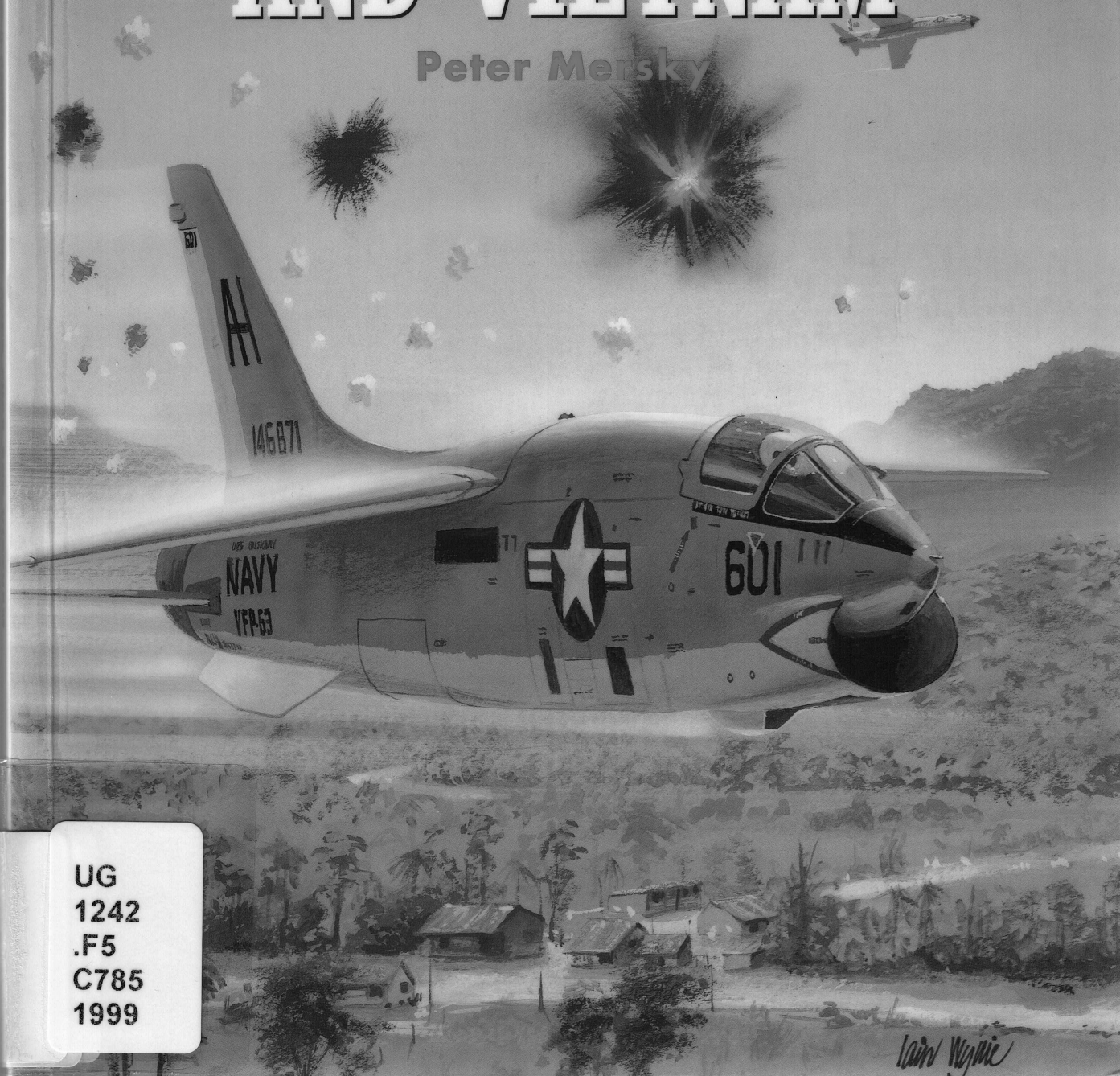




RF-8 CRUSADER UNITS OVER CUBA AND VIETNAM

Peter Mersky



UG
1242
.F5
C785
1999

INTRODUCTION



A classic approach view of the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA-42) taken by the forward-fire camera in an RF-8G's station one (directly below the nose) in November 1969. The white 'bar' at the extreme end of the flight deck is the rounddown. The LSOs can just be seen on their platform on the aft port side, and above them are the landing lights, which play such a crucial part in each approach

Only a few high-performance fighters have enjoyed simultaneously important combat careers, the secondary role usually being in an area for which they were never intended. High speed usually suggests the tactical-reconnaissance arena. The Vickers-Supermarine Spitfire, Lockheed P-38 Lightning and North American P-51 Mustang served well in this important, but decidedly less glamorous, area during World War 2 – oddly, the other major powers seldom used their fighters for reconnaissance.

