

*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 4. Initial Indoctrination



A thousand thoughts were passing through my mind as I drove half way across the U.S., from Travis Air Force base in California to Forbes Air Force base in Kansas, and more then a thousand questions as to why I had volunteered for this "Top Secret" combat group. I have already put in my twenty years why not just retire?

I wondered what kind of a combat outfit the Air Force thought it could make out of a bunch of old Gooney Birds, also known as C-47's or in civilian terms DC-3's, the oldest aircraft that the Air Force had in service. Most of the Gooney Birds had been sent to the bone yard in Florida, with just a few kept in service at some of the small state side bases. These were considered to be old and worn out, and very outdated.

Now don't get me wrong, in the past the Gooney Bird had some pretty remarkable accomplishments: It had been the first reliable passenger aircraft and was used all over the world, even by Admiral Byrd on his historic South Pole trip!

When WW II came along the Gooney Bird was called into war time service and used as a troop transport, supply transport, medi-vacs, and personal planes for unit commanders and Generals, why it even hauled the U.S. Mail to our troops overseas. Our military put ski's and jet bottles on them so they could land and takeoff in ice and deep snow. The most unusual use was to pull gliders for the commandos so they could glide silently into enemy territory. In civilian life they were even used as fire fighters to drop fire retardant, the old Gooney Bird has led a versatile and varied life.

In WW II I was a fighter pilot and at the time I felt that any muti-engine flight time I could get would further my military career, so entered the Gooney Bird into my life. As time went by I found myself flying B-36"s and then B-52"s, but I still flew the Gooney Bird quite often.

Let me digress a little bit here, during WW II I was sent to Lincoln Nebraska, and while waiting for my overseas orders, I was the flight instructor for the Gooney Bird. Because of this I logged a lot of hours in the old bird. It also chased away the boredom of waiting for my orders, and I got to fly, that's why I joined the Air Force anyway.

As I approached Forbes Air Base I came to the conclusion that I must have been totally out of my mind to volunteer for this assignment in Vietnam. All I knew about the war in 1964 was that a friend of mine had delivered footlockers full of money to buy the War Lords that ran the southern tip of Vietnam

(soon to be called IV Corps).

It seems that the Vietnamese government did not have enough troops to fight up by the DMZ and down in the south delta areas, so they had us pay the War Lords to fight for them. And I volunteered to fly the antique aircraft on a "**Top Secret**" combat mission in this crazy war. Little did I know what was in store for me!

When I checked into personnel I was informed that my briefing was tomorrow morning at 0930, and that they would answer all my questions then.

After two days of almost non-stop driving, I had slept in the car on the side of the road and bought hamburgers when I got gas and ate on the road,

***I was "ready" for the Officer's club.***

It was early in the afternoon so I figured that the club would be empty.

I was wrong. To my surprise there was a large group of old pilots that I thought must be some of the tanker crews that flew out of Forbes.

**Wrong again!**

These guys were here for the same reason I was.

I thought that I would be the only old timer crazy enough to volunteer for this mission, boy was I wrong! All of us were about the same age and condition, too fat, tired, old and too close to retirement for combat, why all of us had seen action in Korea, and most of us were in WW II!

***Why did we volunteer?***

***We were all very patriotic and felt that we owed it to our country to help out this one last time, it may sound corny but, why else would we volunteer to get ourselves killed?***

Now to the briefing,

I felt like a new recruit in basic training again, they talked a lot, but told us nothing we wanted to hear.

They reminded us that this whole thing was "Top Secret" and informed us that no one had even tried any of the maneuvers that we were going to do, however they were fairly sure that the Gooney Bird would hold together for us!

They wanted us to "practice" the maneuvers at 10,000 feet to 15,000 feet so "if" we had trouble we "should" have time to solve the problem before we hit the ground.

***Not very comforting.***

Of course all I can think about is that these aircraft are all most as old and even more worn out and tired than I was!

Here I am in the pilot's seat, on the taxi way with my "instructor" in the copilot's seat, I have more hours in the left seat of a Gooney Bird than my "instructor" has total flight hours! Now to fly it felt good to be in the air! I did all types of landings and takeoffs, no flaps, full flaps and everything in between, long runway, short runway, one engine, full power, no power, over and over again. After two weeks they let us drop sand bags on targets on the ground. Sand bags? I thought I was going to shoot the enemy with guns mounted on the aircraft! Speaking of guns, they had not been manufactured yet!

Now I get to drop Navy flares with parachutes tied on them.

As I flew over the bombing range in Nebraska I would tell my gunner "drop flare" and he would toss it out, very simple, except no one knew how long the flares would burn

or how fast they would fall.

All of us on the aircraft noticed at about the same time that the bombing range was on fire!  
I managed to burn the whole range up! Very Enlightening!

Wow! Our guns have arrived and been installed on the aircraft!

Now the Air Force calls the C-47 the AC-47 since it can Attack and is a Cargo plane.  
Now I can test my skills with a real gun! Here is the drill; first, light up the target with a flare,  
second, bank the aircraft at 45% and hit the rudder to put it into a skid,

***line up the crosshair's and FIRE!***

The only problem is it is very hard to stay on target because the aircraft when banked  
to 45% wants to fall to the ground -- not real healthy.

So we changed the gun angle from 90% to the aircraft to 15% down.

Now I only needed to bank the aircraft 30%  
something that is within the design capabilities of the aircraft.

There was supposed to be a group of Gooney Birds in Vietnam developing the tactics  
for our combat missions, but they 30 caliber machine guns firing 800 rounds per minute.  
The General Electric Gatling gun I had was 7.62 caliber and would fire 6,000 rounds per minute!

***Yes!... 6,000 rounds per minute.***

*And I had three of them on the left side that's a total of 18,000 rounds per minute.  
Or one bullet per square foot in a football field in less then three seconds!*



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## 5. The Green Beret



The most memorable part of my training was while I was trained by the Green Beret.  
All the Green Beret I worked with had spent at least two tours ( a tours is one year)  
in Vietnam and most of these men had volunteered for another tour!  
Some had already received their shipping out orders!

At first it was hard for me to understand why these men were willing to go back to Vietnam  
after they had already fulfilled there obligation of one tour, however as they talked to me  
I began to understand the Vietnamese situation and their dedication to these people.

These men were not in Vietnam just to get combat pay or just to kill VC,  
or just to get the glory for fighting a war,  
their "**job**" was to help the  
individual village, farmer, and the farmer's family,  
survive each day and keep his land.

These brave men told me how the VC would wait for the right moment to strike an outpost or  
village,

and what tactics they would use under different circumstances.

I was told that the VC would fight in the daylight hours only when the friendly forces  
(American or South Vietnamese)  
would attack their bivouac area or their home bases.

Their preferred time to fight was the night, the darker the better.

These Green Beret were so glad that Puff the Magic Dragon was coming to Vietnam  
that they spread the word of what our capability were to every Green Beret in Vietnam!  
In fact my first contact with a Green Bret in Vietnam was at night while his outpost was under attack.

His first question was " Are you one of those Puff the Magic Dragon ships?"

When I said "yes this is the Dragon Man."

His reply was " Boy, am I glad you guys finally got here, we need your support.

Can you do every thing I have heard about you?" I replied

***"Just tell me where the bad guys are  
and watch, then you tell me".***

A couple of flares and a few burst from just one of my guns  
and he came back on the radio and said,

***"That's much better then I ever expected!"***

These Green Beret's were the only thing that kept our guns working,  
 we had problems with the cartridge guide bars, they would bend and then break,  
 making the gun worthless,  
 The Green Beret had a machine shop in Saigon, and they designed and built us a better guide bar.  
 We sent a sample to General Electric, and they started to make them the same way,  
 this modification did away with the problem!

### ***Back to training,***

The Green Beret taught me how to survive, if I was shot down, how to escape an ambush,  
 how to set bobby traps, with something as simple as a tin can, and how to handle and set explosives.

One man was in charge of our hand to hand training,  
 he was five foot seven inches tall and weighed about 155 pounds.  
 He told us of all the horrible acts and tremendous brutality that he had seen in Vietnam,  
 I will not go into any detail here.

I watched as he challenged a student to attack him with a bayonet on a rifle.  
 The student would try to stab and the Green Beret instructor would casually step aside  
 and place his finger on the tip of the bayonet and direct it safely away from himself,  
 all the while smiling and talking to his attacker and never even pausing or miss a word!  
 His training was invaluable to many of us in Vietnam.

***I have a great respect of these great men that fought to protect the people of Vietnam,  
 sometimes only one Green Beret in an outpost!***



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## 6. Training Trouble



For my last qualification flight "they" had decided to install a pneumatic flare launcher to aid the gunner and allow him more time to feed guns rather than toss flares out the door.

For the first two flares everything went well, in fact this launcher looked like it would be fantastic, then I went to launch the third flare, the air pressure was low and the flare did not clear the launch tube.

This was not to bad.. **"but"**, *of course you knew there was a "but"*,  
when the time was out on the flares chute timer the chute opened  
and of course it cleared the launch tube and pulled the flare clear of the tube

**"but"**, *again the but,*

the chute ropes caught on the rear stabilizer and with the chute on one side of the stabilizer  
and the flare on the other it worked like a saw and

***started to saw through the stabilizer!***

### Now I had a problem!

**After trying all types of maneuvers to free the flare my instructor and I decided  
that I had better fire my required ammo to qualify, so I could graduate  
and go on leave with the rest of the crews.**

***So I fired at the target and qualified!***

Now I radioed the control tower and explained the problem  
and they told me to go to the nearest military base, Salina Army Base,  
it was about thirty minuets away and Forbes A.F.B. was about one and one half hours away!

But I could not see in the dark how bad the damage was.

about now the ropes on the flare broke so at least my stabilizer had not been cut all the way through!

As I approached Salina I radioed them to apprise them of my emergency  
and to request a truck and a tarp, to cover my "Top Secret" gun.

The tower operator was a little surprised about or request for a tarp  
and said it would take awhile to round one up.

When I arrived in visual range o the Salina runway I was told to just fly circles around the base for  
awhile!

***I informed the tower that I had an emergency,***

as I had know idea how bad the stabilizer was cut and that it could break with any strain  
I put on it while banking the aircraft, and that I had the runway in sight and was coming in,  
they better clear the runway!

I landed without any trouble.

As I slowed a "Follow Me" truck pulled out to guide me to a parking area.  
Imagine my surprise, as I shut down the aircraft, we were surrounded by Military Police (MP's)  
and told to remain in the aircraft until told otherwise.  
I went to the cargo door and tried to get the MP's to let us sit outside the aircraft-- it was very hot  
inside.

They said if we left the aircraft we would be shot before our feet hit the ground!  
So we stayed in the aircraft until the Officer of the Day (OD) arrived.  
after talking to the OD for about one hour he said we could get out and sit on the ground by the  
aircraft.  
What a relief!

The OD called the base commander and finally we got a bus, not a truck, and a large tarp.  
we spent the next thirty minuets unbolting the guns and had a real battle  
getting them through the rear door of the bus, we did manage.  
Off to Forbes and our leave before we headed to Viet Nam.  
Of course we were about three hours behind schedule!

