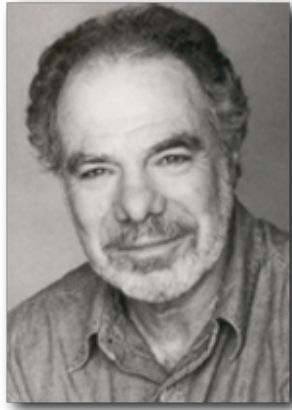


## USS Midway Veterans Association

### The Brink

By Rick Setlowe, 1957-59, Lt.jg, Ops, CIC Air Controller

In October of 2020—in the midst of a Corona contagion—I was invited to San Diego to be interviewed for “The Brink” episode of the USS Midway Museum: United Stories of America.



The 7-minute film documents the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1958 that brought Midway and her crew to the brink of nuclear war.

**Rick Setlowe**

I am in my late eighties and one of the few surviving veterans of that historic event. Specifically, I had been the strike controller--the air controller who would point the nuclear bombers to their targets.

The producer of the documentary Sean O'Meara at first interviewed me via Zoom in my home in Los Angeles, and then a few weeks later Sean called and asked if I'd be willing to be filmed aboard Midway at my general quarters station, a radar scope in CIC.

This was at the time of the pre-inoculation pandemic, and at my age with several underlying health conditions the prospect of being jammed in a very cramped space wearing no face mask with an unknown film crew loomed as dangerous as combat. A widower, I had so far survived hunkered

down at home having my groceries delivered. I had not even had a haircut in over a year.

Perhaps one of the quirky attractions that has drawn over 100,000 views of “The Brink” on YouTube is this aged hippy with gray hair down to his shoulders in a battered leather flight jacket decorated with Midway insignias.

But I knew things, and I felt this strong duty to narrate them. This is what I knew.

On August 23, 1958, the communist Chinese launched a massive artillery barrage of two small islands Quemoy and Matsu off the coast of China, where thousands of Chinese Nationalist troops were stationed. This was regarded as the opening salvo to a Red Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which the United State had a treaty to defend.

At the time Midway, after three years in the shipyards undergoing major upgrades then making it the largest ship in the world—and the only carrier then equipped with the new steam catapults—was at sea off Hawaii undergoing its operational readiness inspection. We were immediately ordered back to Pearl Harbor. Our pier was secured by Marines, Midway was loaded with weapons--nuclear weapons— and we took off at flank speed for the Taiwan Straits.

In August 1958 the ship was an historic technical milestone. We were the only carrier equipped with the powerful new steam catapults and therefore capable of reliably launching nuclear strikes. As late as 2016 the noted military historian

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Norman Friedman wrote in the Naval Institute Press about the strategic importance of our new catapults--Midway is the only ship mentioned--in giving Navy carriers a nuclear strike capability

Why? Nuclear bombs are complicated bombs within bombs, and very, very heavy. One of my classmates in Navy flight school was the later astronaut Gene Cernan. In "The Last Man on the Moon"—his autobiography published in 2000 by St. Martin's Press— even after three space flights his 1958 experience still weighted heavily on the astronaut/test pilot who at that time was a Lt. jg flying A-4's off the carrier Shangri-La—"The nukes were so heavy that they were the only bomb the A-4 could carry. Bearing a full load of fuel in addition to the bomb, I needed a maximum velocity shot to help me stagger off the deck...It would probably be a one-way trip."

Aboard Midway in the Taiwan Straits the tension crackled like an electric storm without lightning. Cdr. Halford Woodson, c.o. of Heavy Attack Squadron Eight, assembled the pilots and air crews flying the twin-jet A3D, and ordered they were not to leave the ready room until they wrote their last letters home.

"Write the letters now, no excuses, give them to me," he is quoted in "Midway Magic," Scott McGaugh's authoritative history of the ship. "Those who return will get their letters back."

All the strike pilots were briefed on their targets. Years later, as a celebrated astronaut on a goodwill tour Cernan

recalls, "In a much-altered world political climate, I flew into Shanghai for the first time, arriving at a military airfield aboard a commercial passenger jet. I looked out the window during the approach and recognized some landmarks. I'd seen this place before! I realized I was landing at Ground Zero of one of my targets back in those nasty, nuclear days."