Postwar reconnaissance fighters included the Royal Air Force's Meteor series (particularly the FR 9), the US Navy's Grumman F9F Panther and McDonnell F2H Banshee and the US Air Force's Republic RF-84F Thunderflash and Lockheed RF-80.



RF-8G BuNo 146897 takes off in full afterburner from NAS Miramar. This remanufactured A-model from VFP-63 displays the common *EYES OF THE FLEET* bulkhead marking on the raised wing. Having survived the Vietnam conflict, this particular aircraft was finally lost whilst operating with VFP-63 Det 4, as part of CVW-6, aboard USS *Independence* (CV-62) on 9 June 1981



An RF-8A from VMCJ-2 taxis up the flight deck after a trap. Although Marine Corps RF-8 pilots were, after all, naval aviators, and were required to maintain their carrier qualifications, many seldom saw a carrier. In a few months this aircraft and pilot would be flying missions from NAS Guantánamo during the 1962 Cuban Crisis. Remanufactured into an RF-8G, this particular aircraft (BuNo 145646) was lost some 17 years later whilst serving with VFP-63 Det 2 during cruise work-ups aboard *Coral Sea* on 13 October 1979 (Harold Austin)

Vought's world-beating F8U Crusader, which resurrected the struggling pioneer company's fortune almost single-handedly, seemed an ideal candidate for major redesign into a fast tactical-reconnaissance platform to essentially replace the Panther and Banshee. It had attracted national attention in July 1957 when Marine Maj John H Glenn flew from California to New York in three hours and twenty-three minutes, averaging 725.55 miles per hour (Mach 1.1).

While the fighter-Crusader began its fleet introduction in late 1956, 32nd production F8U-1 (the pre-1962 designation) BuNo 141363 was drastically altered forward of the wing. The fighter's four 20 mm internal cannon were deleted, the slim forward fuselage broadened and its belly flattened to accommodate a suite of Chicago Aerial cameras. Early-build F8U-1Ps (as the early designation system called the photo-recce version) carried a variety of vertical and oblique platforms, plus three separate – the trimetogen arrangement – cameras which used overlapping photography to give horizon-to-horizon coverage. Later, the KA-66 and KA-68 pan cameras gave true panoramic photography, being located in Station 2 – there were four camera positions in the photo-Crusader.

Station 1 was located directly below the cockpit, a prominent fairing housing a camera that looked directly along the jet's flight path at a 45° angle. This positioning was excellent for obtaining approach imagery to a target, and became one of the RF-8's most dependable cameras. Station 1 could also be altered to carry a 16 mm motion picture camera, although this was rarely used.

Besides Station 2, with its pan camera, the RF-8 included Stations 3 and 4 with vertically- and obliquely-mounted cameras that could look either directly below the aircraft, or out the side windows.

Film size was originally 70 mm (2.5-in square), but by 1967 the introduction of the RF-8G had seen the size enlarged to 4.5-in square.

The photo-Crusader's mission was intelligence-gathering. Without armament, and with a greatly increased internal fuel capacity, the RF-8 was a 'speedster', relying on surprise, pilot courage and skill – and perhaps a little luck – and supersonic dash speeds to get over the target, get the photos, and get out before enemy air defences could be brought to bear.