When I got to Forbes and was headed for the crew dressing room  
I saw three full Colonels and two Lt. Colonels standing abreast in the hall way,  
the one in charge yelled

**"Haller what have you done now?"** Well I said the first thing that came to my mind  
***"Sir, I have left you a memento to remember me by"***  
and pushed past the group and went to change my uniform.

**That ended the use of any pneumatic flare launchers  
on these Gooney Birds!**



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## 7. Wild Blue Yonder



*" Off we go, into the wild blue yonder."*

That was an old WW II fight song from the old Army Air Corps. ( Now called the Air Force)  
I don't think it was intended to be sung by a bunch of tired old pilots ready for retirement  
when the Vietnam war shifted into high gear.  
Nonetheless, 110 old warriors climbed into the oldest aircraft  
the Air Force could resurrect from their bone yard.

It was one week before Halloween, a fitting time to be flying Puff the Magic Dragon,  
and we were off to Vietnam.  
There were twenty two Gooney Birds and there crews leaving McClellan AFB in California.  
Each aircraft carried three pilots, one navigator, and one crew chief.

The first leg of our flight was a ten hour flight to Hickman Field in Hawaii.  
We had extra fuel tanks installed so we had enough fuel to make the flight,  
and the aircraft had been completely reconditioned,  
in fact the looked brand new inside and out!  
However they had the old style Auto-Pilots and the controls for them  
were placed below the throttles, a very difficult place to reach.

*Enter American ingenuity,*  
we went to a dime store and bought some arrows with suction cups on the end  
and stuck them on all three control knobs -- they worked great!  
This did not relive the apprehension that we all had  
about flying this OLD aircraft over the Pacific ocean!

We were all very surprised that we arrived at Hickman on schedule,  
and none of us, had to ditch in the ocean,  
*our confidence in the aircraft had greatly improved,*  
in fact we had no trouble with the aircraft, just some minor radio trouble!  
In fact everything went so well that the two day layover that was scheduled for maintenance  
*turned into a two day holiday in Hawaii!*

Our sprits were high as we departed on our next leg, a short seven hours to Wake Island.  
Wake Island is small, it has about a five thousand foot runway,  
*and if you are a little short, well you hit the ocean and get real wet,*  
*of course if your a little long or going a little fast you will run out of runway*  
*and hit the ocean and get a little wet also,*

no room for error.

Well, here I am on my final approach to Wake,  
I am just a little "hot" (going a little to fast), and as I reach the edge of the runway I cut the power  
and,

well the aircraft kind of fell a little hard, and bounced a couple of times,

***it is hard to brake when you bounce into the air!***

After three or four big bounces I was able keep it on the runway,  
now if I can just stop before the end of the runway!

***Made it, a little rough, but safe!***

**Then the tower operator radios me  
and asks if I am trying to land or take off!**

***I could have shot him!***

It was about 1300 hours when we all headed for the officers club,  
it had a dining room that would seat about fifty people and a nice outdoor patio and bar.  
The dining room was closed, but the kitchen staff was willing to make us some sandwiches,  
however there seemed to be some tension in the air.

After eating and a few drinks we headed to the Visiting Officers Quarters (V.O.Q.)  
**billeting office ( the hotel front desk, to you civilians).**

It seemed as if they did not want us here, they took there time in assigning us rooms.

Most of us threw of bags on the floor of our rooms, and headed back to the club.

We were told that since we were not in our Dress Blues that the club was closed to us!

After a very heated discussion they agreed to set up a snack bar on the patio for us.

We were told that we must eat dinner before 1700 hours and leave right after dinner!

The club had been reserved by the Captain, the Commanding Officer (CO)  
of the Island for a dinner and a cocktail party.

**This was an insult for this Navy Captain and his crew,**

sitting on this rock in the middle of the ocean to deliberately  
withhold the only luxury that this Island had, the Officers club,  
from us, we were officers, in fact many of us out ranked him.

***We decided on a plan of "attack".***

We would wait until about 1645 hours and then enter the club and order dinner,  
this would allow the cook time to fix our food, and we figured the Captain  
would not throw us out in front of the other officers and there wives.

Now the hour had arrived, we entered and were told to leave!

***What! it was not 1700 hours yet!***

They told us that there was not enough time to eat before 1700 hours and we were out of luck.

We began to complain, when out of nowhere came the OD  
and several MP's arrived and escorted us out and back to the V.O.Q.

**Okay plan two,**

we had not formulated plan two yet, but soon did,

We would but the captain's staff car on blocks and remove his flags.

As we prepared to leave we found armed MP"s at every exit!

We were confined to our quarters!

**Now plan three! no plan three.**

In fact we were ordered to leave the base at dawn the next day.  
And to add insult to injury, we had to eat breakfast at the mess hall not the club,

for some reason the club would be closed until 0900 hours!

***That did it!***

some of the younger officers slipped out a window and  
stole the captains flags and license plate off his staff car!

Here we are at dawn firing up our aircraft, getting ready to leave,  
and aircraft number 13 has a bad starter on his right engine, it will not turn over.  
He radios me, number 12 to pull in front of his right engine and rev my engine up,  
this should create sufficient wind to rotate his prop and turn the engine over enough to fire.  
We tried this several times but could not get enough rotation to fire the engine.

This was a very bad situation,  
we would have to leave this crew behind on this unfriendly Island with a very unpleasant captain!

***Well one more try!***

I position my aircraft so the prop will be as close as possible to his,  
I rev my engine to the maximum allowed, plus a little for good luck, and

**Bingo! his engine fires!**

Now we are all off.

This leg was about ten hours again as we headed to Anderson AFB on Guam.  
I had been on Guam several times on what the Air Force calls temporary duty (TDY),  
for one, two, or three months, at a time, when I was flying B-36's.

This brought back the memories of the good beaches.

In fact my bomber wing was chosen to demonstrate the capabilities of the B- 36.  
We would drop two hundred and fifty six, five hundred pound bombs onto the coral reef  
near the beach, besides showing the capabilities of the aircraft it also would lower  
the corral reef and allow the ocean water to flow freely to the beach at low tide,  
this would improve the water quality at the beach during low tide greatly.

Guam is much bigger, and friendlier, then Wake.

We were scheduled to spend three days here to repair any problems with the aircraft.

Guam had buses that would take you anywhere on the Island you wanted,  
the beach, or downtown. It was beautiful, but we were impatient to get to Vietnam.

As we left Guam and headed to Clark Field in the Philippines, about eleven hours away,  
and our final stop before Vietnam, I could not help but think about how we started out at McClellan,.

We were delayed a couple of days because of bad weather over the Pacific  
and our sprits were low, after all we were going to fly a aircraft that had been in the bone yard  
for who knows how long, and was grounded before that!

By now though our sprits were very high.

The only mechanical problem we had was a bad starter on Wake and that was fixed on Guam.  
We had seen no bad weather, in fact there were hardly any clouds, you might call all our flying  
boring.

No one had to turn back or ditch at sea.

***Everyone's confidence in there aircraft could not have been better.***

About the only thing we could do was listen to the radios and chat to each other,  
we had radios installed to receive and transmit on every frequency,  
it was interesting to listen to all the chatter that can be heard over the middle of the ocean,  
and how far some of those transmissions will reach.  
I had made this flight several times in WW II and it was silent, no radio transmission allowed.  
The enemy had submarines listening on our frequencies to try and track troop movements.

When we landed at Clark Field  
All the extra gear, the fuel tanks and extra navigational gear would be removed  
**and our guns installed, that would make us a combat unit!**

There it is ! Clark Field.  
We will be here just long enough to remove the extra fuel tanks and other gear, and to install our  
guns.

As I climbed out of my aircraft to talk to the maintenance officer  
about how long it would take to retro fit the aircraft I recognized him!  
I had spent a couple years with him at Spokane AFB in Washington,  
and then four more years at Glasgow AFB in Montana,  
we hunted deer together often in both places, he was a welcome sight!

The bad news was that our guns had not arrived and no one knew when they would arrive.  
So the Battle cry **"PARTY TIME"** was sounded among the squadron.  
This lasted for the next seven days.

The Base Commander had a Formal Halloween party scheduled for the next night  
and we were told,

**"no dress blues- no party."**

This upset the men in the squadron as we did not have our "blues",  
after all we were going into combat.

We did however, have our

**"Dress Combat Uniform",**

that consisted of, camouflage uniform with ascot scarf. We are going to crash the party!

We need a squadron flag or banner. It was suggested and voted on,

we would procure a pair of

**ladies pink panties**

and tie them on a pole for our squadron flag!

A couple of the boys headed for the WAF's barracks (ladies dormitory, in civilian terms)  
to procure a "flag". to my amazement they had managed to procure two pair of panties for our flag!

Off we went to the party, of course we had to stop off at the bar to get some encouragement

( a few double cocktails). Into the Halloween party we marched,

just as the general was about to deliver his speech!

They marched around all the tables making a special effort to go around

the General an couple of times!

Everyone, including the General had a good laugh!

**Guess what?**

We received orders about two hours later that we would be off Clark Field  
and on our way non stop to Vietnam, by 0700 hours the next day!

***I guess we wore out our welcome again!***

***Wait a minute, no guns yet, we will have to stay.***

The General's answer was:

***" get your butt's out of here by 0700 or else  
- I will ship your guns to Vietnam."***

We did not make the time dead line to be off the base, but we were real close!

Now we were on our way to Vietnam to end this war  
and rain death and destruction down on the enemy!

**OOPS! no guns, I forgot.**

As we approached the Vietnam coast line everyone kept a sharp lookout  
to see what the war zone would look like. It was very disappointing,  
we saw beautiful beaches and lush thick jungle, no bomb craters or on going battles,  
no burned out villages, nothing to indicate there was a war going on.

Why, even the local farmers were out working in there fields,  
didn't they know there was a war going on in there neighborhood?

Maybe we were lost and had the wrong country?

**Nope! right country, wrong expectations!**

Of course had there been any fighting we could not help anyway, we had no guns.

None, not even our side arms had been issued yet. Why are we here any way?

No guns!, No flares!, and it looks like no war!

Boy, were we in for a **BIG** surprise!

As we landed at Ton Son Nhut, just outside of Saigon, we were a little disappointed,  
there were no dancing girls to place wreaths around our necks,

or big Generals, American or Vietnamese, to give us the Key to the country.

In fact all there was a lot of confusion. No one knew we were coming,

or who we were, or what to do with us now that we were here!

They let us park are aircraft off in an area they called "snake grass",  
was this because of the type of grass, or because of the snakes, we never found out.

After what seemed like an eternity our transportation finally arrived and took us to our **"in country"**  
briefing.

About all they said was " Don't drink the water. Don't walk the streets alone, especially at night.

Don't eat the local's food." And last but not least.

**" We don't have any quarters for you guys" .**

**We are on our own!**

**Hey! what direction is Saigon?**



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## 8. First Blood



Because we had no guns and could not fulfill our combat role headquarters  
decided to use my crew and I as **Mail Men!**  
Just what I wanted to do for excitement in the war.  
Oh well, at least I could fly and it sure beat doing other pilots paper work.

