

Puppies Puppies Carlos

June 4 – August 5, 2017

Forrest: What are these two objects in the exhibition?

Carlos: Controversy exists as to whether these are Soviet Missile launch keys or Soviet Shuttle Launch keys. But even an expert on Pawn stars identified them as actual soviet keys. This was later refuted by some other expert. But here is a picture of the Soviet SS-4 key and it sure does look like what you have. Though the key design seems to be something that be adapted to any soviet system SS system.



About the SS System, from Wikipedia:

Given the NATO reporting name of SS-4 Sandal. The R-12 rocket provided the capability to attack targets at medium ranges with a megaton-class thermonuclear warhead and constituted the bulk of the Soviet offensive missile threat to Western Europe. Deployments of the R-12 missile in Cuba caused the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. A total of 2335 missiles were produced; all were destroyed in 1993 under the Soviet and US Arms Control Treaty.

F: The objects in the exhibition are replicas of that key, right? How did you learn about the original keys, and how did you first learn about and purchase the replica that you gave to Puppies?

C: Yes, the objects are replicas of that key. I first saw these keys on ebay, which described what they were. I researched them and found them described as ICBM keys for two SS systems, former USSR systems. By chance I was researching sources for a Minuteman missile model kit and came across the site that makes these 3D printed replicas.

Also, and it's amazing how much of this is easily found on the internet, NATO assigns any missile with an SS prefix nomenclature is basically the Soviet version of their arsenal. My personal opinion is that considering how this key can be modified: prongs removed and adjusted to different positions; it can easily be used with varying systems whether shuttle or otherwise.

F: Do you remember what you were looking for on ebay when you found the key?

C: I'm always on the hunt for Cold War related items and eBay seems to be a good source. I had typed in my search, ICBM patch, and while scrolling the results I saw the keys pop up. They were amazing. In a way just that finding led to my "addiction", for lack of a better word, to collecting Cold War items specifically related to my job in the Air Force, a missile combat crew officer. I remember the keys had a starting price of \$50 and I also knew, from experience, that they would sell for way beyond what I could afford so I moved on and focused on ICBM Cold War USAF related patches, pins, and buttons.

I never forgot about the keys though. They were a haunting reminder of a job which, as far as the few of us that remain from that era, none of us can ever forget. I don't think that deep down I wanted to own these keys whether relics or reproductions. I think my main focus was what they represented. Very few people knew what we did day in and day out 60' underground. We were known as the "Silent Sentinels" and our Command the Strategic Air Command (SAC) whose unofficial motto was, "To Err is Human. To Forgive is not SAC policy." pretty much explains what the predominant attitude was at the time. The stakes were high and understandably there was no room for mistakes nor failure. To this day hardly anyone, not directly involved with the USAF deterrence mission, probably gave the Cold War as much thought in the 80's as they did in the 60's. You left on alert and just assumed you'd be back home in 24-36 hrs. You never questioned whether you could do your job if the order ever came. It was our duty to do what we had been trained to do without question, most handled the stress of such responsibility "well" and a few others, well... not so much.

F: Is that why you purchased the replica, like the two in the exhibition, when you found it being sold online? Because the image of the original keys from eBay stuck with you?

C: In a way yes, I know it wasn't exactly the same, but I felt what they represented was a strong way to tie in all the other cold war parts of my collection. The key also brought to the surface the fact that I felt the Cold War never ended. Peace was precariously balanced on two powers basing peace on a very thin, underlying layer of distrust, and you can see that very thin layer slowly sloughing away. I look through my old base yearbook and see pictures of Soviets walking unescorted through our base after we stood down our sorties, that was pretty intense, it was surreal. We have new missile crew members now, more sophisticated systems, with more responsibilities, and ever mounting stressors that very few can understand. A brand new 2Lt, barely an adult, stepping into such responsibility, it's mind boggling.

F: Were you more afraid of the Soviets using their doomsday keys, or the responsibility of having to use your American equivalent?

C: Knowing that I had no control over either, my concern was focused on the destructive potential of the combined forces. There is no coming back from that, yet duty was everything, and there was no question as to what that duty was-very few made their fears known and those were not looked at favorably. The Soviet units knew what was expected and so did we. The enormity of what we were responsible for was always lurking. Yet you showed up every day at work knowing you have to come in with your best A game, nothing else would do. You had to put away your fears, and be ready to do the job. Everyone had their way of handling the responsibilities and keeping their minds busy; some worked on their masters, others, like myself, worked on Squadron Officers School certification & studied our technical orders (TO), some took to the Bible, and others just read, but one thing none of us ever took for granted, at least I think so one did, was paint this job as routine. The testing was constant. You could show up for alert just to find out you were undergoing a no-notice evaluation and failure was not an option. Most of us were more afraid of the no-notice than the Soviets.

The work environment was very confined, enough room really for two people, in a space shaped like a tylenol capsule and the size of probably 3 SUV's lined up end to end, for 24-36 hrs., sitting on a platform full of equipment and alarms going off all the time and a 10 ton blastdoor sealing you off from everyone else. You had a great deal of time to think while watching a screen showing your missiles quietly napping in their silos. The funny thing was that we were told in Vandenberg during our initial training that there was a workout room and track down there, they are probably still laughing about that one, joke was on us.