The F8U-1P made its first flight on 17 December 1956, and Vought's

A head-on view of a Marine RF-8A showing the distinctly 'boxy' look of the redesigned fuselage, which deleted the fighter's cannon for the suite of cameras. The pilot's viewfinder window is directly below the black nose cone. The fairing directly above the nosegear houses the forward-firing KA-45 camera – one of the aircraft's primary sensors



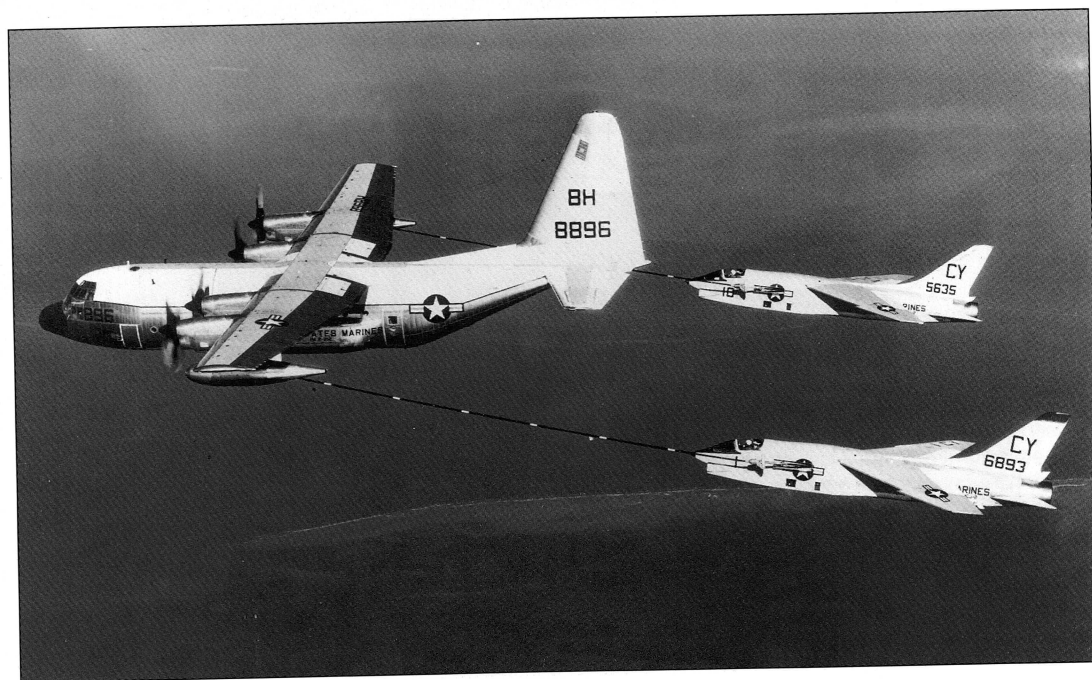
photo-bird joined the fleet with VFP-61 in September 1957. During this period, the Navy's reconnaissance squadrons went through a series of redesignations and re-equipment, but eventually by 1962 the two 'light-photographic' units were VFP-62 and -63, which covered responsibilities for the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets respectively. The Marine Corps used F8U-1Ps in composite reconnaissance squadrons (which had diverse, but related, tactical responsibilities), namely VM CJ-1, -2 and -3, whilst VM CJ-4 was a short-lived reserve unit.

Therefore, by mid-1962 the F8U-1P (which would be redesignated RF-8A in a major revamping of the American military numbering system that October) formed an important part of the naval aviation sea-going effort.



This 1959 photo of VM CJ-1 RF-8A BuNo 146861 shows the different cameras the photo-Crusader could carry, although not all at once. The deployed speedbrake, immediately forward of the main gear, appears to be striped. The Corps had a limited number of RF-8s, and this aircraft would find itself flying some of the earliest combat missions in Vietnam from several carriers in the latter half of 1964. Converted into an RF-8G, BuNo 146861 was lost in a non-combat-related accident in the South China Sea on 5 September 1972 whilst serving with VFP-63 Det 1 aboard *Hancock*. A second Crusader from CVW-21 (F-8J BuNo 150229 from VF-24) was also lost during a non-combat sortie on this day – both pilots were recovered

Because of its large internal fuel tanks, the RF-8 seldom needed to refuel in the air, but it never hurt to practice. These two VM CJ-2 RF-8Gs are seen receiving from a KC-130 during a stateside training mission



CUBAN CRISIS

CUBAN CRISIS

The photo-Crusader's first operational test came in the mid-autumn of 1962, and involved both Navy and Marine RF-8As. USAF U-2 reconnaissance flights had brought back indications, but not incontestable proof, that the Soviets had introduced intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) into their client state, the island of communist Cuba. On 13 October, in conjunction with continued USAF flights, VFP-62 and Marine squadron VMCJ-2 were ordered to stand by at Naval Air Station (NAS) Cecil Field, near Jacksonville.

