

ColdType

The Big Read

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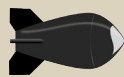
ISSUE 131

Warnings
from the
Cuban 
Missile
CRISIS

BY DON NORTH

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Warnings from the Cuban Missile Crisis



Fidel Castro's death at 90 on December 9 was treated more as a cultural event than a oment to reflect on how close the danger of thermonuclear really was. **Don North** saw the risk from up close in 1962 and describes it 50 years later

Saturday, October 27, 1962, now known as “Black Saturday,” was the day I arrived in Havana to report on the Cuban missile crisis, completely oblivious that 50 years later it would be considered “the most dangerous moment in human history,” the day the world came closest to nuclear Armageddon.

My rendezvous with this existential crisis began five days earlier in a New York bar where I had arranged to watch a TV address by President John F. Kennedy that was supposed to have something to do with Cuba, which I had visited as a freelance journalist six months earlier. Kennedy's address was a shocker. “Unmistakable evidence has estab-

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Nikita Khrushchev (left) warned: "If the United States carries out the piratical actions, we shall have to resort to means of defence against the aggressor to defend our rights." J.F. Kennedy (right) said: "What we are doing is throwing down a card on the table in a game which we don't know the ending of."

Photos: Wikipedia

lished the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island," Kennedy said. A hush fell over the bar and waiters stopped serving to hear his words more clearly.

We now know that, in addition to the nuclear-armed missiles, the Soviet Union had deployed 100 tactical nuclear weapons, which the Soviet commander in Cuba could have launched without approval from Moscow.

A US naval blockade of Cuba had begun the day before Kennedy's speech. "A strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated," was what the president called it. As Kennedy spoke, the US Strategic Air Command (SAC) had gone to DEFCON-3, (Defence Condition Three), two steps down from nuclear war, and had dispersed its nuclear-armed bomber fleet around the United States. The Cold War had suddenly grown hot.

A truthful history of those dark days was the first casualty. Although tape recordings of White House meetings on the crisis were made, they were kept classified until 10 years ago, while many of the participants worked to burnish or obscure their position at that time. Bobby Kennedy made a pre-emptive strike on history by writing and publishing his book, *Thirteen Days*, a self-serving recollection of the crisis.

We now know that JFK's covert campaign of harassment and sabotage against Cuba – Operation

Mongoose – had contributed to a war of nerves that saw the Russians step in to defend Cuba. However, as transcripts of the taped White House meetings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) would reveal when declassified decades later, JFK used had to use all his intellect to prevent nuclear war. "What we are doing is throwing down a card on the table in a game which we don't know the ending of," he told ExComm members, as he ordered the dangerous naval blockade.

The taped record of how JFK tried to contain unyielding pressure from hawkish advisers like Generals Curtis Le May and Maxwell Taylor shows that the crisis was a supreme test of the president's ability to maintain an open mind, while holding to his entrenched abhorrence of war.

It is a cautionary tale to remember as we contemplate a possible future showdown with Russia or China and the need to evaluate the new President Donald Trump on his possession of sound judgment and emotional stability when those characteristics can make the difference between a peaceful compromise and a catastrophic war.

Self-assigned to Havana

Although I had only just landed a job as a news-writer with NBC evening news, I was happy to abandon to report from a key city where few foreign journalists were based. So I walked across the

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street from NBC studios in New York's Rockefeller Center to the Life magazine office. Although I hadn't worked for Life before and only owned an inexpensive Kodak camera, I was ushered in to see a senior editor, and was loaded down with several Leica camera bodies, an assortment of lenses, and a brick of fast 35mm film. Life didn't have a man in Havana, and for this story they were happy to take a chance on a youthful broadcast news writer with some Cuban contacts who was willing to travel into ground zero for American ICBM's and bombers.

"Don, you're now our man in Havana," said the editor. "Get some good shots, write some snappy cutlines and give us the story of Havana at the centre of the storm."

My first stop was Miami, where I met my friend Miguel Acocca, Time magazine's man in the Caribbean. Miguel said I had two choices: The first was to link up with the US Second Marine Division, which was preparing landing craft in Key West ready for an invasion, Operation Scabbards, which would be comparable to the 1944 Normandy landings. It would involve 120,000 troops, who would land on a 40-mile front between Mariel and Tarara Beach, east of Havana. My second choice was to try to get on a stranded Cubana Airlines flight that would be returning to Cuba during the next few days from Mexico City.

