

Thirteen Days in Shelby, Michigan

By Brian Milliron



During the height of the Cold War, the constant threat of nuclear war existed between the United States and the Soviet Union. While radar stations throughout Michigan helped defend the country's northern border from attack, nothing could prepare the Great Lakes State for a 13-day nuclear standoff in October 1962—the Cuban Missile Crisis.

A Boeing B-52 Stratofortress, the main bomber plane of Michigan's Air Force bomber squadrons during the Cuban Missile Crisis, photographed in the mid-1960s. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force.)

Twenty-seven years ago, the Soviet Union dissolved, ending a threat that had plagued the United States since the end of the Second World War. During the Cold War-Era

arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, U.S. Air Force installations in Michigan played a critical—albeit generally unrecognized—role. By being able to detect potential incoming Soviet aircraft, hosting Strategic Air Command (SAC) bomber bases, and providing fighter-interceptor capability, Michigan was the tip of the spear of U.S. national defense.

The closest route between the Soviet Union and the United States was over the North Pole, which put Michigan at the forefront of defense in the continental United States, since the Great Lakes State was only 4,000 miles from the Soviet bomber base at Murmansk. The creation of Strategic Air Command bases in Michigan towns such as Oscoda, Sault Ste. Marie, and Kincheloe also meant that Michigan would be a likely target for incoming Soviet bomber raids and, later, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) if war ever broke out.

Beginning in the 1950s, three major radar defense lines were created north of the continental United States: the Dew Radar Line in the Arctic, the Mid-Canada Radar Line, and the Pinetree Line that extended east to west just north of Lake Superior.

While radar lines were an important first line of defense, gap filler radar stations in Michigan would be required to fully meet any Soviet threat. Those radar facilities would go on to play a crucial role in making sure that an international crisis in October 1962 would not lead to full-scale nuclear war.

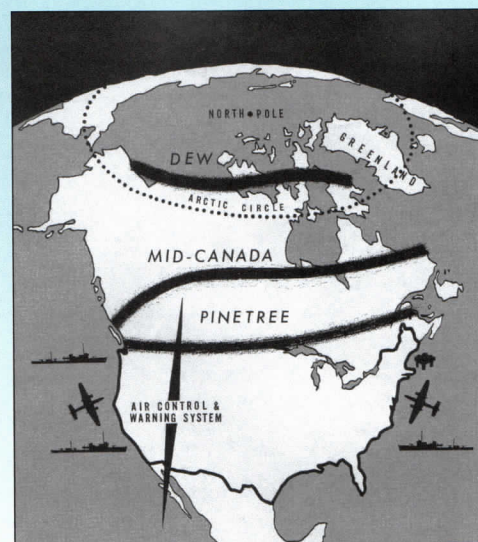


On October 14, 1962, a U.S. U-2 spy plane flying over Cuba photographed Soviet missile sites that could reach the continental United States, setting off the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the next 13 days, the United States and the Soviet Union moved closer than ever before to waging World War III.

