

Posted on Sun, May. 21, 2006

## THE KEYS

# Reunion puts light on faded mission

Now-gray generation of missile and radar operators recall when paradise seemed perched on the edge of war.

BY JENNIFER BABSON  
[jbabson@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:jbabson@MiamiHerald.com)

**FLEMING KEY** - As Bob Weymouth pressed his face against the window of a rolling U.S. Navy tour bus, memories fogged by three decades started to flow -- highlights of a time when South Florida perched on the edge of war and a young soldier felt needed.

"This is the first time since 1973 I've made this drive," Weymouth, a retired Army clerk, said, eyes wide, hands a little shaky. ``None of these trees were here. This used to be the old guard gate. It's all coming back."

Weymouth and 30 other men who made up Homestead's and the Keys' HAWK missile battalion -- focused squarely on Cuba -- gathered in Key West last week to relive a mission that has faded from the local memories of many, though shadows still lurk for those who know where to look.

The detritus includes the rusted metal skeletons of radar towers and odd-angled bunkers whose concrete has bested countless storms.

The HAWK program went hand-in-hand with the Cuban Missile Crisis, which unfolded in October 1962 when the U.S. confronted the Soviets over nuclear missile installations spy photos detected on the island. In the end, the Soviets backed down. Though the crisis is considered to be the most perilous moment of the Cold War, its passing did not dampen U.S. interest in maintaining a vigorous missile defense system aimed at Cuba for 17 years.

As part of that operation, Weymouth toiled from 1971 to 1973 at the U.S. Army's Alpha Battery HAWK missile site on Fleming Key. Four batteries that included six mobile missile launchers each with three missiles per launcher were scattered across the Keys.

Last week, some of those men toured spots that had once been theirs. Among the places were Fleming Key -- where the Army now operates an elite underwater training school -- and Battery Bravo, a spot that now houses a graffiti-covered city warehouse and park tucked behind Key West International Airport.

"I'd never really been away from home," recalled Wes Guidry, the former drill sergeant and reunion coordinator. Guidry was 18 when he left Louisiana in 1969 and headed to the Keys to become a "fire control operator" -- Army talk for the guy who pushes the missile button. Guidry never got the chance: The missiles were readied but never fired.

## 'HOT' STATUS

On Wednesday, a keg of Budweiser and hotdogs greeted dozens of aging men who recalled Key West's beaches, the island's solitude and rowdy bars that left some wanting when unannounced drills or an immediate "hot" status was unexpectedly ordered.

"The last barracks over there -- that's where we lived," Guidry said, pointing to a faded concrete building at Naval Air Station Key West on Boca Chica. ``First room on the left, third floor."

If they were scared, the boys and men who manned these missiles insist they never showed it. Still, every missile at one of the four batteries at a time had to be ready to fire within five minutes.

"It was real scary when the sirens went off," said Lowell St. Cyr, a fire control operator who worked 24 hours on, 24 off. ``They could go off anytime we had an aircraft we couldn't identify."

About 17 feet tall, the HAWK has a 22-mile range and stands for "Homing All the Way Killer" because of the way it works: A radar shoots a beam and outlines a target, which the missile -- which travels at 2 1/2 times the speed of sound -- locks onto.

## FRONT LINES

Under the philosophy of mutual assured destruction, anything seemed possible.

"This could happen any time. We still felt the threat because [Cuba] was so close," St. Cyr said. ``This was the front lines of the Cold War."

Frank Ronkowski still can see the tent that provided shelter for him in 1963, when he was among the scores of soldiers dispersed throughout the Keys during and just after the crisis.

As a 23-year-old fire control operator, Ronkowski had a particular mission.

"I had to authenticate all messages coming in and going out," the Illinois native said. ``The codes changed every hour."

#### **REPORTING FOR DUTY**

Last week, even some of the operation's battery commanders showed up for duty, slipping back into familiar roles, even though years had worn away any edge.

"I never wore my rank and still don't," said Jerry Rhyne, 60, a spectacled real estate agent and retiree from Georgia who married a military nurse he courted in Key West.

``These here were a bunch of good 'ole kids."

On Friday, all received Army recognition certificates and pins for their service, and 11 collected Korean Defense Service Medals for HAWK work there.