One day I had a load of mail and supplies to go to Da Nang.  
**I did not know, nor expect that this would be my First Blood in Vietnam!**

It was a routine flight to Da Nang and when I landed I headed for the Base Operations building.  
As I neared the build I noticed a group of Vietnamese, they were all squatted down  
on their heels and their eyes were covered with blindfolds.  
As I got closer I could see that there hands were bound together with barbed wire,  
and the prongs of the wire were cutting into there wrist.  
In fact blood was dripping from some of there wounds. This really shocked me!  
As I passed by I could feel the fear in the air they felt not knowing where they were  
or where they were going or what was going to happen to them.  
I entered the building and dropped off the mail at the counter and asked the desk Sergeant  
what was going on with the Vietnamese out front?  
He informed me that they were captured Viet Cong ( VC)  
and were waiting for some trucks to arrive to take them to  
the Vietnamese Headquarters for interrogation.

As I walked out the building, I could not help standing and staring at them.  
Here in front of my eyes were a bunch of VC!  
I then realized that not only were there old men and young men,  
but old women and young women, some of them not over 15 years old!  
As I stood there looking at there prisoners and seeing there bleeding wrist and hands,  
I could not help feeling sorry for them and wondering why they were being treated so badly.

I felt so bad that I had to do something to ease there fear.  
I took a sweat soaked pack of Salem cigarettes out of my flight suit and went from one  
to another putting a cigarette in there mouth and lighting it for them.  
Instantly, I could see the anxiety drain from there faces and be replaced by relief!  
**Suddenly I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder and the remark**  
**that I must be new in Vietnam**  
**to feel pity for the VC Prisoners Of War (POW)**  
The remark made me mad and I turned to give the individual a piece of my mind  
about how POW's should be treated!

**When I had turned completely around I found myself  
nose to nose with a Marine Major;**

a short stocky Major that I could tell had just come out of the jungle,  
he had mud all over his uniform and it was soaked with sweat.

**Well, nose to nose I told him what I thought about his treatment of POW's!**

How could we be so cruel to POW's and not expect the same for our captured soldiers.  
He immediately turned very red in the face and was having a hard time controlling himself,  
but finally asked

**"How long have you been in Vietnam Major Haller?"**

I responded with

**"I had been here for a couple of weeks."**

He then spent five minutes lecturing me on my emotions.

He then asked if I had time to take a ride with him to the District Capitol,  
about a twenty minute ride,  
just to see how the "poor defenseless VC treated there POW'S just the night before".

I agreed and my navigator, **Lt. Thompson**, asked if he could go along.

I informed the crew where we were headed and jumped into the Marines jeep.  
Out the main gate we went and he started to tell us about how the District Capital  
was built by the French and had an eight foot tall wall, topped with broken glass  
to act as a deterrent for anyone who tried to climb the walls.

He gave us a description of the layout of the compound.

He told us that early last night the VC had captured the compound  
and all of the soldiers and their families, without firing a shot!

They had scaled the walls and took the compound by complete surprise.

As we got closer and could see the wall I was becoming disappointed because  
I had agreed to come along on what was turning out to be a boring history lesson,

I wanted to see the battle site, see blood or something

I did not know what I wanted to see!

Just before we turned to enter the compound our marine "guide"  
asked us if we had weak stomachs. of course I responded

**"no way I have fought in WW II and Korea I have seen blood before!"**

Lt Thompson just said **"no."**

The Major told us that what we were about to see might make us sick,  
we assured him that nothing was going to turn our stomachs. ***Little did we know!***

As we entered the compound we saw, in the nice neat parade ground grass,  
358 bamboo stakes driven into the ground.

Each stake about four inches in diameter, and on the end of each stake  
was a body, men, women, children, and even infants!

The stake was driven into the belly's of the infants and children.

The men and women fared much worse!

The end of the stake was cut at about a 45% angle, to leave a sharp point  
and then driven into each person's rectum, just far enough so they could not get off,  
not far enough to kill them, then stood up with its victim impaled on the end.

As they squirmed and wiggled and writhed in pain the stake would penetrate  
deeper in to them until they finally died, some lasted all night!

The group of VC I had seen on base were the part of this group  
that had "enjoyed" torturing these people all night.

As we left the compound no one spoke for most of the return trip,  
all I could think of was what would happen if I was shot down and taken prisoner!



No way I would fight to the death!  
In fact my navigator and I swore to each other, we would both fight to the death,  
and if it was nessacary we would kill the other rather then allow him  
to be taken alive by the VC!

*The entire purpose of this raid was to put fear into the other villagers,  
so they would not support the South Vietnamese Government.  
It had no real military purpose.*

**Just a couple months later a friend of mine, a Captain,  
I will not give his name out of kindness to his family,  
was shot down and captured., the VC split him open like a hog,  
from his crotch to his chin, of course they did not shoot him first,  
and they made sure they did not cut any arteries,  
they did not want him to bleed to death quickly.**

**This was WAR,  
I asked and gave NO quarter!  
The VC soon learned who I was  
and put a large reward out for my head,  
**literally!****

**They would call me on the radio and threaten to shoot me down,  
they talked to me by my NAME.  
They would tell me that they were going to drag my head through the streets,  
and many other unprintable things.**

**This only made me determined to be  
the deadliest "Dragon Man" ever.  
And I was!**



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*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 9. Laotian Surprise



Major Jensen, and his crew, were notified to be on alert for a special, top secret mission. Not unusual, it seems that anytime any mission is "planned in advance" it is top secret.

This one would involve the Royal Laotians Army and there Green Beret advisors. It would turn out to be in Laos and it would devastate several Battalions of North Vietnamese Regular Army troops (NVR or NVA).

The reason that Major Jensen had been chosen was that he was considered to be as good a **"Puff"** pilot as I was, and had a little seniority over me.

There were three Laotian outpost along the Mekong river were it borders Vietnam. The Royal Laotian Army, and our Green Berets had come up with a plan to trap a very large, (more then three battalions,) of NVR, in the area around these three outpost, an area with very little cover.

The surveillance had shown that the NVR would be in position to attack the outposts. This would allow the NVR unlimited access to a good road into South Vietnam!

After a couple nights spent circling around about ten minutes away from the outpost, Major Jensen got the call he was waiting for. The enemy had reached the 1500 yard defense perimeter.

***This meant the attack was under way!***

Now Major Jensen would establish a holding pattern ten minutes away from the outpost nearest the NVR, and turn off running lights, rotating beacon, interior lights, everything except his instrument lights, this would make "Puff" invisible from the ground.

The plan was for him to wait until the enemy was at the 500 yard defense perimeter, then drop flares and fire guns to destroy the NVR. He now received a call from the ground; the NVR were larger then expected and had just penetrated the 1000 yard perimeter. A few short calculations later and Major Jensen had decided that it was time to head down and in and **"surprise"** the NVR.

The reason for the wait until the 500 yard perimeter was that there was **NO cover from the outposts to the 700 yard point,** this meant that the NVR would have to run at least 200 yards to get any cover.

Major Jensen had his gunners double check his guns and set them up to come on line one after the other, as gun number 1 went dry, gun number 2 would start firing, and so on, giving him an almost non-stop supply of ammo.

The loadmaster was told to drop flares about fifteen seconds apart,  
this would light up the area like the day.

***It is time!***

Major Jensen headed in and on his first pass he dropped flares,  
made a tight turn and laid his crosshair's right on the NVR.  
They were so surprised they did not even try to hide, they just stood there looking around,  
**until the "Puff" guns started firing. Now they were heading for cover!**

They dropped their weapons, and personal gear, and ran!

They could not run fast enough to get away from "Puff"!

Major Jensen was painting the field, he would wave the wings up and down  
and use the rudder to move side to side, a very effective way to cover a large field.

The battle did not last for very long, in fact "Puff" made only three passes  
and there was nothing left standing.

Usually the Green Beret would deploy a team to analyze the results and count the dead  
and collect any and all intelligence material they could find. ***Not tonight!***  
The NVR force was so large that they would not deploy the teams until morning.

First light the next day the Army had a FAC fly over the area,  
all he could say was that there were hundreds of dead NVR  
and hundreds of large puddles of blood where seriously wounded had laid  
before they were hauled off by their comrades to a field hospital.

All in all Major Jensen had fired out 20,000 rounds of ammo, expended 24 flares  
and was given credit for killing 512 NVR! This darn near wiped out three battalions of NVR.  
three battalions that would never reach South Vietnam to fight there!

***Not bad for a nights work.***

**Major Jensen and his crew  
received the Distinguished Flying Cross for this mission!**

On the same night that the above mission took place I received a call to defend  
an outpost very close to the Cambodian border.

This was hazardous because the Cambodian outpost had fifty caliber  
and 20 mm machine guns and would fire at any aircraft, that were in range,

***no matter what side of the border it was on,  
or what country it was from.***

As I neared the outpost I decided to fire from East to West and fly from South to North.

This would put me close, but not over the border, on my return pattern.

***(The border was easy to identify, it was a large canal.)***

At this outpost the Green Beret were on hand and he provided excellent information  
on the location of the VC and the mortars and heavy machine guns and recoilless rifles!

I was ready to go to work when I arrived. Of course my navigator, Berky,  
had all the heavy weapons, the location of the holding force and the foot soldiers  
on a "map" I could work from, this how it should be!

I flew in low and as my crosshair's came upon the first machine gun I fired,

***he was shooting at me and I won!***

I completely smothered him with bullets.

A couple passes to get rid of the other fifties and I would start on the mortars and recoilless rifles.

Everything went well. In a very short time all the heavy weapons were taken out

and all that was left was small arms fire from the foot soldier.

These VC were in the high buffalo grass around the outpost so it took a couple passes to get rid of them.

On the last pass I suddenly was getting hit by rounds from a fifty, this fifty was in Cambodia!

Once we knew that it was the Cambodian outpost I decided that I would teach them a lesson!

I called paddy Control and told them about the incident and my intended response.

They replied " Good luck Jack".

I did not want to fly into Cambodian air space, so I turned and came in right on the Vietnam side of the canal.

I had the gunner put all three guns on the line at once, 18,000 rounds per minute, and I had the Cambodian outpost in my sights!

I fired when my crosshair's just touched the first edge of the outpost and did not stop until they had cleared the far edge of the outpost. No more fire from the fifty.

I knew that since I had taken some hits from their fifty and that radar would show that I had not crossed the border, the Cambodians would not make a big deal of this incident.

***I was correct. Nothing was ever said.***

***Maybe they will think twice before they fire across borders at a U.S. aircraft again!***

**When I landed at Bien Thuy  
I counted the holes from that Cambodian fifty  
there were 75 !**

***I was lucky to be home!***



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*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
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## 10. The Dragon Over Vietnam



The following chapter was written by

**LT. Col. Charles A. Riley.**

**"Chuck"**  
to all of us.

It was late November in 1965 when our guns were finally installed, now we were real,  
ready for combat, and official, AC-47's.

