A CINCINNATI SAILOR AT THE EDGE OF WAR

James Ralph Gray Sr. and the Cuban Missile Crisis

USS John R. Pierce (DD-753) | October 1962



USS John R. Pierce (DD-753), historical ship photograph as reproduced in the supplied reference image.

James Ralph Gray Sr. was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on January 6, 1941. At twenty-one, he was serving in the United States Navy aboard the destroyer USS John R. Pierce, a ship that took part in the naval quarantine of Cuba during the extraordinary confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union in October 1962. His surviving brothers confirm that he was aboard during the crisis. A contemporary shipboard muster-roll entry is being sought as additional documentary confirmation.

Two newspaper clippings preserved by the family identify him as James R. Gray, a machinist's mate, son of Genevieve Gray of Cincinnati. Together, they reveal a working sailor whose service encompassed both a world-changing naval operation and an act of practical courage that earned him an official commendation.

A destroyer goes to sea

On October 22, 1962, President John F. Kennedy announced a naval "quarantine" intended to prevent additional offensive weapons from reaching Cuba. That same day, the John R. Pierce sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, under Commander James W. Foust. The destroyer joined the quarantine force on October 24. According to the Naval History and Heritage Command, it investigated thirteen vessels over the following five days.

For sailors aboard the Pierce, the crisis was not a distant news story. The ship was at sea, carrying out orders at a moment when decisions made on both sides could have escalated into war. It would be tempting to describe precisely what Jim saw, thought, or did during those watches, but no surviving personal account has yet been located. What is documented is the mission of the vessel on which his family says he served.

October 26: The Marucla interception

The Pierce had a direct role in one of the crisis's best-documented surface encounters. On October 25, she and USS Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. moved to intercept the Lebanese-flagged freighter Marucla, bound for Havana. Navy accounts report that the Pierce briefly investigated an East German passenger vessel before rejoining the hunt for Marucla. At first light on October 26, a boarding party drawn from the two American destroyers went aboard the freighter. Its cargo papers and selected cargo were examined, and the ship was subsequently allowed to proceed.

The operation was the only actual merchant-ship boarding of the quarantine. Years later, Captain Foust wrote a firsthand account disputing an implication that the Pierce had played a secondary role. He described how his destroyer maintained contact, communicated with senior commands, and helped bring the two warships together for the boarding. His testimony gives a vivid sense of how closely the crew's routine operations intersected with decisions being made at the highest levels of government.

Although a Pierce officer took part in the boarding, there is no evidence that Jim himself went aboard Marucla. As a machinist's mate, his likely contribution was in the engineering spaces, helping keep the propulsion plant and its supporting equipment ready while the destroyer maneuvered and maintained station. His particular watch station remains unverified.

A machinist's mate at work

A second-class machinist's mate (MM2) was a petty officer with substantial responsibility for shipboard machinery. On a steam-powered destroyer such as the Pierce, machinist's mates served the propulsion and auxiliary systems that allowed the ship to sail and maneuver. Their work mattered especially during extended operations, when reliable machinery and immediate responsiveness could be essential.

On October 28, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles. The Pierce left her assigned quarantine station on October 29 but continued patrol operations in the Caribbean, returning to Norfolk on December 14. Her shipmates had participated in a moment now remembered as one of the closest approaches to nuclear war in modern history.

A commendation for courage and resourcefulness

Another family newspaper clipping tells a different, more personal story. It reports that James R. Gray received a letter of commendation while serving aboard the Pierce. On June 23 of an unspecified year, a barge loaded with 133 tons of heavy machine-shop equipment began to capsize. Jim and several others helped keep the barge afloat so that workmen could salvage the machinery. The year of the incident has not yet been established, and the original commendation letter has not been located.

