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Ex-soldier will return to land he defended

Wharton veteran invited to mark 50 years since 2nd Taiwan Strait Crisis

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WHARTON -- It was 1958 and tension was high for Joel Aronson and his military buddies stationed in Taiwan.

The communist People's Republic of China was firing artillery at the small island territory, also known as the Republic of China.

But a tough American response led to a cease-fire, and today Aronson, a 23-year resident of Wharton, has been invited along with other veterans to return to Taiwan to mark the 50th anniversary of the incident.

It was called the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, and the United States provided the military support to fend off a potential invasion by the communist Chinese. The communists had taken over the mainland in 1949, prompting the anti-communist Republic of China government and its supporters to flee to Taiwan.

Aronson served two tours of duty in Taiwan while he was enlisted in the Air Force.

The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis began on Aug. 23, 1958, when mainland China began shelling the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, two small archipelagos that were controlled by the Republic of China and were located within a mile of the mainland.

Aronson was living in Oceanside on Long Island when he enlisted in the Air Force in 1956 out of a sense of adventure. He had an interest in photography and later became a professional photographer, but he failed the aptitude test that the Air Force administered to recruits who wanted to be photographers for the service.

Testing Aronson, however, revealed that he had an aptitude for learning languages, so he accepted an assignment to study Chinese at Yale University.

The Air Force's goal was to train Aronson to eavesdrop on the radio communications of communist Chinese warplanes. He successfully completed a year's worth of training and, in April 1958, was assigned to a radio monitoring station on an air base north of Taipei, the Taiwanese capital.

The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis began just four months later.

Mainland China had shelled Quemoy and Matsu with artillery in 1954 in what became known as the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, but it ultimately stopped the shelling without seizing Taiwanese territory.

When the artillery barrages resumed four years later, the Taiwanese and American forces feared the bombardment was a prelude to Taiwan being overrun by mainland China, then and now the world's most populous nation.

"People were afraid of their (communist China's) tactics of sending millions of troops over," Aronson

said.

Activity at Aronson's station sharply increased as he and his Air Force colleagues carefully monitored the radio communications of communist Chinese aircraft. They were scrutinizing the communications for signs that a full-scale invasion was about to begin.

"Everybody was intense," Aronson said.

It was a potentially dangerous time for Aronson and his buddies, but they remained focused on their duties and did not get too worried about the possibility that their base might be bombed by mainland Chinese aircraft.

"We didn't sit around biting our fingernails," Aronson said. "We had confidence (in our air defenses)."

The United States responded to the shelling by deploying warships and warplanes in the region and by supplying the Taiwanese with AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, which the Taiwanese fired during dogfights with communist Chinese MiG fighters. Then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower also made forceful statements in defense of Taiwan.

Recently released documents indicate that the U.S. Air Force even proposed to attack mainland China with nuclear weapons if the communists attacked Taiwan. But Eisenhower blocked that move by ordering American forces to use conventional weapons only.

The strong American response caused the shelling to stop when mainland China declared a ceasefire on Oct. 6, 1958.

With the crisis passed, Aronson returned to America in March 1959 to undertake advanced Chinese studies at Yale. He returned to Taiwan for another tour of duty from early 1961 to June 1962, when he left the Air Force.

During his second tour in Taiwan, Aronson continued his work in electronic intelligence and branched out into photography. He took pictures of VIPs including then-Vice President Lyndon Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird, when they visited there in 1961.

Aronson again returned to Taiwan in 2003 as part of a visiting American delegation. He said he is thrilled to be embarking on his latest trip, which will run from Aug. 17 to 26.

The group will stay in Taiwan for the entire trip and will not visit mainland China, where the eyes of the world will be focused as the Olympics are held there from Aug. 8 to 24.

The highlight of Aronson's journey is scheduled for Aug. 23 when he and 10 fellow American veterans of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis will attend a wreath-laying ceremony at Taiwan's Tomb of Unknown Soldiers. They then will enjoy a luncheon with Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou.

But Aronson said he also looks forward to interacting with ordinary Taiwanese, whom he said are very friendly.

"I feel very comfortable in that environment," he said.