### **"Beware of the Dragon."**

*In ancient times Dragons assumed different shapes,  
to trick evildoers.*

*So too, this Dragon you have met.*

***"Puff the Magic Dragon"***

*breathes fire and lead; much fire and lead.*

*What was your meeting with Puff like?*

*You could not tell Puff from any other plane until it was too late.*

*The next time you hear a plane, think*

***"Puff " .***

*You can be sure that*

***"Puff "***

*is thinking of you!*

During the Chinese New Year in late November, very shortly after our guns were installed,  
leaflets with the above message printed on one side, in Vietnamese of course,  
and a picture of an AC-47

**(Puff the Magic Dragon, or the Gooney Bird),**  
with a Dragon draped over it's top, and breathing fire,  
were dropped over VC positions.

The Vietnamese are a very superstitious people, and they took this message literally.  
In fact documents that were captured in route to Hanoi  
proved that the VC were very much afraid of Puff the Magic Dragon!

## *And rightfully so.*

The effect of all three guns firing at once was Very impressive, to say the least.

With every fifth round a tracer, and firing 18,000 rounds per minute,

**( that's about 60 tracers each second)**

it looked like a tongue of fire and flame from the aircraft to the ground,

hence the name:

## **"Puff the Magic Dragon".**

The 4th. Air Commando Squadron, the Air Force's official name for the Puff Squadron,  
was deployed with the noblest of missions:

To provide all friendly forces with protection during the hours of darkness,  
when the VC preferred to fight, and most conventional warfare method were poor, at best.

But "**Puff**" was at it's best in the night!

I will digress a bit here to explain the other nick name,

( actually this was our "official" call sign), Puff got.

Our Operations Officer, Lt. Col. Mel Johnson was asked what call sign he has going to give to us,  
he yelled out to me across the alert pad

**" they want to give your spooky assed Gooney Birds a call sign."**

***I replied***

**" Well how about Spooky?" And it stuck!**

The squadron was deployed to all IV Corps areas in Vietnam.

If you are not familiar with how they divided South Vietnam, it went like this:

They started at the DMZ and divided it into four roughly equal parts,

the northern most was " I Corps",

then south to "II Corps"

south again to "III Corps"

and south again to "IV Corps"

numbers 1 - 4.

**Of course all was not fun and games for the Puff crews,**

**we lost our first crew in mid December,**

**Major Bob Abbot and his crew**

**They were shot down, in bad weather, near Phan Ran.**

**The aircraft was totally destroyed and the entire crew was killed.**

Next the 7th. Air Force Tactical Air Control Center,

such a mouthful to say it got shortened to TAC, directed the squadron to intersect  
the Ho Chi Minh trail to stop night traffic of men and equipment to the enemy in the south.

The code name "**Tiger Hunt**" was assigned to these missions.

This was very dangerous because we flew low and the mountains were totally dark.

The trails were hard to see when covered by bad weather or low cloud cover,

this was nearly always the case.

And the VC would set up mobile 37mm and 57mm AA ( Anti Aircraft) guns,  
which was a very hostile environment to fly a slow Gooney Bird through.

We did destroy a lot of trucks and troops, but at a high price,

four aircraft and thirty crew members, the aircraft were replaceable, the men were not.  
These crew members were listed as KIA/MIA (Killed In Action / Missing In Action),  
and have not been accounted for yet.  
Were they killed or captured?  
I pray they were killed.

At this time the TAC ordered us to mount a fifty caliber machine gun next to the Gattling guns,  
it would be fired by the gunner independent of the other guns. I did not like this idea at all,  
I was concerned about the strength of the floor, I felt it could not take the hammering from the fifty.  
I was assigned to fly the mission from Ubon AFB in Thailand to find out!  
Thank God that I was not allowed to leave Da Nang because everything was grounded by bad  
weather!

So rather than delay the test for me, they had Major George Jenson and his crew,  
who were already in Ubon, fly the mission.  
We will never know the outcome of this mission, they never returned.  
I still think, and so do the engineers at Douglas Aircraft, the designers of the C-47,  
that while the fifty was being fired, the force of the recoil would tear the gun off the floor.  
It would, before you could realize there was a problem  
and stop firing, cut the tail section off, or at least partially off, the aircraft.  
This would make it impossible to do anything but dive into the ground!  
No more talk from anyone about putting a fifty on the aircraft!  
***Too late for George and his crew.***

The 7th. TAC finally reassigned all Puff crews back to "in country" bases  
where we could do our best work.

I was assigned to fly out of Bien Thuy, in IV Corps.  
This detachment accounted for the highest number of missions, most combat hours flown,  
and most confirmed kills, of all the "**Puff**" detachments!

Here is what a typical night was like for my crew and I.  
The date is 1 March 1996, this is taken straight out of my diary.  
Our mission control center was referred to as Paddy Control

I took off a 1800 hours, it will be dark in about two and a half hours.  
At dusk Paddy Control radioed me to head for the strategic Vietnamese fort of Ap An Hoa.

It was under attack by a heavily reinforced battalion of VC.  
We made several passes through heavy fire to destroy five heavy mortar positions,  
and a couple heavy machine gun positions.

***These were giving both the fort  
and my aircraft a great deal of trouble.***

Puff inflicted very heavy casualties on the VC battalion, and they quickly withdrew.  
After this sortie I went back to Binh Thuy to refuel and pick up more ammo and flares,  
and to check the damage to the aircraft.

There was no serious damage so back into the air we went!  
This time Paddy Control called and we were off to a small outpost that was under attack  
by a small group of VC. This time there were no motors or heavy machine guns,  
just small arms fire. With just a couple of passes they had suffered enough loss to retreat.

***Now I can resume my Cap mission***

*(flying around in circles)  
and wait for a call.*

Paddy control did not let us rest for long, this time it was a downed Army helicopter,  
They were under heavy attack and were in immediate danger of being over run,  
a polite way of saying killed or captured.

It took just a few minutes to kill off the VC and then it was just a matter  
of circling the helicopter crash sight and dropping a flare every now and then  
to keep them safe until daylight, about two hours away.

At first light the Army sent in another helicopter and picked up the crew and all weapons.  
After they left the area I headed back to Binh Thuy. My night was over, and a great success.

From first take off until final landing,  
My crew and I had flown just over eleven hour of combat flying.  
This does not count refueling and Cap time!

**The 4th. Air Commando Crew members were awarded  
every combat decoration  
given by the  
U.S. Government, including a couple**

**"Medal of Honor"  
the highest honor our country awards!**

**And several Vietnamese  
"Cross of Valor",  
the Vietnamese highest honor!**

The unit received the "Presidential Unit Citation" for extraordinary gallantry,  
The 4th Air Commando Squadron was the most highly decorated squadron ever in Vietnam!  
Of all the medals and awards we received we all consider the most important  
and best "award" was the Thank You we received daily from the troops we were able to help.

**One Green Beret Sergeant sent me a short note  
after I assisted him one night it simply stated.  
" Your Spooky aircraft made the difference between  
100 Vietnamese farmers  
and two American soldiers  
fighting a battalion of VC.  
I am alive today only because of you,  
Thank You."**

***These thanks are the REAL combat medals!***

The biggest surprise thank you I got was when Captain Roy White and I  
were eating dinner in a restaurant, floating on the Saigon river, named My Cayh.  
Two young troops were going HOME after spending a year fighting around Tay Ninh  
recognized us as Spooky pilots. They came over to talk and said

**" You guys saved our butts more then one time, thank you " .**

This was very uplifting to hear!  
We chatted about the war and HOME for awhile and they had to go to catch there flight.



When Roy and I finished our meal we called the waiter for our check and he informed us that the to GI's that left before us had paid for our meals!

**I will never forget that  
" Thank You "!**

**In fact the only regret that I have  
about my involvement in the Vietnam war  
was that there were about 50,000 American's  
that I could not save.**



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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 11. The "Puff" Navigator



When I started writing this book I asked the crew members that I flew with in combat to write me about their experiences and thoughts about  
**"Puff" the Magic Dragon.**

Here is one of the stories I received, the following was written by

### **Major Alfred C. Bowman.**

The biggest difficulty I encountered was in figuring out just what a **"Puff"** Navigator was supposed to do. Total enlightenment definitely did not come from the short State side training that I received. It consisted of low level map reading, finding small towns at night, just normal navigation type duties.

After arriving in Vietnam, and my "in country" briefing, I am sure Jack told you about the briefing, lots of don'ts. I was assigned to Bien Thuy, Boy was I on the wrong track! Function as a navigator was a very small part of my job, an incidental on most missions, as the pilot usually already knew where the outpost's were located.

*Equally descriptive of my duties were such titles as:*  
*radio operator,*  
*translator,*  
*intelligence officer,*  
*airborne artist,*  
*aircraft cartographer,*  
*gun plumber,*  
*and even flare carrier!*

Before I proceed more, I will try to describe the mission of **"Puff"**. Essentially "Puff" is used in a night support role, usually as a defensive weapon. The majority of the missions are generated from an airborne alert (Cap) over the home or a designated base.

When the base or an outpost in the same area or a field unit comes under attack, **"Spooky"** is called in to provide support as needed.

**"Spooky"** can fire up to 18,000 rounds per minute with the three Gatling Guns and provide illumination support with from 45 to 64 MK 24 - 2,000,000 candle power flares. One of these will light up a 2.5 mile circle like day time!

**"Puff"** can also provide communications support and relay any UHF, VHF, HF,

or FM radio transmissions, and act as a forward Air Controller of other aircraft in the battle area.

In the IV corps area, the combat crew of "**Puff**" was, pilot, copilot, navigator, Vietnam Air Force observer(VNAF), flight mechanic, loadmaster and two gunners.

The key man on the majority of the missions was the VNAF.

The US units were scarce in the IV corps area and the VNAF made contact and did the talking with the Vietnamese on the ground, this was usually the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) radio man. The navigator had to talk to the VNAF and relay information to the pilot.

***I will describe a typical combat mission to illuminate the job ingredients.***

Notification of the mission came from Paddy Control, included in the notification were the target coordinates, the ARVN radio contact frequency, fire and flare clearance, this means permission to fire guns or drop flares, and any other information that was available, usually none, but once in a while they would know where heavy machine guns and mortar were, and AA guns.

After the read-back and acknowledgment of the message the navigator would give the pilot a ball park heading and mileage and estimated time of arrival (ETA).

The navigator would then plot the coordinates on a 1:500,000 terrain map and give it to the pilot so that he could be familiar with the area on arrival.

Unfortunately, the 1:500,000 maps were not always available so then the navigator assumed the artist - cartographer role.

Some of my blowups and interpretations derived from a 1:250,000 map were interesting although in no way related to reality!

My next task was to brief the rest of the crew on escape and evasion (E&E) in the event that we were shot down in the target area and our plans failed disastrously.

Now the translator - diplomat role, the VNAF sat at or near the navigation (nav) table.

Between the VBAF and the navigator was a note pad.

The idea was that as the VNAF received information from the ground he would write it down, in English on the pad, and the navigator would relay this information to the crew over the intercom.

Unfortunately it was not a perfect system. Most times the VNAF's English was very poor, and usually the ground operator was totally ignorant of the tactical situation, knowing only that his outpost was under attack, and he was usually deep underground in a bunker  
**(this was of course to protect the radio).**

**So the first on-the-target job was to locate the VC.**

**A seeming simple task like,  
determining range and direction from the outpost  
or some other prominent terrain feature  
could be a nightmare  
when the ground operator had no concept  
of north, south, east, or west  
and had never even heard of a "meter"  
in any language!**

When we had at last determined the position of the VC, we would now try to get clearance for flares and firing.