I knew Mario Garcia-Inchaustigi, the Cuban ambassador in Mexico; we had shared many a rum and coke at the delegates' lounge in the United Nations when he was the Cuban delegate and I was an announcer for UN General Assembly sessions. If there was any chance of a visa and a ticket on that flight, Mario could arrange it, so I cabled the embassy explaining my situation and caught the next flight to Mexico. Boarding the Cubana flight, I was aware that it was a sensitive time to be arriving in Havana as the Grozny, the first Soviet ship to test the American blockade, was about to encounter US navy ships. And Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had warned, in a radio broadcast: "if the United States carries out the piratical actions, we shall have to resort to means of defence against the aggressor to defend our rights."

Along with the youthful soccer team from East Berlin, five other international journalists were on board the flight: Robert MacNeil, a fellow Canadi-

an, working for NBC; Gordian Troeller, a Luxemburger and his wife Marie Claude, both working for the German magazine Stern; Atsuhiko Horikawa, the Washington correspondent of the Tokyo daily Yomiuri Shimbun; and Alan Oxley, a British freelancer, who worked for CBS News and lived in Havana.

Not welcome in Havana

Walking from the plane in the dark, hot and humid Havana night, we were welcomed by costumed guitarists as we entered the passenger terminal. A giant poster declared that Cuba was "en pie de Guerra" (on war alert). Inside, armed men in battle fatigues eyed us suspiciously. My visa was stamped and I was directed to an adjacent room where my fellow journalists were being held. Minutes later, soldiers wielding machine guns, ordered us to take our luggage and board an army truck waiting outside. We were driven into Havana and dropped off at the small, modern Capri Hotel. The officer in charge politely informed us that we were to "guests of the Cuban government." We were given room keys and escorted under armed guard to rooms on the ninth floor. Two guards with machine guns were posted outside our rooms.

The Capri Hotel was located in the heart of downtown Havana, a few blocks from the Havana Hilton and the old Hotel Nacional. In bed, sleepless, I remembered a US Pentagon study of nuclear war effects on different size cities: If US ICBMs dropped a one-megaton bomb on Havana, it would vaporise my hotel, leaving a crater 1,000 feet wide and 200 feet deep. The blast would destroy virtually everything within a 1.7 mile radius. Of the two-million inhabitants hundreds of thousands living in central Havana would be killed instantly. Tens of thousands more would die of radiation within hours. Fires would rage across the rest of the city as far as the Soviet military headquarters in El Chico, 12 miles from city centre.

Confined to our hotel, we were oblivious to the momentous events that were unfolding on Black Saturday:

- A US Air Force U-2 reconnaissance aircraft had been shot down, killing pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson, while on a mission to photograph the Soviet missiles

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- A US Air Force U-2 accidentally strayed into Soviet airspace near Alaska and Soviet interceptors gave chase.

- Defense Secretary Robert McNamara reported the Soviet ship Grozny was steadily approaching the Cuban quarantine line.

- Six low-level US Crusader reconnaissance flights had been forced to turn back by Cuban ground fire while photographing missile sites.

- The US Navy located and dropped practice depth charges to force four Soviet Foxtrot nuclear armed submarines to surface.

- The Soviet Union and the United States conducted atmospheric nuclear tests on this day.

- Two Cuban exiles dispatched by the CIA under the Mongoose program had set explosive charges at the Metahambre copper mine in Pinar Del Rio. They were captured by Cuban police.

Any one of these incidents could have provoked a nuclear response in the tense atmosphere that prevailed that day. There were stories within each of those stories. For instance, the CIA flew slightly better U2's than the US Air Force; they had a more powerful engine and could fly 5,000 feet higher. However, President Kennedy preferred to have air force pilots flying over Cuba, as fewer questions would be asked if they were shot down, so the CIA reluctantly agreed to lend several

of its U2's to the Air Force, and they were repainted with Air Force insignia.

As one U2 approached the missile site at Banes, near Guantanamo Bay in Western Cuba, an order came from Soviet military headquarters in El Chico near Havana, "Destroy target number 33. Use two missiles." A proximity fuse detonated the SAMs as they closed in, spraying shrapnel and killing Major Rudolf Anderson instantly.