F: That sounds incredibly harrowing. Why did you want to serve in that role?

C: I put in 3 assignments on my wishlist during my senior year in college Air Force ROTC (everyone had to fill out their assignment request-wish list- during their senior year). One was in the medical field, another was just some routine assignment and I read about missiles (very brief description, just enough to give you a very vague idea of the job) and thought it's my 3rd choice, I'll never get that. Surprise! I got it.

F: So it was almost by accident that you were involved so directly with the fate of the world, but you knew you wanted to serve in the Air Force? How old were you when you wrote that list?

C: I was 23 years old and once I graduated college I had to wait 9 months to enter the Air Force because I had to wait for a slot to open up. In the meantime I worked as pharmacy Tech at a hospital in San Angelo where Linda and I went to college and and also where she and her family lived.

I always wanted to be an officer. It didn't matter what branch of service (my dad talked me in to the Air Force, he was Army and retired after 26 years of service). I grew up an Army brat and after seeing the officers on base I knew that was for me. I went through Army JROTC in High School and it pretty much nailed it for me. My dad served in the Korean War and 3 tours in Viet Nam and David is now a veteran as a result of his service, so the lineage made it further than I thought.

I really didn't appreciate what I did in the Air Force until I got out. I learned more about the history of our base, the 351st Strategic Missile Wing. I connected with the USAAF 351st Bomb Group WWII which has about 12 original WWII members left. They flew B-17's in Polebrook England-incredibly valiant men- and they are who we got our unit assignment number from. Our unit yearbook dedicates the first few pages to them (Clark Gable was a member of that unit) .I became a lifetime member and even have a reunion jacket that they gave me. I served as a liaison between their group and our 351st SMW reunion group for awhile. My goal was to get these two groups together. The 351st BG reunion group is very active and has yearly reunions. Some of my units early patches took their designs from the 351st BG group, later these designs were updated to go along with our missile mission.

F: Did you feel pressure from your family to join the military? Or just an admiration for and identification with your father?

C: No, I didn't feel any pressure to join. Having grown up in the military it was something I always wanted to be a part of.

F: What was your life like as a child, growing up while your father served in the military?

C: Well, my experience growing up as an Army Brat was probably much like other kids. I didn't enjoy that part of it. We moved around a great deal, mainly to two locations: Fort Belvoir, VA and the Canal Zone. My dad would pull us out of school to move, at times mid-term which, academically & socially, made life quite difficult. You really couldn't make friends and starting over in a new school in the middle of the term was damn near impossible. I went to two high schools, Fairfax High School and then Balboa H.S. I really liked Fairfax but struggled at Balboa since we moved there in February. My dad was career all the way so that was the priority. Other families would plan their moves so the kids could finish up the year but that wasn't the case for us.

The hardest part beyond all that was when my dad was shipped to Vietnam. He pulled 2-3 tours there. All the families were sent to Salina, Kansas to wait. He would come back for 2 weeks at a time and then leave. You could tell how it all impacted him, he would eat like he would on patrol, gobbling his food since they really had no time to eat on patrol, slept very little. Then they showed the movie Green Beret (with John Wayne) at the post movie theater. That was a major mistake. They would play the song "Fighting Soldiers" which made it worse. Soldiers died in the movie and the song was quite sad. They would post a list near the recreation center where we lived, updating the MIA and KIA, that was not a happy time. I became a rebel since my dad wasn't there; got into trouble at school mainly (I was in 7th grade).

Once we had David, one factor in me leaving the Air Force was Linda and I wanted to give him consistency and that wasn't going to be the case in the military. And if you focus too much on your military career family then takes a back seat.

F: Do you think your own harrowing experiences serving in the Cold War helped you understand your father's experiences serving in earlier conflicts?

C: Someone once told me that our job compared to a pilot or ground troop was less survivable because whereas both a pilot and soldier had the options to evade attack and thus had better odds at survival, we were sitting ducks. I don't think my experiences helped understand those of my dads. Any physical conflict, in my opinion, with its mental and physical scars can only truly be understood by someone who has also gone through the same experiences. In my case, I had politicians and diplomats ensuring we didn't have to do our jobs, we were the deterrence, and while the fear of doomsday coming was always on my mind those on the front lines, doing the fighting, are living the reality of conflict.

My dad is 87 this year and he hasn't forgotten the wars (Korean and Vietnam) nor the guys that never made it home in his company. I can never understand what he saw or what he went through. He also spoke very little about his experiences there, whether the reason was because it was too painful or he wanted to forget, I don't know.

Linda just reminded me about a time when I was on alert. I rarely called he while I was on alert. I called her out of the blue and told her I loved Her. I couldn't explain why but at the time a situation had developed that, for a few minutes, made it look like the unthinkable had happened. Can't say much else about that, but we are all here so the system worked.

Humans take their existence for granted. They go to sleep and wake up giving life not a second thought, taking it for granted. The men and women still doing my job are the Silent Sentinels (that's what we were called), the job is harder and more stressful and they keep the bear at bay for now. I don't know for how long though.