**In the foreground is Lt. Don Holt, then Lt. Emit Aillaud, then, barely seen, is Lt. jg Rick Setlowe, Air Strike Controller. Holt and Aillaud controlled the CAP (Combat Air Patrol) guarding the ship.**

The one plane, one bomb, one pilot missions aboard Midway were assigned to Attack Squadron 63, the Fighting Red Cocks, flying FJ-4B Fury light attack jet aircraft. By a quirk several of the pilots were the youngest aboard, grads of a naval cadet program that had then required only a year or two of college for flight training. One ensign was, in fact, not yet old enough to legally drink but had

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the staggering responsibility to deliver a nuclear bomb. It scared the roughage out of him.

We discussed this over late-night drinks. Yeah, on occasion we had a drink. Officer country had its privileges--a drink or two to induce a restless sleep. We had to be ready for Armageddon. We were running patrols up and down the Straits 24/7. Blips on the Red Chinese radar day and night to let them know we were out there and loaded for bear.

The President Dwight Eisenhower declared, "I believe in taking the position in opposing aggression by force, I am taking the only position which is consistent with the vital interests of United States. And the peace of the world."

I quote this not from any TV news, but the mimeographed headlines posted on the crew's bulletin boards alongside the Plan of the Day. What it boiled down to me personally, hovered over my radar scope, subsisting on CIC's thick black coffee and cheeseburgers from the "dirty wardroom," buzzed awake by amphetamine tabs doled out by the flight surgeon, was that I awaited attack flight plans and vectors to our nuclear targets.

I was the strike controller at General Quarters if they "rang the bell" because, paradoxically, I was the least experienced. I simply had to aim the sharp point of the nonreturnable nuclear spears. The two controllers next to me, Lt. Don Holt and Lt. Emit Aillaud, were experienced jet

fighter pilots with WestPac and Mediterranean deployments. They controlled the combat air patrols of F-8

Crusaders and F3H Demons to protect Midway from the swarms of MiGs from mainland China expected to attack us. We had been overflown by long-range Russian reconnaissance planes, and the Red Chinese knew exactly where we were.

John Foster Dulles, the U.S. Secretary of State, declared, "If you are afraid to go to the brink, you are lost." In the Cold War of the Fifties this strategy was labeled MAD—Mutually Assured Destruction.

But Eisenhower and Dulles' brinkmanship worked. On October 6, after shelling the garrison on Quemoy for forty-four straight days, the cannons of Red China fell silent. Faced with the destruction of all that he had built since the Revolution, Chairman Mao ordered a cease fire and pledged to negotiate with the Nationalists on Taiwan and their leader Chiang Kai-shek.

Aboard Midway The Brink ended with a bang on November 14. The carriers Lexington and Ticonderoga—strategically separated beyond the horizon until that time—materialized about us. But Midway was the showboat. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the President of the Republic of Nationalist China, and his staff of generals flew out to the ship from Taiwan aboard a Midway helicopter to be greeted by a 21-gun salute and CincPacFleet Admiral H.G. Hopwood, resplendent in his formal white

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uniform, sword, and heroic chest of medals.

It was the only occasion in my Navy career when I donned my own white formal uniform.

The Generalissimo inspected our Marine Honor Guard, then watched from the bridge a fly-by of 75 planes from the Ticonderoga, Lexington, and Marine aircraft that had been deployed to Taiwan. And then there was an awesome fire power demonstration by the Midway air group—rockets, napalm, strafing by supersonic Crusaders, and, notably, our strike aircraft performing the awesome acrobatics of nuclear lofts.

In a caption the USS Midway Museum documentary “The Brink” notes, “On board the USS Midway was Richard Setlowe, a junior officer responsible for giving the nuclear bombers their targets should it be necessary. A reality that still haunts him today.”

Apparently, I was not the only one haunted. In “The Last Man on the Moon” my former classmate Cernan writes,

“Such thoughts weighed heavily on me one day when I was on shore leave in Japan, visiting both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the only two cities ever hit by atomic weapons. The serene parks were quiet, and monuments to the attack were draped by colorful chains of paper cranes, considered a sacred bird by the Japanese, folded by schoolchildren who clustered about me, chirping greetings, not knowing who I was, since I was in civilian clothes. Looking out over the rebuilt cities, over herds of happy kids, I considered the responsibility that I held, and of what my government was asking me to be ready to do.”

I have also thought heavily about that, and I have arrived at the realization that this experience later shaped my life, my career, and inspired me—no, drove is a more accurate word—to write my first novel “The Brink.”

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