Declassified Soviet sources have confirmed the missile had not been cleared to fire by the Kremlin. Furious, Khrushchev ordered no further firings

without his direct orders. In Washington, Air Force Gen. Curtis Le May ordered that rocket-carrying fighters be readied for an attack on the SAM site. The White House ordered Le May not to attack unless he had direct orders from the President.

"He chickened out again," Le May growled. "How in hell do you get men to risk their lives when the SAMs are not attacked?"

Thousands of miles away, a U2 flying out of Eielson Air Force base in Alaska on a mission to monitor air samples during the Soviet nuclear test that day became disoriented and flew 400 miles

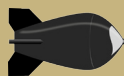
into Soviet airspace. The Soviets could well have regarded this U2 flight as a last-minute intelligence reconnaissance in preparation for nuclear war. Soviet MIG aircraft tried to intercept the U2, which was flying at 75,000 feet, but could not reach that altitude. Alaskan Command sent up two nuclear armed F102 interceptors to protect the U2.

When President Kennedy was later told about the incident he replied, "There's always some sonofabitch who doesn't get the word."

Six US Navy Crusaders, flying at tree-top level under Soviet radar, headed westward to photograph the missile sites of Pinar Del Rio. Cuban anti-aircraft guns opened fire as the Crusaders approached the San Cristobal missile site, so the pilots, aware of multiple hits,

aborted the mission and flew home to Key West.

Soviet submarine commanders were highly disciplined and unlikely to trigger their nuclear torpedoes by design, but we now know the unstable conditions on board the subs raised the spectre of an accidental nuclear launch. US Navy ships had located four Soviet Foxtrot submarines in the waters south of the Turks and Caicos Islands. Each day the subs had to surface to charge their batteries and report to Moscow. Once located, the subs were forced to surface by US naval ships dropping hand grenades and practice depth charges.



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On “Black Saturday,” sub B59, commanded by Captain Valentin Savitsky, had been chased for two days. Its batteries were low and Savitsky had not been able to communicate with Moscow. Temperatures in the sub reached 140-degrees, food was spoiling in the refrigerators, and water was low and rationed. Carbon dioxide levels were becoming critical and sailors were fainting from heat and exhaustion.

Submerged several hundred feet, the sub came under repeated attack from the USS Randolph which dropped practice depth charges. The explosions became deafening. Forty years later, Vadim Orlov, a senior officer on B59, described the scene as Captain Sevitsky lost his temper: “Savitsky was furious and summoned the officer in charge of the nuclear torpedo, and ordered him to make it combat ready. ‘We’re going to blast them now,’ said Savitsky. ‘We will perish ourselves, but we will sink them all. We will not disgrace our Navy.’” Fellow officers persuaded Savitsky to calm down and a decision was made to surface in the midst of four American destroyers.

A spy and journalist out of their depth

In Washington, a Russian KGB officer and an ABC News reporter inserted themselves into the drama. Aleksandr Feklisov, the KGB station chief, had approached ABC News State Department correspondent John Scali with a plan to dismantle missile bases in Cuba in return for a US pledge not to invade. Scali ran it past Secretary of State Dean Rusk and got his approval. Their meddling was a classic case of miscommunication between Washington and Moscow at a time when a mis-step could have led to nuclear war. According to Scali, it had been a Soviet initiative, while Feklisov presented it as an American one. What Scali thought was a feeler from Moscow was an attempt by the KGB to measure Washington’s conditions for a settlement.

Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin said he had not authorised this type of negotiation and refused to send Feklisov’s messages to Moscow. Feklisov could only send his negotiation report with Scali by cable to KGB headquarters, and there is no evidence the cable was ever read by Khrushchev or played any part in Kremlin decision-making. Yet, the Scali-Feklisov meetings would become part of

the strange mythology of the Cuban missile crisis. Scali later became US Ambassador to the United Nations by President Richard Nixon.

Before “Black Saturday” ended President Kennedy got more bad news. The CIA determined that five of the six medium-range missile sites in Cuba were fully operational. That evening, Kennedy sent his brother Robert to meet Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and warn him that US military action was imminent. At the same time, Khrushchev was offered a possible way out: Pull his missiles out of Cuba and the US would promise not to invade and also withdraw missiles from Turkey.