F: Do you worry about nuclear war breaking out now?

C: Yes I do. I strongly believe the Cold War never ended. The Soviets have become more cunning, stronger, and less fearful especially now that we have a new president. Putin never does anything without an ulterior motive. He is slowly whittling away at NATO and you can see how our allies may be fracturing and I pray those in charge are able to turn things around. I hate to say it but we may have a new Bay of Pigs scenario brewing in the Middle East and I don't even want to guess as to how that may end up especially with people with very little if any experience dealing with such matters on our side trying to figure it out.

F: In other words, we should all be on alert?

C: Oh definitely. There was a time that our schools drilled for possible attacks. I even remember doing them in 1st grade in the Bronx-it entailed crouching on the floor in a corner of your classroom in a modified fetal position covering your head. We understood so little then about the power of such weapons; the heat sucking the oxygen out of your lungs, the aftershocks, the fire ball, the fallout, the contamination. You would think that with time comes more knowledge and more preparedness but when was the last time you heard or saw any information posted anywhere explaining what to do and how to prepare for such a possibility? That would be no where. Complacency is human nature, the idea that survival is not an option makes it seem like it's better not to panic folks with such trivial concerns so we don't prepare.

There is a picture from our base yearbook that drives me crazy every time I see it. It shows Soviet officers touring our base (see the picture). It shows USAF General Welch escorting Whiteman's (see our base shield in the top right corner of the picture) first Soviet visitors ever-General of the Army Maksimov, Commander in Chief of the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces and General Lt. Shaposhnikov, 1st Deputy Commander in Chief of the Soviet Air Forces.

I'm proud of my service and of the part I played during the Cold War but The Soviet Bear has never gone to sleep and I think it has been very busy. The solution? I don't really know. I'm hoping we can get back on track and I hope it's soon.



F: That must have been terrifying, hiding under your desk as a first grader.

C: These are mid 1950's pics but just to give you an idea of what our drills entailed back then and trust me it was no better in the 1960's with plywood fallout shelter designs. We never had the luxury of gas masks during our drills (notice no skin protections).



Linda just reminded me that even the gas masks had asbestos so you trade one danger.hazard for another. These two are exactly what we had to do. It was called the duck and cover. We practiced this rarely during the school year maybe 3 times at best.



F: How did this experience of growing up and then serving under constant threat of the world ending influence your thinking as a parent? You mentioned quitting the Air Force when David was born.

C: I think the tendency is for people to become complacent, out of sight-out of mind type of mentality. I know as a child I really didn't understand anything about what was going on. I was like all the other Once-lers, my parents just went along with their lives, never talked about it and never explained what was going on. The teachers mentioned very little about why we practiced and it was a catholic school so never quite understood their reasoning for not giving us more information, maybe it they didn't know much more than we did and they were told to do the drills.

The thing about my job was there were guys who were quite complacent, married, single it didn't matter, you could tell by their attitude. Those that were like me knew better, complacency just opened the door to making mistakes. Regardless of which side we stood on, complacent or not, the thought of why we were doing our jobs was haunting us in some way. I thought of Linda and David and believed that my job was a deterrent to anything bad happening. Leaving the Air Force wasn't really about the job, it involved several factors. I had accomplished what I had been trained to do (within two years we made peace with the USSR and our base missiles were dismantled and silos destroyed-we became a B-2 Bomber base so all of us, with a few exceptions, were out of a job)-I tried to find another specialty and that was harder than we thought because once in SAC always in SAC even if SAC no longer existed, Linda was going to medical school and though she tried finding a another medical school in Missouri, I could tell she would not be a happy there, it was very difficult for us with David there and trying to find childcare. Linda actually left for a few months to go back to medical school, my mom came to take care of David who was about 1 and that was a disaster and Linda had to come back. Once we returned to Dallas Linda finished medical school. The truth is it is very hard on a family in the military.

F: Do you think that's part of why you've built your collection of these objects, why you want to keep things around that remind you of this haunting part of your life? So that you don't become complacent?

C: That's an excellent question and one that falls under the category of „it's complicated“. I think my passion for collecting Cold War/Missile memorabilia, creating patches, building missile models, and keeping items related in any way to my time as a missile officer is due to many factors: a midlife crisis which is cheaper than the cherry red convertible I guess guys get into at my age, finally realizing that my job was one not many even in the Air Force had and even then very few in the Air Force not in the field knew much about what we did, a sense of pride for serving especially in a field that directly impacted everyone, and a desire not to let later generations forget about the Cold War and hopefully not repeat the mistakes of their parents.

I don't want our service to our country to be forgotten. Veterans Day often mentions and focuses on WWII, Korean, Vietnam, Gulf War vets and rightly so, but seldom if ever, are the Cold War vets recognized at all. Our church would hold a July 4th event and after the seeing Cold War vets ignored the first time around, I made sure they didn't forget the following year.

Linda let's me wear my veteran hats and do my Cold War thing because it is what I consider my identity. Everyone has what they consider their "identity"; at least that's my opinion and for me it gives me a sense of purpose and self worth.

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