In the event of war, the SAC had a tremendous force at its disposal, including

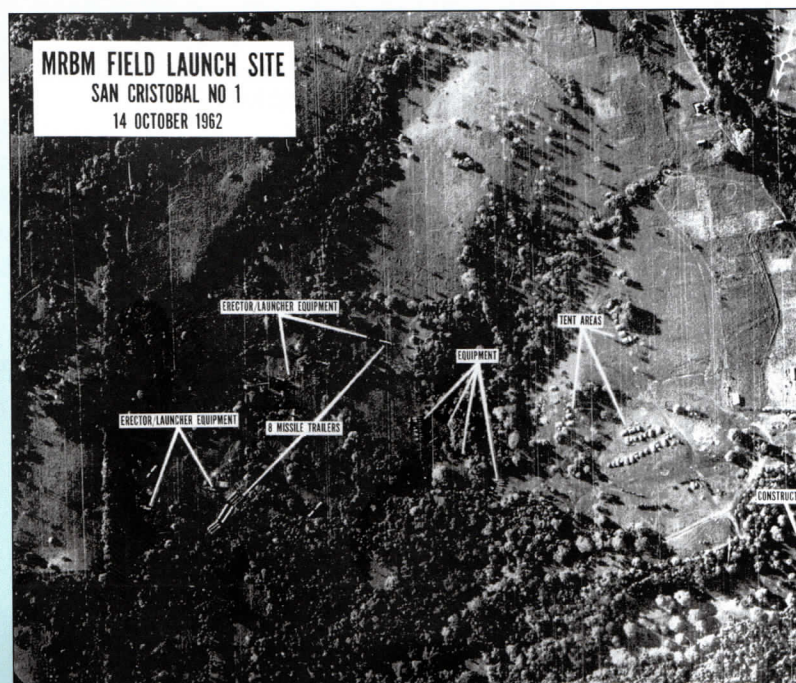
1,479 bombers; 1,003 refueling tankers; and 182 ballistic missiles available for use against the Soviet Union. That force included the 526th Bomber Squadron at K.I. Sawyer Air Force Base in Marquette, the 93rd Bomber Squadron at Kincheloe Air Force Base in Sault Ste. Marie, and the 524th Bomber Squadron at Wurtsmith Air Force Base northwest of Oscoda.

A number of those bomber planes were airborne at all times. The belief was that, even if the Soviet Union was able to decimate U.S. leadership in Washington, D.C., American command-and-control facilities, ICBM silos, and bomber bases around the country could offer enough firepower to hit back at the Soviets. At the very least, the deterrence that those facilities created made the possibility of mutually assured destruction enough of a reality that the Soviet Union would not attempt such a first strike.



The three major radar defense lines in the northwestern hemisphere. Michigan's gap filler radar stations were stationed south of the Pinetree Line. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Department of Defense.)

A reconnaissance photograph of Soviet missile sites being constructed in Cuba in October 1962. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.)





U.S. Air Force radar technician Don Chaffin at a radar gap filler station in 1966. (Photo courtesy of Don Chaffin.)

Had cooler heads not prevailed in Washington, D.C., and Moscow, planes of the three Michigan bomber squadrons would have attacked targets inside the Soviet Union. Wurtsmith had just received the latest version of the Boeing B-52 Stratofortress, the fastest and most advanced model in the SAC arsenal. The 524th Bomber Squadron, along with the 920th Air Refueling Squadron, which arrived at Wurtsmith in 1960 with its KC-135 Stratotanker refueling aircraft, were ready as President John F. Kennedy responded to the crisis.

While SAC bases across the country prepared themselves for war as the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolded, Michigan's gap filler radar stations did the same. One such radar site was located just west of the small Western Michigan village of Shelby. Situated 817 feet above sea level, the radar facility—like others in Empire, Midland, Saugatuck, Alpena, Burnside, and Grand

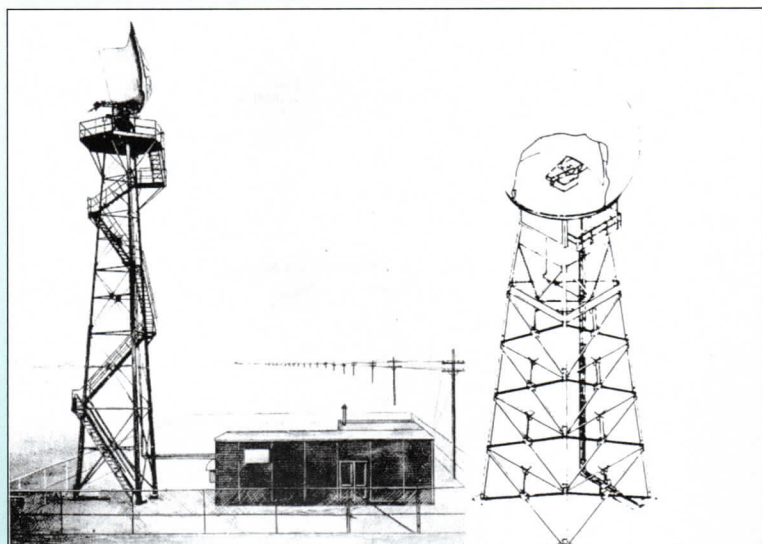
Marais—was manned to provide additional radar coverage to the north.

