to reach the pilot in the plane. My task was to deliver cold water to the pilots; it was *never* refused. (Time has dimmed my memory somewhat and I'm not sure if I gave the pilots plastic bottles or a cup-like container; but I do recall that I gave them plenty of water.) This went on for hours. For the whole day the pilots stayed put and I brought them water. I do not know what the pilots did about their "nature calls" and I never asked. The pilots sitting in their planes in the broiling sun drove home the seriousness of the situation.

This day, October 23, 1962 ended without the pilots flying their fully loaded planes to Cuba; the next day the Soviet vessel changed course and **did not** cross the quarantine line. Everybody breathed a sigh of relief. What was to become known as the Cuban Missile Crisis was not over yet but it was scaled back a notch. Way, way up the food chain the powers that be (on both sides) were slowly working things out and throttling down the tension and war footing. (We in the medical team did not know it but the entire military of the United States was at "DEFCON2." This was *one step removed from thermonuclear war*.) Those of us near the bottom of the chain were simply left in ignorance of such matters and little to do. Had this turned into a shooting war the medics would have had plenty of business.

We stayed at McDill a few more weeks and the crisis declared officially over on November 20, 1962. We then packed our crates, boarded some C-130s and returned to Cannon. The Soviets eventually took their missiles back to Russia. But we came very, very, very close to an Armageddon the likes of which the world has never seen. . We brushed the shadow of death in the night as a nation and as a world and never realized just how close we were to war. Decades later the real hero of the crisis became known.

His name was **Vasili Alexandrovich Arkhipov**, he was a Soviet submarine commander commanding a flotilla of four Soviet submarines operating close to Cuba. Each of the submarines was loaded with a single nuclear tipped torpedo each with the destructive power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. During the tense time of the standoff on the surface these four submarines operated beneath the waves in horrible conditions: the interior temperature was never less than 120 degrees Fahrenheit. The crews were short of everything...including communication with their controllers in Moscow! The sub commanders had been given "discretionary" orders regarding the time and place to fire that single torpedo. In sum, they **did not** need Moscow's permission to fire. In the case of the sub known as "B59" the situation had gone past anything the world has ever seen.

The lack of communication with Moscow and the conditions on the sub probably all contributed to the decision by the sub's Captain to **fire the torpedo**. There were three key players in this deadly drama under the waves that played out during those days in October of 1962: the boat's captain, the boat's political officer, and flotilla commander Arkhipov who, as fate would have it, was also on the B59. He would **not vote to fire that torpedo** and since he outranked even the captain of the vessel the torpedo was never fired. And we in the United States and the world never knew about the decision for decades.

The noted historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called the Cuban Missile Crisis "**The most dangerous moment in human history.**" Who can argue with that assessment?