

## **“The Martyr Who Died for Us All”**

Of the nearly five hundred names listed on Clemson University’s Scroll of Honor, none has been more widely reported than Rudolf Anderson, Jr. Anderson, a 1948 graduate in textile management, was the sole casualty in the Cuban Missile Crisis which pushed the United States and Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war sixty years ago this week.

Rudy Anderson grew up in Greenville and showed an interest in flying even as a toddler. When bad weather forced an airplane to make an emergency landing near the Anderson’s home, the family took in the pilot for the night. The next morning, the flyer took three-year-old Rudy to see his plane, delighting the child. Throughout his early childhood, Rudy built model airplanes. He even attempted to fly himself, leaping from a window—and ending up in the hospital with a broken arm. It wouldn’t be his last wingless flight—or his last crash landing.



Rudy was a member of Buncombe Street Methodist Church and was an Eagle Scout. He served as manager on Greenville High School’s 1943 state championship football team. Rudy graduated from Greenville High School in 1944 and enrolled at Clemson College.

At Clemson, Rudy earned academic honors and participated in intramural sports. As a cadet, he was a member of the Executive Sergeants Club, and the Senior Platoon, composed of the most precise senior cadets. The Senior Platoon drilled each morning and evening and highlighted the annual Mothers’ Day parade on campus. It also marched at halftime during Clemson football games. Anderson was among the first Clemson cadets to participate in the newly-formed Air Force ROTC program, attending summer training at Keesler Field, Mississippi.

Just three months short of graduation, Rudy embarked on another wingless flight. According to *The Tiger*, Rudy was attempting to catch a pigeon that had flown into the second barracks. Rudy chased the bird down the third floor hallway and was unable to stop when it flew out the window. Rudy went out the window as well, bouncing off the eaves over the entrance of the barracks, breaking his fall, and saving him from more serious injuries. Despite a fractured pelvis, Anderson recovered quickly and graduated on schedule.

Anderson received a commission as a second lieutenant in the Air Force, but he was not ordered to active duty as the military was still declining in size from its World War II peak. Instead, Anderson took a job with Hudson Mill in Greenville.

Anderson was building a career in textiles when, in June 1951, he was called into the Air Force. The Korean War was escalating and the United States was determined to hold the line there against Communist aggression. Anderson was assigned to Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida for nine months. Before departing for his next assignment, Rudy met Jane Corbett with whom he would correspond over the next three years as his Air Force career carried him halfway around the world. In August 1952, Anderson began flight training at San Marcos, Texas. He was selected for single engine jet training and sent to Webb Air Force Base in Texas where he earned his wings in February 1953. He was next sent to Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada where he learned to fly the F-86 Sabre, the Air Force's primary air combat fighter of the Korean War.

In July 1953, the Korean War ended in a truce, but the need for intelligence on both Chinese and Soviet intentions in the region drove the United States to conduct reconnaissance flights. Anderson was assigned to the 15<sup>th</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron at Kunsan Air Base in South Korea. Flying specially-equipped RF-86 jets, Anderson and his comrades flew over Chinese and Soviet territory at high altitudes, their weapons replaced with cameras. In nearly two years in Korea, Anderson was twice awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

On a trip home before his next duty assignment, Anderson proposed to Jane Corbett and they were married in November 1955 near Larson Air Force Base in Oregon. Rudy's prowess as a reconnaissance pilot was well-known and, following attendance at an Air Force school, he soon found himself back in Nevada at desolate Groom Lake, a dry lakebed known as "The Ranch." Here, Anderson would learn to fly the secret U-2, an unarmed, very high altitude reconnaissance aircraft developed by the CIA.



In March 1957, Jane gave birth to Rudolf Anderson, III. He would be followed by a brother, James, two years later. Anderson meanwhile was flying operational missions in the U-2 as a pilot in the 4080<sup>th</sup> Strategic Reconnaissance Wing headquartered at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas. By 1962, Major Anderson and his colleague Major Richard Heyser were considered the Air Force's most accomplished U-2 pilots.

Overflights of areas of interest were nothing new. Anderson had flown over the territory of other nations while in Korea. The United States had famously lost a U-2 over the Soviet Union in 1960. That aircraft had been downed by surface-to-air missiles, its pilot captured and put on trial. U-2s had provided aerial photographic intelligence from Cuba before the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion. So, when temperatures began to heat up over the possible installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba in the fall of 1962, it was only natural that Anderson, Heyser and the other U-2 pilots of the 4080<sup>th</sup> would be called upon.

U-2 flights over Cuba in the late summer had noted disturbing build-ups of Soviet installations and equipment. The Kennedy administration was torn between the need for more frequent reconnaissance flights and the fear that such flights would provoke a response from the Cubans—or worse from the Soviets. Nonetheless, periodic overflights continued. Then, on October 14, Major Heyser brought back disturbing images.



CIA photo interpreters identified Soviet SS-4 medium-range ballistic missiles being installed near San Cristobal, Cuba. In addition, Soviet surface-to-air missile defenses were being set up, though neither weapons system was as yet operational. These discoveries triggered the Cuban Missile Crisis—and would cost Rudy Anderson's life.