The village of Shelby was no stranger to war. More than a decade before the radar facility was created in 1958, the area had housed 500 German prisoners of war (POWs) in a camp erected on the high school football field. The German POWs were used for labor by farmers in northern Muskegon, Oceana, and southern Mason Counties.

Many young men and women in the U.S. Air Force during the 1950s and 1960s were stationed at gap filler radar stations. One such radar technician in Michigan was Don Chaffin, who was assigned to service a number of stations once a week or when an unscheduled emergency occurred. Chaffin routinely manned facilities at Shelby, Saugatuck, Empire, and others throughout the state.

Chaffin's group was permanently assigned to Custer Air Force Station near Battle Creek. When his team serviced the sites, they drove government vehicles to whatever location required maintenance. Typically, the technicians would overnight in a local motel or bed and breakfast while away from Custer. If a malfunction occurred when they were not on-site, two men would be dispatched in an overtime capacity to return the equipment to operational status.

A sketch rendering of the FPS-18 Gap Filler Radar, which was the model located in Shelby during the Cuban Missile Crisis. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force.)



Chaffin visited the gap filler station in Shelby on Monday, October 22, 1962—precisely at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Traveling in a car not equipped with a radio and due to the lack of mobile communication devices in the early 1960s, he and his team were not aware of the international emergency occurring during their drive.

When they arrived in Shelby, the technicians checked in on an unsecure phone line and discovered that the U.S. military had moved to DEFCON 3, the highest nationwide alert state yet reached during the Cold War. U.S. forces worldwide stood at increased readiness, and the Air Force was prepared to mobilize in 15 minutes. Chaffin and his team were ordered to obtain weapons and guard the Shelby station

until relieved. That was all the information they were given—because they were on an unsecure line, they were not told the details of the developing Cuban Missile Crisis. Unsurprisingly, their imaginations began to run wild as they took up arms and followed orders, almost entirely unaware of the tense standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Two days later, Chaffin and his fellow technicians were informed that the U.S. military was now at DEFCON 2, meaning that the country's armed forces were ready to deploy in less than six hours. The United States was now one step away from a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Throughout American history, the U.S. military has only been at DEFCON 2 twice—during the Cuban Missile Crisis and at the beginning of the Gulf War.

Fortunately, a relief crew soon arrived and briefed the radar technicians on what was happening in the Caribbean. Chaffin and his team were then able to make their way back to Custer as the situation stabilized.



In the end, President Kennedy and his advisors were able to find a peaceful solution to the Cuban Missile Crisis and avert nuclear war. Negotiations between Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin and U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the president's younger brother, produced an agreement to settle the crisis. The Americans promised not to invade Cuba and to remove 15 Jupiter Missiles in Turkey, which could reach the Soviet Union, within six months. In return, the Soviets agreed to remove their missiles from Cuba. The agreement nullified the potential threat of a Soviet strike on the United States.

The naval blockade of Cuba was officially lifted on November 20, 1962, and the U.S. armed forces returned to DEFCON 5, the normal state of military readiness. However, radar facilities across Michigan and throughout the country continued to be manned and readied for war.

The fate of a majority of the country's gap filler radar facilities came not long after the Cuban Missile Crisis ended. By June 1968, many of Michigan's radars had been shut



U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Union Premier Nikita Khrushchev.
(Photo courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum.)

down due to budget constraints and the increased role of ICBMs. The Shelby radar facility was in use until 1969. All three of Michigan's SAC bomber bases have since been shut down, with Kincheloe closing in 1977; Wurtsmith, in 1993; and K.I. Sawyer, in 1995.

Nonetheless, the memory of Michigan during the Cuban Missile Crisis remains, and the legacy of its role in protecting the United States during the Cold War cannot be overstated, for Michigan was truly the tip of the spear of American national defense.

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The abandoned radar tower in Shelby in the early 2000s. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.)