Radio News

Sunday, Oct 28: Our Japanese colleague Hori-kawa had a powerful Zenith shortwave radio and we spent a lot of time listening to news broadcasts from Miami. It seemed Khrushchev had “blinked.” Moscow radio broadcast a long letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy agreeing to remove the missiles from Cuba under UN inspection. Kennedy, in return, agreed not to invade Cuba. The crisis between the world’s superpowers was waning. However, Fidel Castro was furious over the settlement and felt betrayed by his Soviet friends. We continued to be his guests. We were fed regularly, but monotonously, from the hotel kitchen, mostly “arroz con pollo,” chicken with rice, which we washed down with Bulgarian red wine at \$5 a bottle. And to make our meals more festive, we ordered Cuban cigars and Russian vodka. Periodically, on the Miami NBC radio station, it was reported that six international journalists, who had flown into Havana, had not been heard from and were considered “missing.”

Monday, Oct 29: No one came to see us, so we spent a lot of time trying to be journalists, jotting in our journals whatever we could observe from our room windows. Looking down toward the harbour, we saw many ships, including Soviet freighters that had passed through the blockade. On the Malecon, the seaside street, we could see an anti-aircraft battery manned by Cuban soldiers. Regularly, US Navy Crusader reconnaissance planes screamed low over our hotel.

Platoons of “milicianos,” male and female civilians on military duty, marched through the streets

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in view of our hotel. On Cuban radio and even the hotel sound system, patriotic music was interrupted by urgent announcements of news bulletins and excerpts from speeches as Fidel Castro warned his people to expect an invasion by the United States.

Whoever was in charge seemed to have forgotten about us. We weren't mistreated, but simply held incommunicado, so we began plotting ways to draw attention to our dilemma.

That afternoon, I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw two old Canadian friends drinking at an outdoor cafe just below my window. Doug Buchanan and Rod McKenzie were pilots for International Air Freighters flying between Toronto and Havana. My colleagues and I hastily wrote a letter addressed to the Associated Press in Havana, listing our names, nationalities and the circumstances of our house arrest, and tossed it through the window louvres to them. The letter floated down nine stories onto the roof of a guard post. The two pilots retrieved the letter, whereupon the guards seized them and marched them off at gunpoint.

Tuesday, Oct 30: Alan Oxley, the British journalist who lived in Havana, spotted a girlfriend sunning herself in a bikini on the roof of the apartment building next to our hotel. He shouted to her to bring her baby and try to visit us in the hotel. She arrived within an hour pushing a baby buggy and the guards allowed her in to visit Alan. Before she left we slipped the letter to AP into the baby's diaper, but the crafty guards searched them on the way out and found it.

Phone home

Friday, Nov 2: Horikawa came up with a new plan to make contact with the outside world. The phones in our rooms were shut off at the switchboard, so we screwed off the plates in the wall where the phone wires entered and found a gathering of multicolored wires. We slit each of the wires with a

razor blade and inserted the phone terminal connections. Our theory was we would eventually tap into wires connected to another room and we'd be able to make a call. We intercepted conversations in Russian, Spanish and Chinese, before finally tapping into the phone lines of an empty room. We got a dial tone and called the Associated Press, who promised to contact our embassies.

We jammed back into the wall moments before the hotel manager and receptionist ordered the guards to inspect an empty room where they claimed telephone calls were being made. Later that day, the Miami radio station reported our names and that we were being held under house arrest at the Capri.

We heard on the radio that Castro had rejected the Washington-Moscow settlement. U Thant flew in to Havana to attempt to persuade him but failed.

Sunday, Nov 4: the Soviets sent in their prime negotiator, Anastas Mikoyan, to reason with Castro. By then, we had been under house arrest for nine days. Raul Lazo, a junior officer at the Cuban Foreign Ministry, quietly called on us that evening and told us we were free to go and report as we liked. "I hope you will forgive us for having detained you. Please understand the crisis made it necessary," he said. To celebrate our freedom, Robert MacNeil and I checked out the thriving night-

club in the Capri, whose loud music had kept us awake while under house arrest. The big Havana hotels still featured lavish floor shows with leggy dancers in brief costumes. Tables were crowded with well-dressed couples drinking rum or vodka and the air was heavy with aromatic cigar smoke.

