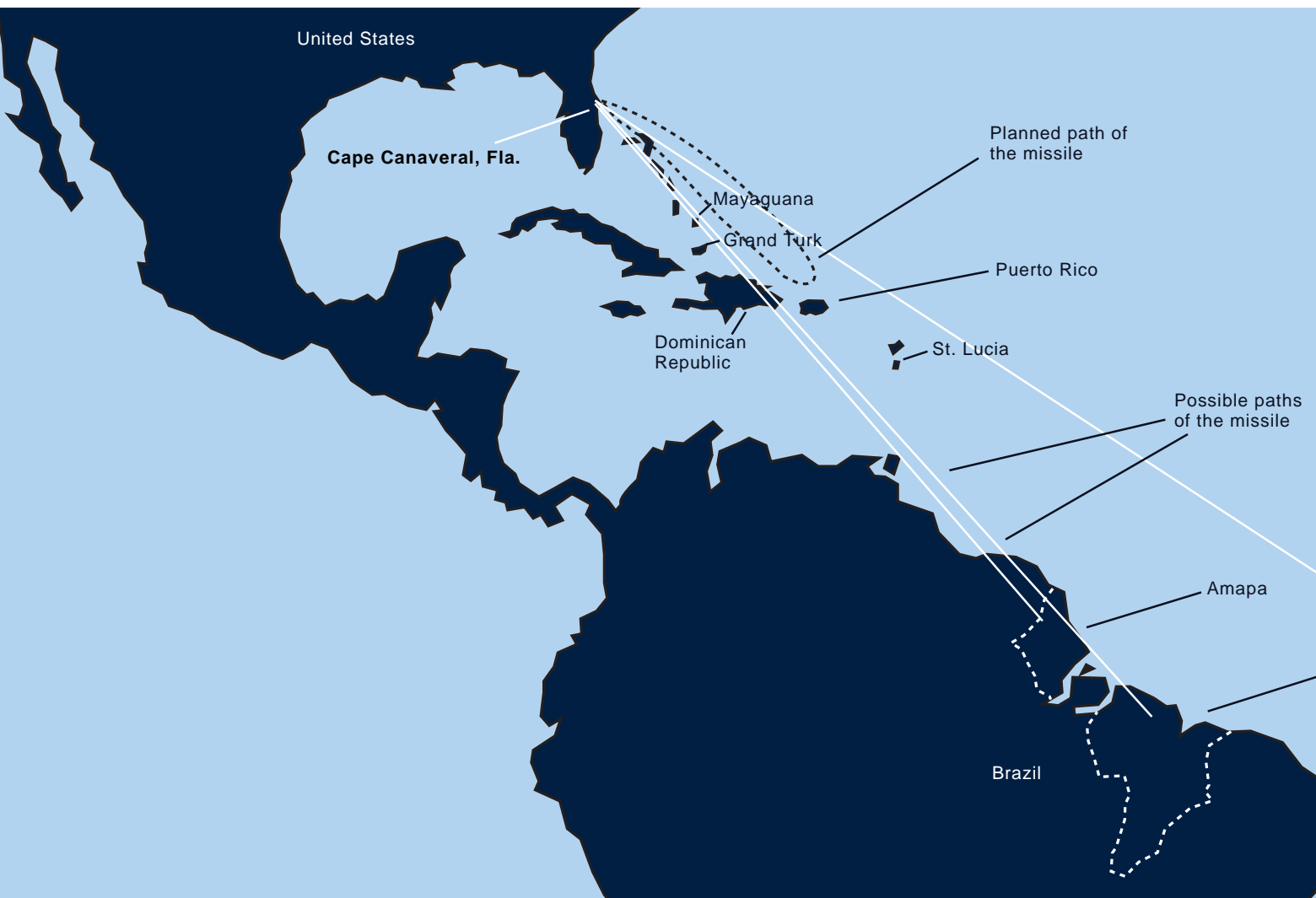




Nearly 50 years ago, a big red aircraft made an unexpected landing in the Amazon.