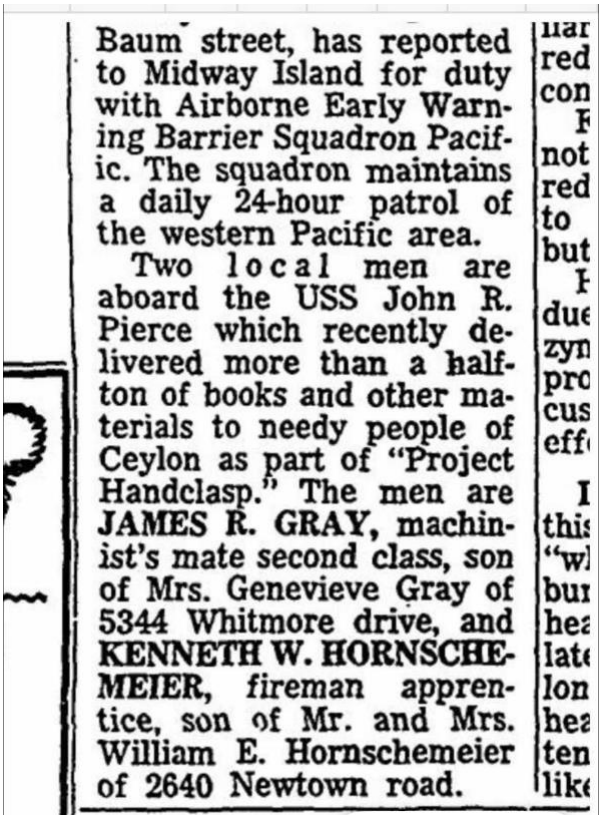
This brief local news item makes Jim more than a name on a warship roster. It records him stepping forward with other sailors in an emergency, applying the teamwork and technical steadiness that naval life demanded. The family also preserved a clipping naming Jim and another Cincinnati sailor, Kenneth W. Hornschemeier, aboard the Pierce during a Project Handclasp delivery of books and supplies to people in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The dates of both clippings remain to be established.

What his family can preserve

James Ralph Gray Sr. died January 5, 2016, one day before his seventy-fifth birthday. His life extended far beyond his Navy years, yet those years connected him to extraordinary events. The facts of his ship's Cuban operation are well documented; his brothers' recollection connects him personally to that October deployment; and the family's newspaper clippings independently document his ship assignment, technical rating, humanitarian service, and commendation.

When the 1962 muster rolls or personnel diaries are obtained, they can be added to this account. If his commendation letter or the dated newspaper issue is found, a fuller account of the barge rescue will also be possible. Until then, his story deserves to be told carefully: a young Cincinnati machinist's mate serving aboard a destroyer at the center of a Cold War crisis, and a sailor publicly recognized for helping others in danger.

Family newspaper records



Baum street, has reported to Midway Island for duty with Airborne Early Warning Barrier Squadron Pacific. The squadron maintains a daily 24-hour patrol of the western Pacific area.

Two local men are aboard the USS John R. Pierce which recently delivered more than a half-ton of books and other materials to needy people of Ceylon as part of "Project Handclasp." The men are JAMES R. GRAY, machinist's mate second class, son of Mrs. Genevieve Gray of 5344 Whitmore drive, and KENNETH W. HORNSCHEMEIER, fireman apprentice, son of Mr. and Mrs. William E. Hornschemeier of 2640 Newtown road.

Family clipping identifying James R. Gray as MM2 aboard USS John R. Pierce during a Project Handclasp mission (newspaper and date not yet identified).



stationed at Ft. McArthur, California.

2D. LT. RONALD P. ROGSON, a Marine aviator candidate and son of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur G. Rogson of 9471 Conklin avenue, has completed flight preparation school at the Pensacola Naval Air Station.

ENS. ROBERT W. LINK JR., son of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Link Sr., of 3455 Harwinton lane, has graduated from the U. S. Naval Officer Candidate School at Newport, R. I.

JAMES R. GRAY, machinist's mate, son of Mrs. Genevieve Gray of 4445 Whitemore drive, has been awarded a letter of commendation while aboard the destroyer, the USS John R. Pierce. The letter states that on June 23, a barge laden with 133 tons of heavy machine shop equipment began to capsize. Gray and several others kept the barge afloat, and workmen were able to salvage the equipment.

2D LT. MYRON R. WILLIAMS, son of Mr. and Mrs.

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Gas bubbles cause stomach pain.
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Family clipping reporting his commendation for helping save a capsizing barge on June 23 (year not yet verified).

Sources and research notes

• Naval History and Heritage Command, Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, “John R. Pierce (DD-753).” https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/j/john-r-pierce-dd-753.html

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• James W. Foust, “The Cuban Missile Crisis Quarantine,” letter in U.S. Naval Institute, Naval History, Spring 1992. https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/1992/march/contact

• J. M. Caiella, “Family Namesake,” Naval History, October 2022 (discussion of the Marucla boarding). https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2022/october/family-namesake

• U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962.” https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis

• Family-provided biographical record and two undated local newspaper clippings; oral confirmation by James R. Gray’s surviving brothers.

Documentation status: October 1962 ship presence is supported by family eyewitness testimony; the individual October 1962 Navy muster-roll image has not yet been examined. The June 23 barge incident year remains unknown. Specific thoughts, conversations, battle stations, and participation in the Marucla boarding are not attributed to Jim without evidence.