Enjoying our first night of freedom we took a late night stroll past the Havana TV station. A large black limousine pulled up and out stepped Commandante Che Guevara wearing army fatigues, his signature beret with a red star and large Cohiba cigar clenched in his teeth. Che had been in his



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military headquarters in a limestone cave in Pinar Del Rio throughout the crisis and this was his first night back in Havana. A small group of admirers quickly surrounded him and he signed a few autographs. I approached, saying: "Por favor, Comandante." Che smiled without removing his cigar and I shot a close-up headshot against the night background. (later, back in New York, I fancied becoming a millionaire from poster and t-shirt sales, but the colour slide of Che disappeared when an airline lost my suitcase.)

Robert and I took a table at a bar and ordered a final daiquiri to toast our freedom. A friendly waiter discovered that we were Canadian journalists. A few minutes later, a spotlight hit our table as the master of ceremonies said, "Bienvenidos, amigos periodistas Canadienses." Then, the spotlight swung to a table just behind us. "Bienvenidos, companero sovietico," said the announcer. Sitting in the spotlight was Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the famous Russian poet. We sent him a drink and introduced ourselves. Yevtushenko was working on a heroic film about Castro, and had written a poem that would appear on the front page of Pravda, the Moscow daily:

America, I'm writing to you from Cuba,
Where the cheekbones of tense sentries
And the cliffs shine anxiously tonight
Through the gusting storm.
A tabaquero with his pistol heads for the port.
A shoemaker cleans an old machine gun,
A showgirl, in a soldier's laced-up boots,
Marches with a carpenter to stand guard.
America, I'll ask you in plain Russian;
Isn't it shameful and hypocritical
That you have forced them to take up arms
And then accuse them of having done so?
I heard Fidel speak. He outlined his case
Like a doctor or a prosecutor.
In his speech, there was no animosity,
Only bitterness and reproach. America, it will be difficult
to regain the grandeur that you have lost
Through your blind games, While a little island,
standing firm, became a great country.

First thing on Monday morning the six of us who had been held in the Capri turned up at the Foreign

Ministry to get press credentials so we could cable or phone our reports. We were told the officials responsible for press accreditation were out of town and to try again "manana."

Every day we assembled at the Foreign Ministry in quest of Cuban press cards and every day we were told to try again tomorrow. Fidel was furious with his Soviet friends for caving in to US demands and had even rejected a Soviet proposal for international inspection. U Thant had come and gone from Havana, and on November 2, Khrushchev's principal deputy Anastas Mikoyan, arrived in Havana to persuade Fidel to agree to the inspection and removal of the Ilyushin 28 bombers.

Castro grudgingly met Mikoyan's plane, but refused to meet with him for days. At the bar of the Havana Libre Hilton, I met a Canadian pilot who had flown in with Mikoyan's plane – in 1962, Canadian pilots were required on flights out of Gander airport in Newfoundland. He said he would keep me informed on Mikoyan's schedule and departure date, which would indicate his tough negotiations with Castro were over. The Hilton bar was probably the most conspicuous watering hole in Havana and if Cuban intelligence was noticing the company I kept, it would not enhance my daily request for a press card.

Help from the Canadian embassy

One of the most well-informed and influential diplomats in Havana was Dwight Fullford, second secretary at the Canadian embassy. I heard later that he had pressed the Cuban Foreign Ministry hard for my release from house arrest. On the fourth evening after my release from the hotel, Dwight and his wife Barbara invited me for dinner at a Havana restaurant. We had just met on a street corner when Dwight excused himself to buy cigarettes. As I was talking to Barbara, a black limousine pulled up and two men jumped out. They grabbed me, shoved me into the car and sped away in a screech of tires, leaving Barbara to explain the sudden disappearance of their dinner guest. Dwight, returned to the embassy to again work the phone lines on my behalf.

I was taken to a small jail near the harbour that was used for immigration cases. Within an hour,

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most of the other journalists held in the Capri were rounded up and again became guests of the government, this time in a grimy cell. The next morning a diplomat from the Canadian embassy dropped by to say the Cubans had decided to deport us to Mexico, the only place Cubana Airlines was flying that week. But there was a hitch: the Mexicans had refused to receive supposed criminals from a Cuban jail. The diplomat said he was working on it.