# The Day They Lost the Snark

By J.P. Anderson



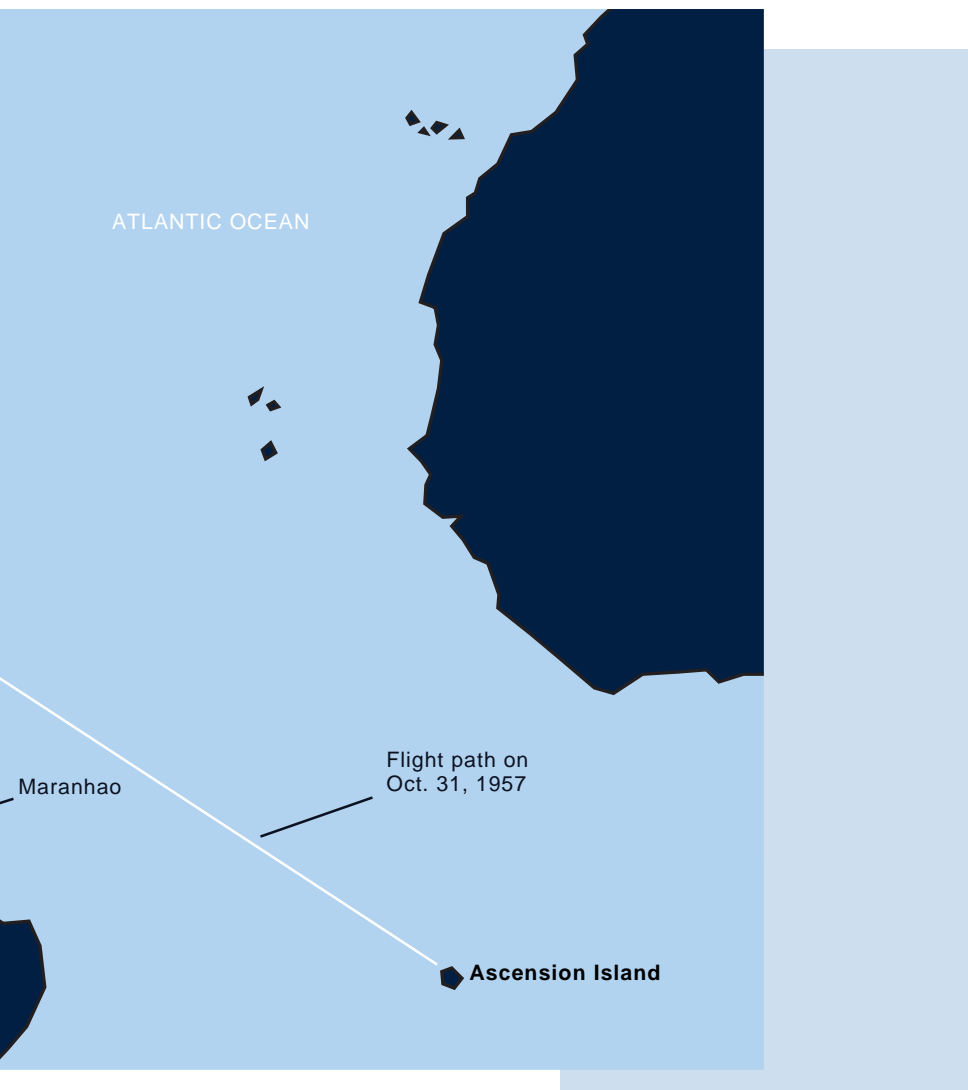
**T**HE Snark may not have distinguished itself in its first 61 test flights, but No. 62 certainly was one for the books.

It came during the Cold War 1950s. The Northrop Aircraft B-62 (later SM-62) Snark, an unmanned, nuclear-capable aircraft, was America's first long-range cruise missile. The huge (48,000-pound) aircraft was launched from a mobile platform by two boosters and then was powered by a jet engine. Strategic Air Command pressed for its deployment.

However, Snark testing, which started in New Mexico and moved to Cape Canaveral Missile Test Annex, Fla., was bedeviled with problems. In its first launch at the Cape, the test Snark crashed after only 15 sec-



*Technicians ready an SM-62 Snark cruise missile at Cape Canaveral Missile Test Annex, Fla. The Snark was to fly to Puerto Rico and return. Instead it vanished after it was last seen off Venezuela.*



onds of flight; its drag chute deployed prematurely. The next to go up rejected steering commands five minutes into flight, went out of control, and was destroyed.

In 1954 and 1955, Northrop launched 11 “recoverable” Snark A and B models. It actually recovered zero.

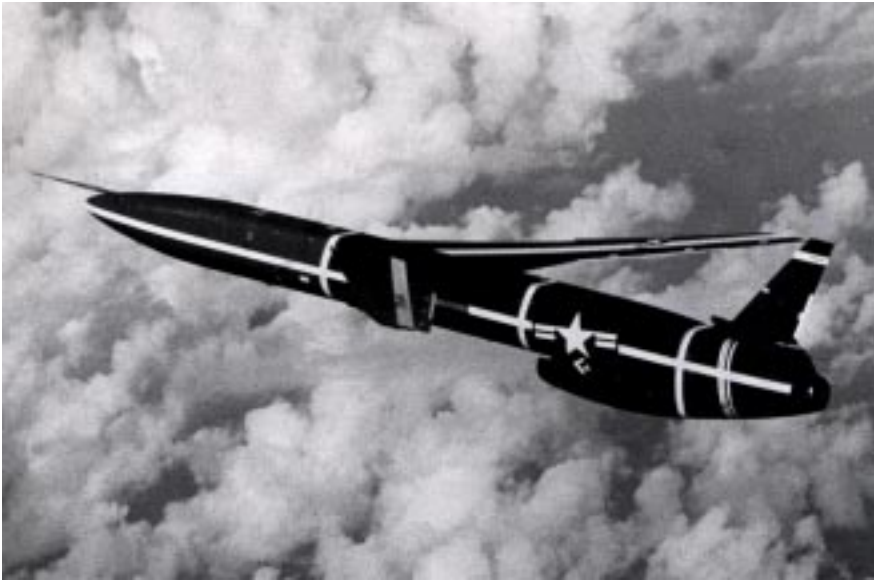
Snark C models were deliberately flown into the Atlantic waters. Failures and deliberate “dumps” caused workers at the Eastern Test Range to refer to the area as “Snark-infested waters.”