The RF-8As were needed for low-level high-speed runs to confirm the earlier U-2 photos that only showed earth moving and unconfirmed construction activity. Cuban agents reported information about possible missile bases, and the US government wanted a closer look. A high-flying U-2 might take only one to two frames a minute, but an RF-8 travelling at 600 knots at 5000 ft took several frames a second. No only was the coverage that much greater, it was also more detailed.

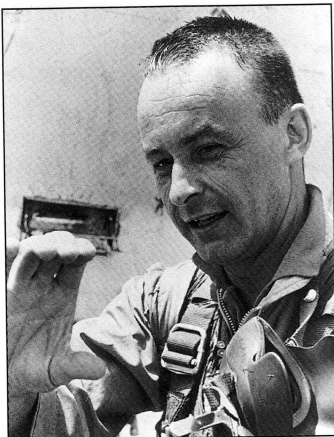
While VFP-62 scrambled to get detachments to carriers in case the 'big ships' went on a war footing, its land-based 'home squadron' prepared for operations over Cuba. Four Marine pilots were assigned to VFP-62 to provide additional resources and fly the Navy squadron's RF-8s. The flights duly began on 23 October 1962 under the codename *Blue Moon*, six aircraft overflying three targets – two RF-8s apiece. Two aircraft always flew per sortie. Fourteen flights were made on 27 October, which proved to be the greatest number during the entire operation.

The RF-8As made two flights daily from NAS Key West, completing low-level high-speed dashes over the heavily-defended island before landing back at NAS Jacksonville, where the Crusaders' film was downloaded and rushed for processing and interpretation at the Fleet Air Photo Lab (FAPL) owned by VFP-62. After their film was downloaded, the RF-8As returned to Cecil Field, which was just a short

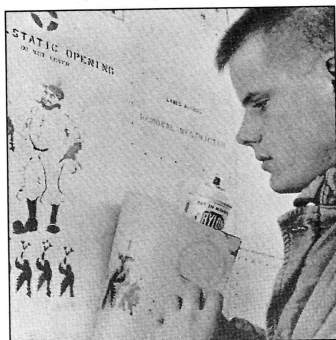
Cdr William Ecker dismounts from his RF-8A after a mission over Cuba. This photograph was taken sometime after the squadron had received the first ever peacetime Navy Unit Commendation on 26 November 1962 – note the ribbon painted on the Crusader's nose. The forward-fire camera bay is already open, as is the number-three bay door behind the plane captain assisting his skipper



ERND HAZY LIBRARY



Cdr Ecker gives his initial impressions of the mission. A career naval pilot, Ecker had seen combat in F4U-1D Corsairs during World War 2 as a member of VBF-10 aboard USS *Intrepid* (CV-11). Note his large oxygen mask with bayonet fittings. The bullets on his chest bandoleer can just be seen between the mask and the right shoulder strap of his torso harness



Another dead chicken means another successful mission over Cuba. Each RF-8A received a caricature of Cuban Premier Fidel Castro – note the he is wearing a baseball uniform, which refers to the Cuban nation's passion for the game – and a dead chicken marking for each mission. Castro's fear of being poisoned in New York during a state visit, and his demand for a freshly killed chicken, prompted the latter marking



Above: Still in full flight gear, Cdr Ecker leans over the light table to run through mission film with photo interpreters and other interested officers at the Jacksonville photo lab. Note Ecker's ammunition belt, characteristically worn across the chest

Below: A page from Cdr Ecker's flight log, showing some of the October missions over Cuba. Note that although the designation system for the Navy's aircraft had changed that month, the yeoman responsible for inscribing this vital piece of a pilot's record still refers to the RF-8A as F8U-1P

MONTH: <u>OCTOBER</u>		YEAR: <u>1962</u>		CODES: A-actual B-estimated C-OOA D-OOA E-OOA F-117 G-JAN H-Catalina	
AIRCRAFT		PILOT TIME		INSTRUMENT TIME	
DAY	MODEL	SERIAL	PILOT	TIME	REMARKS
2	F8U-1P	146834	349	1.8	1.8
4	"	146874	189	2.3	2.3
10	"	146834	349	1.8	1.8
15	"	146834	189	2.7	2.7
23	"	146871	181	1.3	1.3
24	"	146871	181	1.7	1.7
19	"	146871	181	1.2	1.2
TOTAL THIS PAGE		14.3		14.3	
BROUGHT FORWARD		3820.5		42.3	42.3
TOTAL TO DATE		3834.8		54.6	54.6
TOTALS, THIS FISCAL YEAR		14.3		14.3	