Sometimes this clearance was obtained with the first message, but usually not. Once received, "**Spooky**" would begin dropping flares and putting fire (shooting) on the enemy.

From then on, until leaving the target, the VNAF and the navigator made illumination and fire adjustments as needed.

Several other things could happen if it was a very large VC force. The ARVN could ask for a fighter strike, the navigator would relay this message to the appropriate control command. If the request was approved, the **"Spooky"** crew would act as the Forward Air Controller (FAC) for the fighters.

If the ARVN wants artillery then the navigator will relay this message, and the crew will act as spotters for the artillery.

Sometimes Army Hueys would arrive on the scene, and it would get busy directing all the traffic. With the pilot and UHF, copilot on VHF, the navigator on FM, and HF and the VNAF on FM, and about this time the loadmaster would decide it was time to

*announce the arrival and departure  
of a couple 50 caliber slugs passing through the cargo compartment,*  
of course this would lead to a rapid increase in activity on everyone's part to find a new traffic pattern into the target area!

Naturally things were just as busy in the back with the loadmaster throwing out flares and the gunners reloading the guns and when things got a little slow up front the front people were invited to help load the guns and carry flares!

**Never a dull moment while on target!**

Within an hour or so after **"Puff"** got on target, Charlie would call it a night, however there were times when he was heavily entrenched and bunkered and would try to wait us out

**-- it didn't work.**

**"Spooky"** can loiter for six to eight hours and if he is short of ammo and flares he can call for a replacement.

Two **"Puff"'s** could cap any spot all night, one **"Puff"** could cap it if it started late at night.

Upon leaving the target area **"Spooky"** would clear with the ground ARVN first, and then, if necessary brief the replacement **"Puff"**.

The next step was to check in with Paddy Control with the results of the battle and amount of ammo and flares expended, and the aircraft commission status, and the ETA to home base. In route to base the navigator would do his book work, mission reports in great detail and equally detailed intelligence reports also had to be completed.

A **"Puff"** crew can mill out as much paper as anyone else in the Air Force, even in combat.

When we touched down the armament crew would load on flares and ammo.

The maintenance crew did quick fixes on the aircraft, hopefully no large bullet holes to repair.

The refueling crew would fill us up, and in less than twenty minutes

**"Puff" was ready to go back to war!**

Time and space won't allow me to go into all the highlights of my tour, but once as we flew over the Mekong River, a company of VC were on a barren sandbar in the middle of the river. For some unknown reason one of the VC took a pot shot at our **"Puff"**!

***This was a very bad thing to do!***

Now that we had received unfriendly fire we could return fire without asking for clearance.

And **boy! did we return fire!** I doubt that anyone survived, but if they did, they will not take a "pot-shot" at anything that might even look to be **"Puff"** again!

Another time I talked to Charlie on our FM radio.  
He was monitoring our frequency while the VNAF was talking to the outpost we were defending.  
A voice came over the radio, in Pidgin English,

**"Spooky, you go home and we stop attack, O. K."?**

I answered back:

**"We stay and you stop the attack anyway, O. K., or you die!"**

We stayed and the outpost wasn't bothered for the rest of the night.

Then there was the time that we arrived at the outpost  
just as the VC decided to break off the attack, and headed toward a nearby rice field.

The Green Beret at the outpost told us were the VC had gone  
and we had clearance to pursue and fire,

*so off we went.*

When we arrived at the rice field we dropped several flares but were unable  
to see anything except the rice paddies, surrounding trees, and several clusters of brush.  
Just as we were pulling off the area the flight mechanic, who was standing in the rear doorway,  
said that the clusters of brush were running towards the trees!  
So we went back to work and thoroughly hosed off the fields.

I found my tour on **"Puff" the Magic Dragon** to be most interesting and satisfying.  
The satisfaction is explained by the record. I completed my "Puff" tour,

**and had defended over**

**1000**

**outpost,**

**camps,**

**bases,**

**recon teams,**

**field units,**

**and crash sites,**

*and not one of the positions  
we defended were overrun,  
or taken by the VC!*

**This is a very exceptional record, however  
it was just normal for the "Puff" crews.**

---

**UPDATE**

*Chapter 11, in Col. Haller's book,  
first appeared in The Navigator magazine, Summer 1968.  
The book's version has been modified a bit here and there*

*from the original as I wrote it while serving at the USAF  
Air Ground Operations School, Hurlburt Field.  
Alfred C. "Ace" Bowman (10/28/2002)*



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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 12. Harvest Moon "Hero"



### "Operation Harvest Moon" (OHM)

had been in progress of about a week.

The plan was to use the Army, Navy, Marines, Australian troops (Aussie"s), and South Vietnamese troops, in an assault and pincher movement to push the VC from the western edge of the plains towards the ocean.

If all went well the VC would retreat to a large peninsula where the Navy could shell them from off shore.

Everything had gone well so far.

Then the weather started to cloud up on the Marines side of the blockade. The VC decided to try to break through the Marine lines under the cover of the low clouds, rather than be trapped on the peninsula. The fighting was fierce and ferocious,

**the Marines were calling for an airdrop of ammo,  
they were down to the ammo that each man had and no more.**

**Some men had as few as twenty rounds.**

***Time to fix bayonets and pray!***

The Air Force C - 130"s that would make the drop could not get below the cloud cover,  
**it looked bad for the Marines!**

It just so happened that one of the Puff crews was on a return trip from Ton Son Nhut, where they had picked up some spare parts and personal supplies.

It was early afternoon when the pilot, "Pappy",

*(he was the oldest pilot in the squadron, hence the nickname),*

heard the call from the Marines, and the C -130's response.

He radioed the Marines that he had 30,000 rounds of 7.62 ammo that he could drop them.

Puff was smaller and could fly slower than the C -130,  
so he figured he would be able to get below the cloud cover safer.

Pappy started to descend from 5000 feet to 300 feet and finally broke through the clouds and could see the ground. What he saw surprised him,

it was the VC preparing an all out attack on the Marines!

When he saw the Marines he ordered his gunners and loadmaster to drop them the ammo, and apprised them of the VC location.

The Marine radio man replied that he hoped that they could pass out the ammo before the VC would attack!

Pappy figured that if he hosed off the VC it would buy the Marines some time and maybe save some of them. he turned the aircraft around and started to fire on the VC

from the rear of their columns toward the front.  
This was the first time Pappy had ever shot VC during the day,  
he said that it was like shooting fish in a barrel.  
Pappy was amazed at the effectiveness of the Gatling Guns!  
All he had seen before was the tracers making a wall of flame to the ground,  
now he could see the bullets hit on and all around each target!

Pappy called the ground to confirm that they had got the ammo, they had.

*The radio operator was shouting at the top of his lungs  
and kept congratulating Pappy  
for completely stopping the attack.*

*The Marines wanted to know who he was.*

**Pappy said**  
**"Just your friendly neighborhood Spooky".**

*I got this story from the Marine radio operator and it was confirmed  
by Pappy two weeks after the mission.*

**The interesting thing about this is that the Marines wanted to give Pappy a medal.  
The Air Force wanted to court martial Pappy for firing without headquarters approval!**

**The end result was that Pappy  
was called back to work in headquarters  
as a paper pusher,  
and never to fly another combat mission.  
Pappy left Vietnam not the highly decorated hero  
he deserved but a defeated man,  
a hero that was defeated by a lousy war  
and a lousy system that prevented men from fighting  
for their lives and the lives of their countrymen  
in a foreign country!**



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## 13. Daylight Missions



There were very few daylight missions of Puff, one was in the previous chapter. The reason for this was that Puff had to fly slow and low to be the most effective, this makes for a easy target if you can see it.

The second daylight mission.

A puff crew had just landed from a night of flying when they heard that a volunteer crew was need to get to the outpost in the valley of Au Shau, where an American unit and A Vietnamese Special Forces unit were under attack.

It was reported to be a large number of VC and they were being supported by North Vietnamese troops.

Several A -1E aircraft had made attempts to get to the outpost,

but because of heavy clouds they were unable to locate the outpost.

The **Spooky** crew had just finished a six hour night, but this was an emergence, and they were familiar with the area, they had been flying it for over four month's.

They knew the routes that led in and out of the valley. the only question was; which pass would allow them to get to the outpost unnoticed?

The navigator suggested the best way would be to fly into the corner were Laos, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam joined.

then fly the river until the came to the pass that went to the Au Shau valley.

Since it was the navigator's job to navigate this was the course they took.

At the corner they ducked under the cloud cover, down to about 500 feet in order to stay below the clouds. They saw the outpost, and banked the aircraft to 30 % and started to fire.

**Suddenly the left engine took several rounds,  
and burst into flames!**

The pilot told the copilot to feather the engine.

But by now the aircraft was to low and with one engine could not pull up fast enough, so the pilot was forced to crash land. The crew survived the crash, and only the Crew Chief suffered injury, when an ammo can broke loose and crushed his chest.

The crew positioned themselves around the aircraft, the pilot stayed in the aircraft to send a distress call over the radio.

He was Killed in his seat by enemy fire from a heavy machine gun.

The copilot grabbed his and the dead pilot's M-16 and charged the machine gun.



In a short time the machine gun quit firing, the copilot was never seen again.

**KIA.**

The remaining three crew members fought off the VC until some A-1E's arrived and strafed the area around them and the outpost, this allowed a marine helicopter to land and pick up the three crew members.

**The entire crew was awarded the Silver Star for their efforts.**

This was the second crew that suffered losses in the first five months of operation.

Their losses helped make everyone more cautious,  
many of the Puff crews thought they were invincible!  
All together there were five crews lost in one year.

I was the next "lucky" one to get a daylight mission! It was just after 1000 hours, I had not flown the night before so had just woke up when the Commander from the 5th. Commando squadron came in and asked me if I would willing to fly a search mission for a pilot that was long over due.

**Naturally I said yes,**

he would have done the same for me.

The mission was already approved by my Squadron Commander, so I got my crew together and by 1100 hours we were airborne. Flying at 3500 feet and with a crystal clear sky I could see for ever!

I kept the power back as far as possible to fly as slow as possible, there was very little cover along his flight path and if he had to crash land he would try, if he could, to land near an outpost or village. As we flew his flight route we saw nothing! Then we reverse tracked his path all the way to Bien Thuy, still no sign of the aircraft.

I made my report to Paddy Control and landed. I was very downhearted as he,  
**(nick named Boggie)**  
was a good friend of mine. We would play cribbage or gin nearly every day.

***As I entered my quarters there sat Boggie!***

He was shuffling the cards and wanted to know where I had been all afternoon!  
I wanted to kill and hug him at that moment!

He had been hit in the fuel tank, made an emergency landing at a Green Beret outpost.

He had lunch with them, while they fixed his leaky fuel tank and refueled him. He then flew back to Bien Thuy, landed and was not even aware that they were looking for him! I just started laughing until the tears rolled down my cheeks, then said "deal the cards, after you call your Operation Officer and tell him what is going on!"

I flew the next daylight mission, in part because of my "successful" last daylight mission! This mission would prove to be a little more exciting then the last.