The D model was used to evaluate the Mk 1 inertial guidance system. The first three flights were programmed to fly a southeasterly course, turn around over Grand Turk Island (Atlantic Missile Range Station 7), and come back. This they did. The third Snark D, equipped with skids, even landed on a Cape runway.

Then came the fourth flight in the guidance test series.

This particular Snark—Northrop No. N-3309, USAF tail No. 53-8172—was launched Dec. 5, 1956, from Launch Complex 1. Its mission was to fly to the area around Puerto Rico, make a turn, and come back.

The Snark took off and set a course toward Puerto Rico. Technicians minding the telemetry said they were



**USAF developed the unmanned, nuclear-capable Snark as an interim weapon while it worked on ballistic missiles. The first Snark went on alert in Maine in 1960. After the runaway, USAF added a second power bus to ensure control.**

receiving a signal until the Snark dipped over the horizon. Then, tracking radars picked up the flight.

### Runaway Snark

However, a problem developed. The radars showed that the Snark had begun to drift to the right off the proper flight path. The rate of error was eight miles for each 100 miles of flight.

That wasn't the only problem. Soon, the wayward Snark began refusing commands that were sent in an effort to get it back on course.

By the time the Snark reached Mayaguana Island in the Bahamas (Range Station 6), the problem was obvious. Station 6's range safety officer was told to terminate the flight. Destruct signals, however, had no effect. The vehicle continued on its cruise into the Caribbean.

Island radars at Station 7 (Grand Turk), Station 8 (the Dominican Republic), Station 9 (Puerto Rico), and Station 10 (St. Lucia) were told to track the runaway Snark. Stations 7, 9, and 10 did acquire track, but the commands had no effect.

Officials at the Air Force Missile Test Center contacted Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico, asking that USAF scramble fighters. By the time they got airborne, it was too late to catch it.

Realizing that the vehicle could crash anywhere south of Puerto Rico, AFMTC officials alerted the State Department, whose reaction is not recorded.

Station 10 was the last to have a radar track. It would be the last to have a crack at the Snark.

In the central control building, USAF had installed four operating consoles—one for the USAF station commander (also the range safety officer), one for the station manager of the prime contractor, Pan American World Airways, one for the RCA Service Co. instrumentation manager, and one for the Snark field engineer.

Not long after *l'affaire* Snark, Station 10 personnel regaled a visitor with descriptions of the scene that day. As they told it, all four technicians formed a kind of "conga line" and marched around the range safety console, each stopping to take a desperate stab at the destruct signals. Nothing worked.

When last seen, the Snark was off the coast of Venezuela, flying a southeasterly course toward the vast expanse of Brazil's Amazon jungle. It simply vanished.

Where did it go? Evidently, no one knows for sure. (A definitive account may exist, but, if it does, it has been beyond the reach of a reasonably long and diligent search.)

There are reports that the Snark was

found by a farmer in Brazil in the early 1980s. (See "Pieces of History: The Cruise of the Snark," May, p. 176.)

Another report held that the missing Snark was found by a group of hunters in the state of Maranhao, in northeast Brazil, and that a local television station aired footage of the find.

One assumes the Snark carried enough fuel not only for a 1,900-mile Cape Canaveral-Puerto Rico round-trip but also for one extra hour of flight—enough to cover about 550 miles. This was routinely done to allow flight-test officials to compensate for wind or to check responsiveness to commands before landing.

Thus, the Snark's maximum range would be about 2,450 miles.

### Into Amapa?

If so, the Snark would not have had enough legs to reach Maranhao, which is 2,800 miles from the Cape. It would have been able to reach only the Brazilian state of Amapa (see map), on the border with French Guiana and Suriname.

Records show that USAF conducted a postflight analysis of the event. It reported that the flight-termination system failed because the missile bus-bar voltage dropped below the minimum needed to switch the destruct system to emergency battery power.

Later-model Snarks were equipped with a second power bus to prevent similar escapes.

The Snark went on to become the first US intercontinental-range missile when, on Oct. 31, 1957, it flew from Florida to Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. On March 18, 1960, the 702nd Strategic Missile Wing placed the first Snark on alert at Presque Isle AFB, Maine.

Unfortunately for fans of the Snark, ballistic missile technology advanced rapidly. Both the Atlas and Titan ICBMs went operational in the early 1960s, and the Snark was deactivated soon thereafter. Though the program has been dead for four decades, one Snark, at least, lives on as a little Cold War mystery. ■

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*J.P. Anderson, formerly a CIA communications officer, joined RCA Service Co. in 1956, serving as a contractor on the Atlantic Missile Range, Project Mercury, Project Gemini, and Project Apollo. In 1979, he returned to the Air Force Eastern Test Range as a communications engineer. He is now a volunteer at the Air Force Space and Missile Museum at Cape Canaveral. This is his first article for Air Force Magazine.*