INSTRUMENT TIME		LANDINGS		REMARKS	
DAY	TIME	TIME	REMARKS	TIME	REMARKS
2	1.8	1.8			
4	2.3	2.3			
10	1.8	1.8			
15	2.7	2.7			
23	1.3	1.3			
24	1.7	1.7			
19	1.2	1.2			
TOTALS, THIS FISCAL YEAR		14.3		14.3	

flight away from Jacksonville, for maintenance. They then returned to Key West for the next missions. Over a six-week period, these operations saw RF-8s bring back more than 160,000 negatives.

The Missile Crisis was in full swing when the US Navy instituted a naval blockade, challenging the Soviets' continued movement to and from Cuba. The world has never, before or since, seemed so close to nuclear war. Finally, after a week of diplomatic furore, the Soviets agreed to dismantle the missile installations and remove them from Cuba.

While the delicate negotiations continued, so did the *Blue Moon*



GA 910 (BuNo 146871) taxis in at NAS Jacksonville after a mission in late 1962, with squadron CO, Cdr William Ecker at the controls. Like many of the Cuban Crisis RF-8As, this aircraft was later remanufactured as a G-model and saw heavy action in Vietnam with the VFP-63 det on board *Oriskany* in 1966, amongst several other TF 77 cruises. It was finally lost in an operational accident whilst flying with VFP-63 on 2 December 1976

President John F Kennedy, second from left, awards VFP-62 the first peacetime Navy Unit Commendation on 26 November 1962. Cdr William Ecker is seen shaking the president's hand after accepting the award for his unit



flights. Recovering at Jacksonville after a mission, each Crusader would receive another 'dead chicken' marking below its cockpit to denote the successful completion of the flight. This marking referred to a comical episode involving Cuban Premier Castro who, on an early visit to New York City in 1960, demanded a live chicken be killed and cooked for him on the spot to prevent someone trying to assassinate him by poisoning his food.

In addition to the 'chicken' markings, every Crusader had the phrase 'Smile, you're on Candid Camera' painted on the lower fuselage surface immediately in front of the Station 1 camera blister.

The chronology of RF-8A sorties per day during *Blue Moon* was as follows:

23 October - three flown	7 November - four flown
25 October - ten flown	8 November - four flown
27 October - fourteen flown	9 November - six flown
29 October - two flown	10 November - four flown
1 November - two flown	11 November - four flown
2 November - two flown	12 November - four flown
3 November - two flown	13 November - six flown
5 November - six flown	15 November - two flown
6 November - two flown	

No Navy flights were made from 15 November 1962 through to the final sortie on 5 June 1963.

The 12 regular squadron pilots that participated in *Blue Moon* each received the Distinguished Flying Cross, and VFP-62 itself received the first peacetime Navy Unit Commendation, which was personally presented to the unit's CO by President John F Kennedy when he visited the squadron at Key West on 26 November 1962. The four Marine aviators who flew *Blue Moon* missions received their DFCs from CINCLANT, Adm Robert L Denison, at a separate ceremony in Jacksonville. Unfortunately, the Marines were not eligible for the unit commendation because they were not technically part of VFP-62.

Capt (later Lieutenant-General) John Hudson was one of the four



One of four VMCJ-2 Marine aviators assigned to VFP-62, Capt John I Hudson (right) shakes hands with Cdr Ecker after completing yet another sortie over Cuba. The humorous dead-chicken marking is prominently displayed between them. Hudson went on to enjoy a full career with the Corps, commanding F-4 squadrons and eventually retiring as a lieutenant general (three stars)

Harold Austin, affectionately known as 'Hoss', poses on his photo-Crusader on the day of his permanent promotion to captain – the pilot almost certainly received his nickname because of his resemblance to television actor Dan Blocker, who played the character of 'Hoss' Cartwright in the popular Western series *Bonanza*. Barely visible on the left collar of his flightsuit is the metal insignia of a sergeant (pay grade E-5), from which he was commissioned. On this important day, he decided he wanted his promotion dramatically documented on film

heavy Cuban flak which nearly shot down several RF-8As.

