

# On this date in History

A special feature in honor of Remembrance Day

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During this past winter I was awakened from a deep and pleasant sleep by the sound of an air raid siren. It was a sound I had not heard in many years, but it instantly evoked vivid memories, memories of kindergarten and air raid drills.

I began kindergarten in the fall of 1962, and in 1962, along with all those other school drills, like the Lord's Prayer and God Save the Queen and fire drills and marching out to recess in an orderly fashion, we all had to learn to quietly stand beside our chairs and, in a predetermined order, march silently out of the room. We would cross the immense central lobby and then the line that our class made snaked parallel with all the other classes' lines down those wide old stairways. Imagine hundreds of elementary school children in orderly spaced lines all going down the same two staircases and the only sounds you could hear were the rustle of wool and the clomp of leather soles on wooden stairs. We would go right past the yellow and black signs that indicated that here was a nuclear fallout shelter, down into the very basement, where we would sit on the floor with our backs to the stone wall where we'd all practice curling over to put our heads into our laps. After we'd stared at the light bulbs and the other kids for a while we'd then back to

our classrooms, a little more casual this time, relived that this wasn't the real one and secure in the knowledge that when it did happen, we'd ride it out safe and warm in the basement of the school.

Of course, this was before any of us figured out that hiding in a basement wasn't going to save anybody from nuclear attack. Back then people didn't really understand what nuclear war really meant; they would build little cement mini-bunkers in their backyards and stock them with gas masks and canned foods. They figured that after two weeks in the shelter, the fallout would blow away. Then they could all troop on out and start rebuilding things and soon life would be just like it always was.

The reason I remember these air raid drills so well is because for about two weeks in October exactly twenty-five years ago, my school practised these drills at least once a day. The Russians were going to bomb the Americans. It was almost certain; the question was, who would bomb who first, and where? This was it, the Cold War was over, the Commies and the Yanks

were finally squaring it off, they were going to go at it missile, warhead to warhead.

On October 16, 1962, President Kennedy was informed that the Soviets were installing missiles in Cuba. Cuba is about 150 miles off the coast of Florida. It's a communist country and therefore a threat to the security of the United States of America. The Yanks had already sponsored an invasion of Cuba, a feeble attempt now known as the Bay of Pigs fiasco. They were expected to try again, so the Cubans asked for and received military assistance from Moscow, including, among other things, bombers and both ballistic and nuclear missiles.

President Kennedy struck a committee, and those fifteen Americans Stauch and True came up with three retaliatory proposals: bomb Cuba, talk to them or blockade the island and force them to dismantle the missile installations. On October 22, 1962, (25 years and 3 weeks ago today) President Kennedy, appearing on network TV, announced the naval blockade of Cuba. The U.S. Mili-

tary went on alert and Soviet naval ships and submarines steamed towards Cuba. And all of the people prepared for bombs, invasions, fallouts, and who knew what else.

Khrushchev wrote letters to Kennedy and the Russian ships kept steaming towards Cuba. But when those ships reached the 800-mile cordon around the island they stopped, right there in the middle of the ocean, and waited. Khrushchev pleaded for peace and Mr. Kennedy wouldn't abide the presence of the missiles, the tension increased and people panicked. It took a couple of excruciating days but the two superpowers finally reached an agreement: the U.S. would not invade Cuba and the Russians would take the missiles back. The Crisis was over.

The Brave and handsome Kennedy had held the entire world at ransom for the sake of a handful of missiles and his political popularity. And he was touted as a hero, a hero who had stood up to the bloodthirsty commies and forced them to back down. Yes, Khrushchev did back down, he backed down in fear of what the Amer-

icans would do to prove a point, he backed down in the interest of peace and sanity.

Unfortunately, the Americans don't seem to have learned much of anything in the past twenty-five years. They still think of the Russians as some sort of mutant evil and they still think they have the right to decide the fate of humankind. The earth has been held ransom to the whims of the two superpowers for so long that we have become conditioned to the expectation of nuclear catastrophe.

This winter, when the town air raid siren went on the blink and sounded for at least fifteen minutes, nobody got dressed in practical clothing and went down to the cellar. People I knew, after they awoke, waited a moment wondering if it were real or not. Then, maybe they looked out the window at the sparkling stars and glistening snow and pondered the possibilities. And then we decided that if this were it, there was absolutely nothing we could do about it and well, it had been a good enough time and we might as well go with serene hearts. And then we kissed our loved ones and went back to sleep, with one ear open for a sound and praying against hope that we would be incinerated so that we wouldn't wake up to deal with what fallout really is.

— Kathryn Kerr