I had got done flying for 10 hours, landed, showered, and was headed for bed.

The Squadron Commander came into my room as I laid down.

Well I knew something was up but did not expect this--

-- One of the American instructors for the Vietnamese had been shot down on a training mission---

Would I fly cover while the ground forces looked for him? You bet I would!

I had been up all night, but let's go now!

I called Paddy Control to notify them that I would be on a mission and in the air.

I had the ground crews ready the aircraft and cut short some of the minor maintenance repairs  
*( read this as patching bullet holes and such).*

It took us about one hour to get airborne.

By now the rescue team had found his aircraft in the river and they knew that he had bailed out.  
 But he had failed to actuate his emergency locator transmitter and they had no idea where he was.

The rescue team had orders to destroy the aircraft and especially the weapons,  
 while they were doing this they came under attack by VC.

About this time I arrived on the scene and was informed that the VC were on the opposite side  
 of the river from the aircraft. As I circled I saw two sampans tucked under the overhanging brush.

The rescue team informed me that they were no longer being fired upon, apparently the VC  
 were waiting to see what I was going to do.

I figured that they would think that I was a supply transport and not Puff, after all it was daylight.

I flew a couple circles around the sampans,

I lined them up and had my gunner put two guns on the line, I started firing for about 15 seconds,  
 and ran a line of fire from about 1000 yards above the sampans to just short of them.

One quick circle, gunners reloaded guns, and now the sampans!

This was the first time my crew and I had seen the guns in the daytime

**and "Pappy" was right "unbelievable".**

I was flying very low and much slower than normal. As the bullets hit the sampans  
 they were reduced to toothpicks in just a few seconds!

I advised the rescue team that I had eliminated the VC, they agreed,  
 but the marines were sending a detachment out to make sure the VC were gone.

I offered to stay around until the marines arrived but the rescue team was satisfied  
 that there was no VC left alive in the area! I wagged my wings and climbed out of sight,  
 then circled and approached just in case the VC would reopen fire.

This took about 15 minutes, in this time the rescue team had found the pilot --  
 his chute had caught on the rudder and he was killed instantly.

*As I flew home all I could think about was  
 how it seems to happen to the best men.*

*That young Captain was dedicated to the Air Force,  
 and to fighting this war,  
 not a loud moth braggart,  
 and did not drink and a Gentleman of the first class,  
 a man of high moral standards!  
 and a good friend.*



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## 14. The Monsoon Season



There were some definite advantages to flying out of Bien Thuy in the IV Corps of Vietnam.  
One was the very flat terrain, only one mountain and it was only 1500 feet tall,  
and way over by the Cambodian border.  
Two was the support we had from all on base personnel.  
Three was the great amount of action I saw.

**Of course there were some draw backs also,  
like no runway lights,  
marker lights,  
or landing lights.  
No operations tower.  
No Instrument landing system.**

**But in spite of this I never aborted a mission  
or missed a scheduled take off time,  
in good or bad weather.**

Webster defines Monsoon as:  
"A season, usually lasting for six months"  
or "an alternating wind in any region, that can be accompanied by rain".

**Six month season, yes.**

**Alternating wind, yes.**

***Accompanied by rain, this is an understatement.  
I have seen typhoons that were dryer then Vietnams monsoon season!***

But even though I could not see out the front windscreen of the aircraft,  
with the wipers on and parked, I still knew that I needed to fly every mission,  
someone's life depended on me being up there.

The VC really liked this weather, it was hard to see him and he could disappear  
into the jungle without a trace, because the rain would wipe out his tracks in just a few minuets.

As they say in the retail business around Christmas, "This was our busy season"!

During this time of year all the rice paddies are flooded with about one foot of water,

and the only place to walk is on the dikes around the paddies,  
or travel by sampans on the canals and rivers.

Our friendly forces would just sit around in their outposts,  
hoping that the VC would not attack there outpost. But attack they would.  
During good weather the friendly forces would set up observation post to monitor  
the VC's travel on the canal and rivers, but no one could "observe" anything in a monsoon.  
You could barely see, ten feet in front of you!

This was the VC's chance to try to gain control of the outpost along the canals and rivers.  
And he would try hard!

Flying in this kind of weather is hazardous, not only during take off and landing,  
but also just flying around in the low hanging clouds and heavy rain.  
There was no radar system to keep me posted of any other aircraft in my area,  
or to track any serious lightening storms, or any very high winds.  
In other words once I was in the air I was on my own.  
this makes it very important to have everyone on board the aircraft to keep a sharp look out  
for other aircraft and any other obstacles

My usual ammo load during good weather was 150,000 rounds and lots of flares.  
In the bad weather I would carry 300,000 rounds and very few flares.  
I learned the hard way that to drop a flare when I was under cloud cover  
would silhouette me against the clouds and allow the VC to see me  
*( and shoot at me with bad results for me)!*  
The flare would also make it impossible to see the tracers from the VC guns to locate him  
and tell what type of weapons he had to shoot me with.  
I would only drop a flare when I was done and had killed  
all the VC and the outpost need the light.

My preferred technique was to catch the VC by surprise and start shooting  
before the realized that I was in the area, no it is not hard to sneak up on someone  
in an aircraft, all that mattered to me was that the VC did not know that I was Puff-  
I wanted them to think that I was just an aircraft passing through, or dropping supplies.  
This way I could inflict very heavy casualties on Charlie before he knew I was a Puff!

Heavy casualties meant that the VC would be very busy  
trying to haul off their dead and wounded,  
they did not want anyone to know how many of them had been killed.  
They would even go to near by villages to "conscript" ( read as force)  
the locals to be litter bearers to remove the dead, and to help dig graves and bury the dead.

Just to add another hazard to my missions in the monsoon season

### **"One Shot Charlie"**

would come out of the jungle and sit off the end of the runway and take a pot shot at me,  
and every other aircraft when they took off!  
Every flight that took off from Bien Thuy was alerted to the fact that "One Shot Charlie"  
was just off the end of the runway. His record was perfect!  
He had NEVER shot down any aircraft, in fact he had NEVER even hit one!  
That is why we never went after him,  
we were afraid he would be replaced by someone that could shot straight!

I still believe that he was forced, by the VC, to shoot at every aircraft that took off, or he or his family would be tortured and killed, but he did not want to harm anyone, just my thoughts about him.

Another hazard in this weather was that the VC would be able to sneak in near the base and set up mortars to shoot down the aircraft when it was taking off or landing, a very bad time to get hit! This happened to a Puff crew at Plieku.

A VC mortar crew was able to sneak in close to the end of the runway and wait for Puff to approach the runway to land.

The VC had lined up their mortar with the glide path of the aircraft, and as it came in they just started firing into the air until the aircraft flew into the mortar rounds. The crew could see nothing in the daylight, in fact even at night all you can see is the flash of the mortar as it leaves the tube, and only if you are looking almost directly at it!

The aircraft took a round in the belly right under the navigators compartment, they were at about 200 feet up, the aircraft burst into flames and the navigator and loadmaster were seriously injured. The pilot was able to crash land on the end of the runway.

This saved the rest of the crew.

If the aircraft would have crashed in the jungle before the runway the VC would have been waiting!

During the monsoon season I would expect to fire all my ammo and most nights I would need to land at Bien Thuy and rearm. I would defend five to seven outpost each nite, and all the Puff"s would be doing the same type of thing,

I would spend ten to twelve hours each day defending different outpost and villages!

Sometimes I was trying to defend as many as four or five outpost, the other Puff crews were already defending other outpost and could not get free to assist me, or me to assist them! We were very busy!

I found it strange to take off in near zero visibility, climb to about 5000 feet, and break out of the clouds into perfectly clear sky, with unlimited visibility, except for down! I would let my copilot take over at this time and go have a chat with my gunners and loadmaster.

Then as I walked back to the pilot's seat I would chat with the navigator.

I felt that this helped all of us to work together in battle.

I needed all the help I could get from my crew when we started fighting, especially in bad weather.

**One of the most frustrating things that would happen was when a village or outpost was under attack and I would be right over head and could not get clearance to fire from the District Chief. This was because the village or outpost had not paid him his taxes, or had been late in paying, and he wanted to punish them and remind them he was in control. In this situation I would deliberately drop down low enough to draw a little fire from the VC. I was allowed to fire back if I was fired upon first!**

If you really added it all up, there were plenty of reasons NOT to fly in the monsoon season: Heavy rain, no runway lights, sometimes no landing lights on my aircraft, no tower, no radar,

I was always at maximum gross take off weight, " One Shot Charlie", and in fact I had to fly below combat minimums in order to see the VC and the battle!

**But I NEVER missed a mission because of any of this!**

I knew how important my support was to the poor soldier on the ground!

There were times when I should NOT have taken off but I, and my crew,

were dedicated to defending all the outpost and villages we could,  
this meant killing the VC on their terms, not on the clear and bright nights alone!



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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 15. Fire Fly



I know that you think that a Fire Fly is a small flying bug that glows at night.

***Wrong!***

***At least in this war you are wrong.***

**In this war, there is a helicopter with a very big search light  
between it's landing skids.**

**Now that is a big, bright, "Fire Fly"!**

It was one of those bright moonlit nights, when the moon beams are shimmering off the river.  
It could almost make you forget there was a war going on.

### **Wait, what was that?**

I saw a large light in the sky over by the river. Now it is on,  
and in about ten seconds it is off and in about one minute it would come on in a different area.

***What is this? I think I will fly by and check it out!***

I recognized it as a US army helicopter. Hey I see someone shooting at him!  
I call him on the guard channel of the radio to make sure he saw that he is being shoot at,  
and to ask what he is doing. He saw the shots and identified himself as a Fire Fly,  
and who are you, he asked? I told him that I was The Dragon Man and this aircraft was Puff.  
He had no idea what a Puff was.

I told him that if he needed help I was " have guns will travel" and to give me a shout!  
and I started to leave. Suddenly I saw a great deal of fire heading towards him, but on his back side.  
He saw it too and turned to fire on them and another group opened up, behind him again!  
He had three groups all around him. He was staying low,  
so the trees would help to protect him some, but could not manage to stop the firing.  
He would use his light to try and blind the VC below, but could not blind the VC behind him!  
he also could not climb out of the tress, he was trapped!

At this time I asked him if he needed an extra gun or two, he replied " I am just about out of fuel,  
I have thirty minutes left! I will take any help you can offer to help me get out of here fast!"  
It was about fifteen minutes to the nearest base he could land at, so I had to hurry.

I descended to 1000 feet, called him and told him he better be ready to climb out of there  
and head for base. I came in from behind him  
so I could hit the group that was behind him and shooting at him.  
I said " hit the power and climb out" as soon as he started up the VC behind him opened fire.



So did I! I hit them with about a two second burst from two guns, that took care of them!  
As I came around I fired on the other two groups, and that was all she wrote.  
The battle was over!  
It took less then two minutes and all the VC are dead or at least have left the area!

This was my first encounter with a Fire Fly, and his first encounter with Puff.  
We would meet and work together many more times.

As I started to leave this battle scene I got a call from Paddy Control.  
They said that there was an Engineering battalion in the field,  
and they were under attack by a large force of VC's. We got the coordinates  
and head over to them. Paddy Control did not tell us that the Engineering battalion was South  
Vietnamese,  
we had assumed it was American.  
The Vietnamese units very rarely stayed in the field after dark!