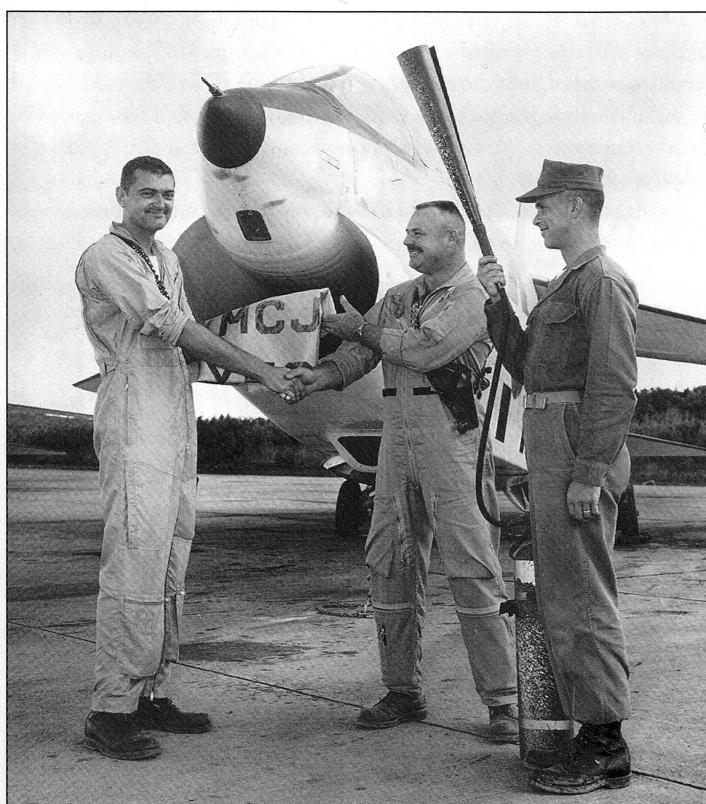
Along with his three Marine Corps buddies, Hudson had initially undertaken the two-hour flight from his base at Cherry Point, in North Carolina, to join VFP-62 at Key West on 19 October. On 10 November two of the Marine pilots flew a mission to commemorate the USMC's 187th birthday, one of the jets involved being RF-8A BuNo 145611 which included this flight as one of five consecutive sorties completed during the crisis.

Although VFP-62 performed the bulk of the Crusader overflights once the Cuban situation had come to a head, Marine RF-8s from a small VMCJ-2 detachment based at the large US Navy facility at Guántanamo ('Gitmo'), on the Cuban mainland, also provided an interesting sidelight during the stand-off.

In the two years prior to the crisis, VMCJ-2 had been performing electronic-surveillance flights with specially-equipped Douglas F3D Skyknights – this large twin-engined straight-winged jet, which later in its long career would become an important platform for gathering ELINT (electronic intelligence) in Vietnam, had made its combat debut a decade earlier during the Korean War, when Marine F3Ds had accounted for a number of night kills, including six MiG-15s (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 4 - Korean War Aces* for further details).

The Marine F3Ds would take off from nearby Caribbean airfields such as those on Jamaica or in the Bahamas in the early pre-dawn hours, then fly well off the Cuban coast enticing Cuban radar to show itself. The Cubans usually obliged, and the Marines always brought back a lot of intelligence, which took several weeks to analyse. The Skyknights also had direct radio





The men of the forgotten 'Gitmo' contingent pose by one of their aircraft, prominently displaying their unit banner. Harold Austin and Capt Gary Hintz (second and third from left, front row) relied on these people to keep their RF-8As up and ready during the crisis

Capt Gary Hintz (left) and Harold Austin (right) pose by one of two RF-8As from the VMCJ-2 det at Guántanamo. The two aviators flew recon missions during the crisis, including several at night. Note their bandoleers and sidearm holsters. Hintz retired as a colonel, while Austin retired as a major and later became a Wesleyan minister

links with the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), even though these missions were flown in a complete radio blackout.

With the onset of the Cuban Crisis, however, and in addition to the seconded pilots and groundcrews sent to the larger VFP-62 effort, a two-jet detachment flew to Guántanamo, staging through Boca Chica, in Florida. Young Crusader driver Capt Harold M Austin Jr was the