The following three days passed slowly: We scratched our names and the date on the cement wall along with those of hundreds of other previous prisoners. A young Nicaraguan named Raul, who spoke excellent English, tried to engage us in conversation. He was obviously a government plant and we regaled him with glowing admiration for the Cuban revolution, Fidel and Che, hoping he would report favourably.

There was a TV set high on the wall that we could view through the bars. Each evening of our stay they broadcast a serial based on Ernest Hemmingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In his later years Hemmingway had lived in Havana and his books were still popular there. On the second morning, our luggage was brought to our cell. Nothing seemed to be missing, but books, letters and private papers had notes pinned to them with Spanish translations written on the stationery of the Cuban Security police.

Next morning, the head guard announced we would be released later that day. However, pointing at the substantial beard I had grown since arriving in Cuba, he said: "Senor North, before you can be released you must shave your beard. In Cuba only Fidelistas have beards and you're not a Fidelista."

I protested, but he was adamant: No shave, no freedom. A dull Gillette was produced without shaving soap or hot water. With a gun in my back, I stood at the sink and shaved, very painfully.

Mexico had agreed to issue transit visas and we were deported to New York without ceremony 13 days after our arrival.

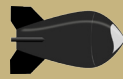
Summing up 50 years

Perhaps the best book looking back on the dark days of October 1962 is *One Minute to Midnight* by journalist Michael Dobbs. In summing up how catastrophe was averted, Dobbs wrote: "Despite all their differences, both personal and ideological, the two men had reached similar conclusions about the nature of nuclear war. Nikita Khrushchev and John Kennedy both understood that such a war would be far more terrible than anything mankind had known before. They also understood that a commander in chief could not always control his own armies. In short they were both human beings flawed, idealistic, blundering, sometimes brilliant, often mistaken, but ultimately very aware of their own humanity."

In retrospect, it is clear the United States needs its President not to be so overdosed with his own testosterone or so obsessed by his own insecurities that he not only understands the meaning of nuance but is actually prepared to conduct relations with the rest of the world in a balanced, thoughtful manner. That means he must show the judgment of a John Kennedy rather than the belligerence of a Gen. Curtis LeMay. The danger today may not be as high as in October 1962, but it is not hard to imagine that another nuclear crisis could arise.

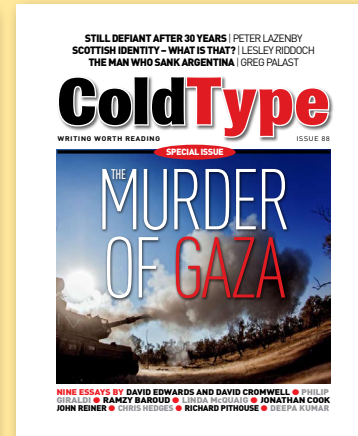
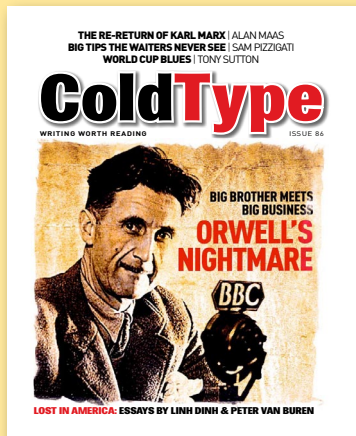
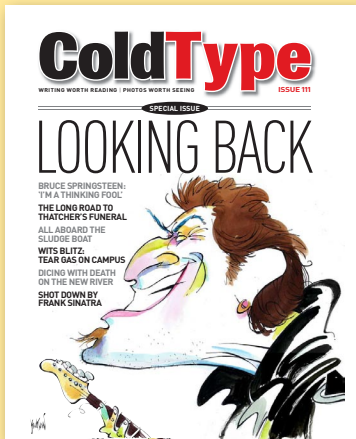
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Don North has covered some of the most dangerous stories of the past half century, including the Cuban missile crisis and conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Nicaragua and the Middle East. North's *Inappropriate Conduct* told the story of a Canadian war correspondent in Italy in 1944 who operated at the risky front line between truth and propaganda in wartime.



A young Nicaraguan named Raul tried to engage us in conversation. He was obviously a government plant and we regaled him with glowing admiration for the Cuban revolution, Fidel and Che, hoping he would report favourably

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