Over the following thirteen days, the United States increased the number of U-2 reconnaissance flights over Cuba despite a prediction from a CIA analyst that there was a one-in-six chance of losing an aircraft. Anderson and Heyser flew again on October 15. On October 17, six U-2s flew the length of Cuba from west to east ensuring nearly complete photographic coverage of the island. Beginning on the 18<sup>th</sup>, Anderson's routine was to fly every other day, but the weather soon disrupted this schedule. Anderson encountered poor visibility due to cloud cover on October 23. The approach of Hurricane Ella cancelled missions scheduled for the 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> and only one mission was flown on October 25.

The October 25 mission, flown by Captain Gerald McIlmoyle, coincided with the high drama of a diplomatic showdown at the United Nations. US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson and Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin engaged in a heated debate. After repeated Soviet denials of the presence of offensive weapons in Cuba, Stevenson shared the incriminating photos taken by the

U-2 pilots. As Stevenson and Zorin fought with words and pictures, McIlmoyle was battling for survival.

McIlmoyle was nearing the end of his mission, much of which had been obscured by clouds. As he passed over a surface-to-air missile site near Banes, the weather cleared. Suddenly, McIlmoyle's yellow radar warning light illuminated, alerting him that his aircraft was being pinged by enemy radar. As McIlmoyle turned his aircraft, he spotted the contrails of two missiles streaking toward him. He maneuvered to avoid the missiles and saw them explode about a mile away. At this point, he was already on his outbound leg and so he continued on to his base in Florida where he landed and reported his encounter. McIlmoyle claimed that when he landed, an Air Force general met him at his aircraft and told him that he had not been fired on and that he was not to report the missile attack. McIlmoyle, who would reach the rank of brigadier general, disregarded the order and told his fellow pilots of the attack.

On October 27, with the world edging toward nuclear disaster and leaders in Washington and Moscow pondering their next steps, Rudy Anderson prepared for his final flight. Four flights had been planned for the day, but the weather was again poor. Three of the flights were cancelled, but Anderson elected to go forward with his mission because so much of McIlmoyle's coverage had been obscured by clouds and the need for fresh intelligence was critical.

Anderson awoke early, ate a high protein breakfast, and donned his pressure suit. Two hours before his scheduled takeoff time, he began breathing pure oxygen. Anderson climbed into the U-2's narrow cockpit and with the help of his check pilot, completed a series of checklists. He shook hands with his check pilot, and gave a thumbs up as the canopy was closed. At 9:09 a.m., Anderson's U-2 streaked down the runway of McCoy Air Force Base and climbed into the Florida sky.

Anderson leveled off at 72,000 feet and headed toward Cuba on what would be his sixth mission of the Crisis. But on this day, there was a new factor in play that had not been present on his previous missions. The night before, Cuban leader Fidel Castro had ordered the island's air defenses to fully operational status. Castro expected an American invasion, to include tactical aircraft, and he had placed his defense forces on alert. Soviet officers manning the SA-2 air defense missiles were tracking Anderson's flight on radar and growing more concerned as he got closer to the medium-range missile sites they were guarding.

Soviet General S. N. Grechko was commanding the surface-to-air missiles. As Anderson turned over Guantanamo Bay to begin a westward track over Cuba, Grechko feared the U-2 was completing its mission and preparing to return to Florida with potentially damning intelligence photographs. After repeated requests for guidance from Soviet leadership resulted in no response, and with Castro's orders no doubt on his mind, Grechko decided to take action. He ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 507<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Rocket Regiment at Banes to fire.

At 1019, two SA-2 missiles roared off their launch rails and streaked skyward. Shrapnel from at least one of the exploding missiles pierced the cockpit of Anderson's U-2 and punctured his pressure suit. The resulting instant loss of pressure at that high altitude killed Anderson

immediately. The aircraft began a long spiral to the ground, crashing near the missile battery that had brought it down.

When the news reached the White House, the president's brother Robert Kennedy would later write, "the whole course of events" changed. There was a feeling "that the bridges to escape [the Crisis] were crumbling."

But instead of resulting in additional escalation, the death of Major Anderson had a sobering effect. Even the bellicose Soviet leader Khrushchev recognized that without immediate action the Crisis would spin out of control. Khrushchev's son, Sergei, recalled that Anderson's death was "the very moment—not before or after—that father felt the situation was slipping out of his control."



*Soviet soldiers examine the wreckage of Major Anderson's U-2.*

This critical moment compelled the Americans and Soviets to reach an agreement to resolve the Crisis. The Soviets agreed to remove their offensive missiles from Cuba in exchange for a pledge from President Kennedy not to invade the island. In addition, Kennedy privately agreed to a later withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey.

Rudolf Anderson's sacrifice, just as the Crisis appeared headed toward disaster, provided the sobering impulse to find a compromise. His death likely saved millions of lives. CBS News commentator Eric Sevareid described Anderson as "the martyr who died for us all."

Rudolf Anderson was survived by his wife Jane, sons Rudolf III age 5 and James age 3. A daughter, Robyn, was born seven months after his death. At the direction of President Kennedy, Anderson was awarded the first Air Force Cross.

Following the Crisis, Anderson's remains were returned to the United States. He is buried at Woodlawn Memorial Park in Greenville. A memorial to Major Anderson was established in Greenville's Cleveland Park.

See also:

*Alone, Unarmed, and Unafraid Over Cuba: The Story of Major Rudy Anderson*, by Major Geoffrey Cameron, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 2017,  
<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1039301.pdf>.

*Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, by Robert F. Kennedy, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1969.