

E. BROOKS HELMICK
WESTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02493

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Dear Michael

Great to hear from you. You made our Christmas! We were all three going to reply over the holidays. Then I got carried away attempting to write a huge history of my 3 years on the Essex, but the project got so big I had to abandon it. Now I am back again, still with the history, although a shorter version than I originally planned. After you read this, you will no doubt be pleased I didn't go ahead with the longer version! But I still might wind up sending this, or something similar to the Captain of the current Essex. After looking at their web site it is clear they are missing the details of what may have been the Essex's most exciting years.

You blew me away that the Essex was still around. I thought she was decommissioned. I checked google and found, as you already know, she is alive and well as an LHD. That explains why some of your fellow marines have been on her recently. Amazing the Navy has managed to keep her going. She was an old timer when I was on her, and that was in the 60's!

I see they appear to have removed the canted deck, no doubt because they didn't need it as an LHD. I would have thought that would have been an unnecessarily expensive retrofit, but apparently not. In any event it is good the Essex has a home page (<http://www.essex.navy.mil/>). I was only on her three short years (1960-63) but they were exciting years .

It started out with a disaster, although an exciting one. In the spring of 1961, we turned out to be the flag ship for the Bay of Pigs crisis. The Essex had just been converted from a CVA to a CVS, but they brought the jets back on board – a high performance squadron out of Pensacola. By the end of the two weeks we were supposed to be heading back to Norfolk and found ourselves in the Western end of the Gulf. Late on a Friday night we shut down all of the radars, turned out all running lights except the aft stern lights, lined up single file with the cans, and headed south through the Yucatan Straits. It was like a scene out of the Guns of Navarone. We thought we were going to pick up an astronaut (Alan Shepherd had already been up), but found ourselves as flag for an unprecedented operation. We actually painted out the side numbers and hauled down the American flag on our escort destroyers.

Unfortunately Kennedy caved in at the last minute in the middle of the landing party arriving up from Nicaragua. Our veteran pilots, who were all over the beach, in strafing position, were convinced they could have easily turned the tide. Unfortunately, they were never given permission to fire, and the rebels got cleaned out on the southern beaches of Cuba. Hardened pilots walked off the flight deck that evening with tears in their eyes. Kennedy later gave the go ahead, but it was too late. It was a done deal. So Kennedy and co. who authorized this operation at the outset, buckled at the crucial moment, and thereby failed to change the course of history in Cuba. Too bad. With our support they were almost sure to have pulled it off. If they could have landed and held for a few days, the whole island would have no doubt risen up, as at that time, they all hated Castro.

In the next two years the Essex took command in a more positive manner. Later that same year, the Berlin Wall Crisis came up, and while we didn't take any direct action, once again they brought the jets back on the Essex and, as a show of force, sent her 90 miles up the Elbe river to Hamburg. The show of force was a bit of a joke, as it is a little tough to turn into the wind to launch when you are in a river! Still, the Germans ate it up big time. Really appreciated it. We averaged 10,000 visitors a day in Hamburg, and on departure day it was incredible. When the last line left the pier and the fog horn sounded, the whole city virtually exploded. They had let all of the kids out of school. There were people standing on tops of buildings waving sheets, tourist boats cruising alongside, crammed beyond overload with cheering passengers. The crew, of course, was standing at attention around the flight deck, and then one guy got carried away and threw his hat in the air. A few seconds later there were about 1000 white hats sailing through the air. One of the boson mates up on the Admiral's bridge gave a sheepish glance toward the Admiral, who turned and said to him, "Well, what are you waiting for?" So his went too. Then on down the river, an entire small town had turned out and set up an enormous speaker playing the

Star Spangled Banner. One Commander who had been in WWII noted he had never seen anything like it. It was an emotional time, and a tough time for the Germans, and they greatly appreciated our support, even if we couldn't do anything about it immediately. Short memories, unfortunately. Would be nice if the Germans could respond similarly today.

Shortly after that we hit a huge storm in the North Atlantic. Somehow we got out of sync with the waves, pitched way up, and came slamming down hard, just as an enormous wave was coming up. Almost broke the ship in half. Rippled the main beams under the hanger deck like they were rubber bands. That put us in the Brooklyn yard for 6 months, and from there to Gitmo for refresher training – October 1962. The morning after we got in, on a Sunday, GQ sounded. We thought it was a training drill, but that was the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis, for which the Essex was once again to be the Flag ship. After patrolling south of Cuba for a few days, we suddenly did a first in my tour – put all eight boilers on the line and headed flank speed for the Windward Passage. We did a projection of our course, and concluded we were headed back to Europe. Not so. That night Kennedy made his famous speech, which terrified the country. No doubt in part because Kennedy had failed with his Bay of Pigs gambit, he wanted to be tougher this time around, but in any event the whole country thought the Kennedy/Krushchev face off had brought us to the brink of nuclear war. By that time, on the Essex, we saw an even grimmer picture. I was a CIC officer and knew all of the comm traffic. There was a Russian rocket fuel supply ship that was cruising down the New England coast headed for Cuba. A P2V had been tracking it out of Pease AFB. Our orders were simple – stop it, turn it around, or blow it out of the water. So the whole nation was scared, but for us, this was it. We were sure we were about to launch WWII as we could see no way that Russian ship would turn around, or even if it did stop, we had the intel that by then there were Russian subs all over the place ready to take us out.

So before long everyone on board knew the score. The next morning we had the boarding party set in dress whites, with a live link to the White House. At 6:30 they sounded General Quarters. I was in the Wardroom at the time and soon realized stepping out into the passageway was to take your life in your hands. The standard time to set GQ on the Essex was 8 minutes. We had her buttoned up in a minute and a half. How some guys covered the entire 800 plus foot length of the ship to man their stations in that time, I'll never know. So we launched the search planes, and waited. The P2V that had been tracking the tanker had broken off during the night and we had to find it again. However, finally another P2V picked it up again, heading north. Krushchev had caved. The tanker had turned around in the middle of the night. It was that close.

So Kennedy won that round, and it was a big one. We spent the next few weeks playing our usual game of tracking down Soviet subs, and by this time there were more in the vicinity than we had ever seen. As usual we would try to stick with them long enough to force them to the surface (most of their fleet at that time was made up of conventional subs). As an interesting finale, we did eventually get a Soviet sub boxed in. We had one con above him, and a helo with variable depth sonar underneath him. He maneuvered wildly trying to escape, but must have broken something and had to surface. We were still in this very tense, almost WWII mode, but decided we take the normal, and embarrassing, step of sending out the standard signal by flashing light, "Do you need assistance?" Suddenly about half the crew of the sub came out on deck. They stood motionless for a bit, and then to the astonishment of us all, they waved. They then made off on their own, but that broke the tension in an instant. We realized they were just like us, good guys, caught up in the middle of a personal duel between our two national leaders.

Not quite the same scenario that you are facing with Bin Laden. This again is the real deal, but this time with an enemy who is immeasurably more vicious and evil than Krushchev ever thought of being. Fortunately we have a President who in no way is going to buckle, and from what we all see how you and your colleagues are performing, we've got some troops on the front line who won't be buckling either. Stay on him. You will get him.

All the best to you all,

Brooks