As I approached the location I could see the fire fight,  
mortars, light machine guns, and lots of small arms fire.

My first order of business was to find out who were the good guys and who were the bad guys.  
My navigator radioed the ground, no answer, he tried four more times.  
He had decided that Paddy Control had given us the wrong frequency,  
when this Vietnamese voice finally comes over the radio and said  
**" Spooky, shoot VC quick, over there."**  
and a burst of tracers went toward one area where I had seen firing earlier.  
How was I to know what side this Vietnamese was on?  
And weather he had directed me toward the good or bad guys?  
My navigator put the Lt. on the radio to try and find out what was going on.  
All he could find out was that the good guys were on the east side of the canal below us.  
So I would need to drop a flare to be able to see the canal,  
it was covered over by lots of over handing brush.

The Lt. told them that we would be dropping a couple of flares,  
they liked this idea, they would be able to see to shoot.

I took a guess at their location, and had my loadmaster drop two flares about 15 seconds apart,  
in the area I thought the Engineers might be.  
Now I could see the VC and the guard tower that the Engineers were in and around.  
The Lt. still could not get a description of where the mortars or the machine guns were.  
This meant that I could be flying into range of either of these. Not conducive to a long life.

Suddenly the radio came to life, with lots of yelling and screaming! It seems that the first flare  
I had dropped had set the bridge, that the Engineers had just finished this afternoon, on fire.  
The battalion commander was very upset. I told my Lt. to tell him that I was sorry  
but I could not control the wind drift of the flares,  
and I would really like to get back to the war, after all it was his people getting shot at!

At last I got a location on the mortars and machine guns.  
The ground said they were 100 feet due west of the burning bridge!

I started firing into that area. After a couple passes the ground informed me that the VC



had mostly stopped shooting at the tower and were now concentrating their fire power into the airspace that they thought I was in. Now I could see where the VC troops were hiding. I dropped three flares very close to each other to make it very hard for the VC to see over head, and hosed off the area where the small arms fire had come from.

I could see the VC were retreating to an area on the nearby river where there were some large sampans.

After the sampans started to move down the river I hosed them down.

This ended the battle for now!

It took the ground forces about fifteen more minutes and the fire was out. They radioed that they had two men seriously wounded and three minor wounded. My crew and I discussed it over the intercom, and decided to offer our assistance. My navigator called down and told them that since the road was straight for well over a mile and over thirty feet wide, it is longer then the runway at Bien Thuy, I radioed and told them that I could land and pick up the wounded and take them to Can Tho. Their commander felt that they could take care of them and drive them to Can Tho in the morning, about three hours away. OK. I headed for home.

When I arrived at Bien Thuy my Commanding Officer (CO) was waiting for me. I was hoping that he was just up early and wanted to congratulate me for a good job.

*I was wrong.*

He was very upset and kept asking me "what did you want to do, get your hole crew killed or what"?

He was referring to the offer I made to pick up the wounded.

I explained that " that stretch of road was bigger then your (meaning the bases) entire runway."

I still could not see any real problem, but, he was the CO.

So no more offers to land and pick up wounded.



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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 16. Sampans!



The night was cool and clear, Paddy Control sent me to find a Fire Fly  
at 106 degrees 00 minutes east and 10 degrees 30 minutes north.  
It is very difficult to find a helicopter with out his lights, flying low against the trees,  
on a dark night! I had to radio him to turn on his light. His reply was  
**" I will spot light both ends of the sampan convoy for you."**

Then he turned on his light, there on the water were at least 30 sampans,  
we were deep in VC territory and no one travels at nite in this area, except the VC!  
He flew down river and showed me the other end of the convoy,  
just to make sure I did not miss any of them.

He was able to keep them parked tight into the shore line  
by shinning his light on them and firing his guns.  
He was not inflecting very much damage, firing through the overhanging brush.  
The pilot said he was just about out of ammo, and had about fifteen minutes of fuel left.  
They were only about three minutes from his base.

I had my loadmaster get two flares ready, to mark the ends of the convoy.  
I wanted the flares set for a ground burst, to set the buffalo grass on fire,  
this would force them out from the banks. At least that is what I hoped it would do!

When the grass started to burn the VC started to head down stream. I was ready!  
While the loadmaster dropped another flare, to allow me to see the VC better,  
I fired one gun at the first and second sampans, this would block the down river travel of the convoy.  
Back up river they headed, just as I had planned!  
Now up river I headed to destroy the end two at the other end!  
That done the Sampans were trapped on about 1500 to 2000 feet of river!

I set my aircraft up to strafe the river next! More flares to see by and FIRE.  
Turn and repeat the strafing, and turn and repeat again, and again.  
I could see my target, they had started to shoot at me,  
but they had to shoot at sound, the flares made it impossible for them to see me above the light.  
This went on until, after five passes my guns broke!  
My gunner was working on the guns when a flight of F-100's arrived.  
I explained the situation to them and directed them to "hit the sampans with all you have".  
As they made their second pass, suddenly out of the buffalo grass on the opposite side of the river,  
a large group of VC opened fire on them, only small arms fire, no big guns.  
As I flew over the VC in the grass I had my loadmaster dump all the empty ammo cases and cans out

the door

- I figured it would at least harass - maybe, wound some of the VC.

The gunner called guns on line! We could fight again!  
I stared to strafe the area were the small arms fire was coming from, drop flares fire guns.  
in two passes the small arms fire was stopped.

While I was doing this the F100 were finishing off the sampans.

Together we had a good night!

**Good Guys 1 - Bad guys 0.**

That is the way I like the night to go.



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AMERICAN VETERAN SEARCH



PATRIOTIC WEB SITE AWARD

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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
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## 17. John Wayne



During the "dry" season in 1966, that means it would only rain in the early afternoon here,  
I received word that we were going to get a special visitor from the States.  
All unit commanders would meet him to visit in the Officers Club.

**Who was it? Top Secret,**  
someone that was interested in the Green Beret missions around Bien Thuy.  
My first thought was a reporter, great they would most likely want me to fly him around  
and make it look like I was fighting, but not take any chance of getting him hurt.

You need to realize that Bien Thuy was so far out in the boondocks  
that the USO never sent anyone down to entertain the troops.

Imagine my surprise when I entered the club and saw **an old friend of mine;**  
**John Wayne.**

Of course no one there knew that John Wayne and I even knew each other.  
It was their turn to be surprised when he saw me and said

***"Hello Jack! what a surprise to see you way out here!"***

The first time I had meet John Wayne was in 1946 when I guided a deer hunt for him.  
He was staying at "Frenchies" ranch, a good friend of my father.  
I found out then that John was a very considerate kind hearted man and he was a good shot to!  
We have been friends ever since.

***Well now enough personal history -- back to the war.***  
John had seen our unit flag behind the bar. It was a banner that read  
**"AAA-AA Athletic Club, Valley Branch."**

he asked what AAA-AA stood for I replied  
" the AAA stands for the American Automobile Association  
and the AA stands for Alcoholics Anonymous.

This means that we were driven to drink by this war and the Athletic Club  
is because we get our exercise by chasing the VC all over this country!"  
He started to laugh and laughed until he had tears running down his face. All of us enjoyed his visit,  
and when it was time for him to go, we presented him with one of our shirts.

A red button up the front shirt with a high Chinese type collar,  
it had the AAA-AA over one breast pocket and his name over the other pocket.  
Needless to say he was very impressed and pleased.

**He later made a move called "The Green Beret",**

**and in it at the end is a short scene with Puff.**

Shortly after John Wayne left the base I was in the air flying a CAP over Can Tho.

Paddy Control called and told use to head for an outpost west of our position,  
and that they were under attack by a large force.

I knew the Green Beret at this outpost well and knew that if he said large he meant a very large force,  
usually a heavily reinforced battalion.

This would mean mortars, heavy machine guns,  
most likely a fifty or two, and even recoilless rifles.

It would take us about 15 minutes to arrive at the battle scene,  
this would allow us time to decide on a plan of attack,  
if we could get the necessary information from the outpost.

**My navigator, Captain Peabody,**

immediately called the outpost and requested the information we needed.

All we could get from the Vietnamese Commander was that the enemy was very close  
to the fence around the outpost and that he was receiving heavy fire from many fifty's.

Well this was not near enough information but it was about normal,  
of course the Green Beret that was assigned to this outpost  
were covering another outpost at this time.

As I neared the outpost I could see that the outpost was under heavy siege.

I saw two fifty's firing from the same area, this would be my first priority!

I came in from the East and started firing on the tree line  
that ran from East to West, were I had seen the fifties. I knew that I had got them,  
because, they were firing when I started shooting and I completely covered them with tracers

**(the bullets go were the tracers go).**

I swung around to hose off the rice paddies to the East of the outpost,  
and suddenly my Flight Engineer notified me that there were

**"lots of fifty cal. bullets entering and exiting  
the tail section and the rear of the aircraft!"**

I saw the fifty now, it was on a very large sampan on the river.

This fifty was probably being held in reserve to be used to block off the only retreat route  
from the outpost, or maybe he was just waiting for me.

**Sgt. Meyers** surveyed the damage,

I flew some maneuvers to check the elevator and rudder controls, they worked all right,

**Sgt. Meyers said**

***"everything looks like it will hold together***

***until we finish this battle and land,***

***let's go get them Major"!***

***And get them we did!***

I had the gunner put all three guns on line, at the same time, I did not want to miss that sampan!  
As I rolled the aircraft and started to fire I could see the bullets chew that sampan into toothpicks,  
these VC were definitely out of the war!

It took about ten minutes to clean up the rest of the areas the VC were fighting from.

The battle over and won I headed back to Bien Thuy to get my Puff fixed.

At Bien Thuy the Maintenance Chief advised me that he could not fix my aircraft!

I would need to fly to Saigon for repairs!

**He did however wrap the elevator and stabilizer with duct tape.  
" that should hold until you get to Saigon, Jack."  
he said. "Great duct tape and it should hold".  
We were off to Saigon.**

After finding out how long it would take to fix my baby my crew and I headed for the chow hall.

When I had gotten my food I turned to find a table to sit at  
and there was **John Wayne** again!  
I said **"Hi, what a pleasant surprise to run into you twice in the same war."**  
He just said

***"come over here and tell these rookies  
( they were Colonels and Generals)  
what you do".***

As I approached his table he spoke to the Brass and said  
**" Gentlemen I would like you to meet Major Jack Haller,  
a friend of mine, he took me on a flight I will never forget".  
"Tell them Jack."**

Well there I was standing there holding my tray full of food, no place to set it down,  
and a table full of Big Brass looking at me. I was slightly embarrassed to say the least!

I figured that I had no choice, so I told them what I did.  
When I had finished John Wayne ask what brought me to Saigon.  
I informed him that my aircraft had gotten shot up a little bit  
and needed a couple bullet holes plugged.

**The Brass at this table had never heard of  
"Puff the Magic Dragon" or of  
the "Dragon Man" that flew her!**

***I figured that they did not really fight in this war, just planed strategies.***



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## 18. The Arms Cache



I tried to get **Captain Johnson** to write this chapter,  
 since it was his mission,  
 he gave me a draft and told me to clean it up and write it down,  
 so , here goes.



