

## **Cuban Missile Crisis Assembly**

In a recent well-being survey, you told us that the areas that you most needed support were in developing coping strategies and sustaining positive attitudes. I have a story from history this morning that shows the importance of both and may have something to teach us today. Let's go back to Saturday October 27, 1962, which has been described as 'the most dangerous' day in human history. It was the height of the Cuban crisis, the riskiest part of the Cold War with the old Soviet Union.

Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, knew that the United States was trying to destabilise Cuba. Cuba was a communist run island in the Caribbean, just 90 miles from the US mainland. He thought that the Americans would not dare to intervene if they knew that Cuba was equipped with Soviet nuclear warheads. Before the Americans had realised what was going on, Khrushchev had managed to ship forty thousand troops and more than 160 nuclear warheads to Cuba.

Clearly, this situation was unacceptable for the United States of America. But what could they do? Should they try to destroy the missiles? Should there be a declaration of war? No one knew if the missiles were operational, and the only way to find out would require a full-scale invasion of Cuba. Any such attack on an ally of the Soviet Union would surely provoke a military response from Russia. With both sides equipped with thousands of nuclear warheads, each on a hair trigger to launch them, the conflict had every chance of ending in a nuclear-tipped World War Three.

The American President – John Fitzgerald Kennedy - was being guided towards a violent solution when by chance he bumped into an old colleague, Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson persuaded Kennedy to try a peaceful solution before committing to war.

Meanwhile, a Soviet submarine designated B-59 had been dispatched from the USSR with three other submarines, as part of the top-secret effort to install ballistic nuclear missiles in Cuba. By the time President Kennedy learned of the plan, these subs were halfway across the Atlantic. As part of Stevenson's suggested peaceful solution, Kennedy announced the quarantine of Cuba by the United States Navy. Cuba would be sealed off to prevent any Russian ships from getting through.

The submarines were nearing the island when they were ordered by the Soviet naval command to change course and take up positions in the Sargasso Sea. Conditions in the submarines, which were designed for the icy waters of the North, were hellish. American destroyers were practically on top of the sub - this prevented it from surfacing to recharge its batteries and use its antenna to receive instructions from Moscow. After 5 days of waiting underwater, conditions on B-59 were so bad that men were passing out. In the words of one, 'they were falling like dominoes'. The boat's captain, Valentin Savitsky, knew from previous days' communications that a crisis was unfolding above the waves but, unable to receive radio signals, he had no way of learning about recent developments.

To avoid any escalation to armed conflict, American warships were supposed to follow a careful protocol when they came across Russian submarines. They were to drop harmless depth charges and instruct the subs to surface. But that day, someone on the American warship decided to drop hand grenades into the water. The suffering Soviet submarine was suddenly rocked by a series of explosions.

Vadim Orlov, a communications specialist on board the sub, later described it thus: 'It felt like you are sitting in a metal barrel which somebody is constantly blasting with a sledgehammer.' The captain ordered the crew to get ready to fire back. 'Maybe the war has

already started up there, while we are doing somersaults here,' he shrieked. 'We are going to blast them now!'

What the grenade throwers did not know - what almost no one knew until quite recently - was that one of the B-59's torpedoes was carrying what the Soviets called 'special ammunition'. The special part was a 15 kiloton nuclear warhead. Had the captain's orders been carried out, there would have been a nuclear explosion, and the chances are good that the Americans would have responded in kind - a full-scale nuclear war would have broken out.

The crisis was escalating elsewhere: at the same time as the clash at sea, an American spy plane was shot down over Cuba. Simultaneously, Khrushchev received a message from the Cuban leader that seemed to urge a nuclear strike against the US. But Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader, wrote badly and the Russian translators found it almost impossible to decipher what he meant. Clearly, matters were coming to a head.

Under the sea, in a submarine battered by exploding hand grenades, another crisis was unfolding. On board B-59, next to the sub's captain who was determined to fire his nuclear torpedoes, was a Soviet Navy captain called Vasily Archipov. It was pure chance that Archipov was on board, but he was to play a vital role in what happened next. Before Archipov had set off for Cuba he had already been involved in a nuclear disaster, as an officer on a submarine called K-19. This was the USSR's first nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered submarine. It had been rushed into service in an effort to keep up with the Americans, and it was so danger prone that its crew began to refer to it as 'Hiroshima'.

A year earlier, K-19 had been participating in exercises off the coast of Greenland when its reactor coolant system failed. It had no backup system. K-19's commander sent in crew members to repair the damage, knowing that they were likely to receive lethal doses of

radiation. Within days, eight of the crewmembers who had volunteered for the task were dead.

Archipov had been on board and had seen the horror of radiation. It was he who talked the sub's captain down from firing B-59's nuclear torpedo and potentially starting the Third World War. If it hadn't been for Archipov's experience off Greenland, he might not have stepped in. But that was not the only piece of luck required to avoid war. Things might have been very different. Archipov could have been aboard a different submarine. Kennedy might not have met Stevenson and been persuaded to try a peaceful solution. The message from Castro to Khrushchev could have been translated as a request for a nuclear strike.

Khrushchev could have rejected the deal that the United States then offered Russia. There are countless other moments during the thirteen days of the Cuban missile crisis when things could have gone very wrong indeed.

By very wrong, I mean a full-blown nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia which would have led to the extinction of almost every living thing on the face of the planet. I would not be here speaking, this Hall would be in ruins and almost no one in the room would have even been born. Those here old enough to remember the year 1962 would have died then in a flash of light and heat, or in the long dark cold nuclear winter that would have followed.

I tell you this story for three reasons. My first thought is that all we hold dear hangs by a thread, and we must fight hard to preserve our life and civilisation.

My second thought is that all complex situations contain the possibility for unanticipated events, no matter how carefully we plan. It makes sense to step carefully as we prepare for whatever future we hope to live. My third thought is the most resonant for me. When everything was spiralling out of control and it looked as though we were heading for a

violent, desperate conclusion, a single man stepped forward and did what he thought was right.

Everyone in this room owes their life to a man whose name you had never heard. Vasily Archipov has no statues. He is almost completely forgotten. But what he did on October 27, 1962, in an overheated submarine, rocked by explosions, surrounded by screaming men, saved us all. A single man, acting calmly and guided by reason was the thread upon which the fate of our world hung.

I pray that no one in this room finds himself in such a moment of crisis. But there will be other, lesser moments of trouble and fear. In the moment when you are tested, I hope you might remember Vasily Archipov. I hope that memory inspires you to be that voice of calm, controlled reason that brings a peaceful conclusion. And you don't need to wait for a crisis to be calm, controlled and reasonable.