**Spooky 41, Spooky 41, this is Paddy Control, what is you present position.**  
**Roger Paddy Control this is Spooky 41,**  
**we are over Can Tho at 5000 feet and turning West towards the Cambodian border,**  
**in the clear. What is your message?**  
**Spooky 41 contact Navy 55 on 286.5 for instructions.**  
**Paddy Control Do you have any other information?**  
**Spooky 41 negative,**  
**we were advised by the Command Center at Saigon to have you contact Navy 55.**  
**Roger, Spooky 41 out.**

This was the typical type of message we got from Paddy Control, were to go, who to contact, and not much else in the way of information. It was unusual to contact the Navy, the Navy was not working much in the IV Corps area.  
 Captain Johnson was thinking that maybe  
 a Navy ship had run aground or was sinking, or- - -

When Captain Johnson received this message he had no idea what to expect,  
 he had never worked with the Navy.  
 He figured that it must be something big for them to call on Puff for assistance!

He had his navigator call Navy 55 on 286.5, and to their surprise they answered immediately, not after four or five attempts like calling an outpost.

This Navy Captain wanted Puff's help to capture a freighter!  
 Capt. Johnson was surprised, a freighter, what do they think I am a ship?  
 Or that I have Pontoons to land on water?

***Well I better keep my comments to my self for now he thought.***

The Navy Captain had been following a suspicious looking Chinese freighter down the Vietnamese coast for about three hours, it had been traveling at about 15 knots, and all of a sudden it accelerated to about 25 knots and headed for the mouth of the South Mekong river.

this is the largest river in Vietnam and it ran from out of Laos and Cambodia.  
 This river was the main travel route for boats coming into South Vietnam.



***That is enough Vietnam geography for now, back to Capt. Johnson.***

The Navy Captain was in command of a cruiser that had been following the freighter, but when it entered the river it was unable to follow -- the water was not deep enough. They had sent a small launch (boat) to investigate, when it got close the freighter started firing on it so they had to back off.

When Puff arrived the freighter had pulled up near the shore and dropped anchor, and was preparing to unload.

Since the Navy could not send in a boarding party, and the freighter was out of range of its guns, the Captain had asked Saigon for help, quick.  
The nearest help was Puff!

Capt. Johnson notified Navy 55 of what he had seen on his pass overhead.  
The Navy's response was

**" keep them from unloading their cargo,  
and I don't care how you do it."**

Capt. Johnson immediately set up an orbiting pattern around the freighter. When a cargo hatch was opened he would spray it down with a few hundred rounds, the crew of course would shut the hatch and dive for cover!

It was beginning to look like the freighter crew would be content to wait for daylight to unload, the VC on the shore started out toward the freighter in their sampans!

**What a target!**

Capt. Johnson banked his Puff and fired all three guns at the sampan. The VC that were not killed dove into the water and swam for the shore!  
This was going to be a cat and mouse game until the morning.

Capt. Johnson would drop a flare and fire a short burst from his guns and then he would wait and then when it had been dark for a while he would fire his guns, he did not set a pattern of flare and gun, just dropped flares and fired guns in any order he felt good about.

At about 0400 hours the Navy contacted him with their plan;  
At dawn the South Vietnamese would drop in a battalion of paratroopers to trap the VC on the shore and at the same time send a large and well armed launch with a boarding crew to capture the freighter.

At about 0700 hours Capt. Johnson saw the South Vietnamese helicopters start dropping the paratroopers.

He also saw the navy launch heading for the freighter.  
Now it was time to get all the bad guys heads down so they would not see the incoming troops until it was too late! The squeeze play had begun!  
It was now just a matter of time before the Navy would be in control of a Chinese freighter!

Capt. Johnson hosed down the freighter heavily, very heavily.  
And then hosed down the shore where the VC were hiding!

When the VC would fire at him he would fire back, with a vengeance!

The paratroopers had a small fight to capture the VC,  
but were very pleased with the aid of Puff!

The Navy took over the freighter with out firing a single shot, they had enough of Puff  
and felt it was better to surrender then to try to out fight Puff, or out run the Navy cruiser.  
It was more sensible to surrender then to die.

**This turned out to be the largest cache of arms  
taken from the Chinese in the whole war!  
Of course the Chinese say they had  
no involvement in the Vietnam war!**

**Capt. Johnson, and his entire crew,  
were awarded the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry  
and the United States Air Force  
awarded them the Distinguished Flying Cross.**



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## 19. Easter



It was April and Easter was tomorrow  
I had been in the air for three hours and nothing had happened, it was a clear night,  
with a full moon and the stars were bright, it was a holiday and  
I was thinking back over the last six months with Puff.

*The squadron had suffered from five lost crews, 25% of the squadron,  
but none of these losses had occurred in the detachment at Bien Thuy.  
We had flown more missions, more hours, fired more ammunition.  
We had saved 352 outposts from being overrun,  
sank 117 sampans,  
captured the biggest arms cache ever taken in Vietnam ( the Chinese freighter),  
we had never missed a take off,  
never aborted a mission,  
and had no one wounded while flying every night.  
Our detachment had five aircraft and crews,  
we had received credit for 4,600 Kills,  
this was more than all other Puff crews combined!*

As I reminisced about this I wondered why we had been so lucky.  
Was it luck, or dedication to our mission, and our skill that kept us alive?  
I had sometimes asked for trouble and closed my eyes to some safety rules,  
but I and the four other crews from Bien Thuy had earned the respect of the Air Force, and the VC.

It had taken the VC a while to learn not to shoot at Puff.  
And to break off the attack as soon as Puff was in the battle!

Well enough reminiscing for now, it was a clear night and the moon was full,  
and it was a holiday, over half the Vietnamese are Catholic,  
I figured there would be no action tonight!  
So I turned the aircraft over to my copilot,  
and headed to the rear of the aircraft where I could get a short nap.

I had been out for about an hour when I felt the aircraft suddenly turn left  
and the engines came to life with full power!  
It must have been another aircraft and the copilot must have needed to avoid him.  
I went up front to check it out anyway.  
As I approached the front my navigator was giving me the "hurry up" sign.  
What is up I thought?

Well Paddy Control had called. There was a Green Beret camp,  
were they train the locals to fight VC,  
and they had just got a bunch of new recruits in this morning.  
They were under attack by a reinforced battalion of 400 or more VC!

When my navigator radioed the Green Beret at the camp he was a little excited.  
There were usually seven Green Beret's at the camp,  
tonight there were three the rest had went to Can Tho for supplies,  
and since it was going to be a clear night there would be no trouble,  
or so they thought!  
So they would spend the night and return in the morning.

The radio man was so excited that we could not understand much of what he said!  
He was also from the deep south, this made it almost impossible to understand him.  
I finally had to yell at him to calm down, and then I told him what I needed to know  
about the position of the VC, if he wanted my help. This seemed to work,  
he calmed down and gave the navigator a very good list  
of the location and placement of the heavy weapons.  
There were four positions with fifties and four recoilless rifles, and three mortars.

As I approached the camp I lined up on the first fifty and fired,  
as I rolled around I got the second fifty in my crosshairs and fired!  
Suddenly my entire crew was telling me that there was another fifty,  
that we had not been informed about, and it was directly under us and firing up at us.  
Now I could see tracers in front of the aircraft!  
this was bad because if things did not change I would fly right into them!  
So a sharp 45% bank, nose up and full power, I hope this is enough to get us clear!  
We took several hits but nothing serious and I came around to get that fifty.  
The tracers started flying towards us, I had my gunner put all three guns on line at once,  
as I lined up on that fifty I fired until all three guns were empty.  
There was no chance that anyone could survive that wall of lead!

Now the radio man called me and said  
**"Sir, I wish to report that the enemy is no longer  
firing at the camp. They are all firing at you.  
The war is between you and them  
good luck Sir."**

Well this was it - -  
**the whole battalion was try to shoot me and my aircraft out of the sky.  
I did not intend to allow them to succeed!  
I came around and took out the rest of the fifties.  
Then the recoilless rifles and the mortars.  
Now it was just the small arms fire from the foot soldiers.  
Or in spooky talk,  
it was time to clean up the VC!  
And clean up I did!**

**The following morning I was invited to join the search and recovery team,  
OK lets go.  
The Green Beret were surprised at the amount of intelligence that they got from this battle.**

**They found bodies, on stretchers. Others half burried and their grave diggers dead beside them!**

**There was a Cambodian Lt. Colonel, the man that was in charge of the operation.**

**He had a VC flag on him and it was blood soaked, with his blood.**

**they gave this to me as a memento of the battle!**

**They also found that he had two pearl handled Colt revolvers on his body.**

**These Colt's belonged to a friend of mine that had been killed just two months before!**

**I was credited with killing 268 VC, and capturing 49 heavy weapons,  
including three fifties and a flame thrower, made in Russia!**

**And to many small arms to count.**

Another Puff had covered the VC's retreat and chased them all the way to the Cambodian border.

They received credit for another 111 bodies. This was a very good night!

My aircraft had so many bullet holes it was impossible to count then!

***This is a tribute to an old war bird,  
the AC-47, that can fly with the best of them!***



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## 20. Vietnamese Gratitude



I had received numerous gratitude messages form other military units,  
accross the country side but none were quite like the one from a small village  
about ten miles up river from Bien Thuy.

I had flown over this village many times and it seemed so peaceful and calm.

It was small about 200 people and about half of them were children.

From the air I could see the children playing in the street,

I often wondered what they thought about this war.

When I passed over head the adults would not even stop to look up they would just keep working.

This village was a "typical" small Vietnamese village; it had an outpost nearby that everyone  
would go into at night, and stay until daylight.

In the outpost were some old WW II rifles and a radio to call for help on,  
if they were attacked by the VC.

The villagers were trained on how to defend the outpost when it was attacked.

This village was so peaceful the I knew it would never be attacked,  
after all it was small and had no military importance, and the Bien Thuy base  
was just ten miles away.

These villagers most likely sat on the banks of the river catching fish for dinner,  
and watching the VC float by on their sampans to unknown destinations,  
to wreck havoc and death on others, not them.

**In May of 1966 I was proven wrong.  
Even though there had been no previous harassment of this village,  
no death threats to the village Chief, nothing.**

There was a call from Paddy Control, this little village,  
actually the outpost the villagers were in, was under attack!

It was about 0400 hours and just a couple of hours until daylight,  
this was unusually late for an attack to begin.

I figured it would be over in ten minutes or less, once I got there.

My navigator contacted the outpost and was able to get the information we needed,  
he drew a map of the weapon locations and gave it to me.

As I approached the battle scene I could see small arms fire from only two locations.

I told my gunner to put one gun on the line at a time, there was no need to empty all three at once,  
besides I had supported three outpost already tonight and was low on ammo.

Well it took two passes at the first location, and just one at the second.

My navigator said that he was told by the ground that the people in the outpost were jumping in the streets for joy, they had never seen such a display of fire power,  
**and this was just one gun.**

I turned on my wing tip lights and wagged my wings at them to let them know that I too was satisfied with the outcome.

Suddenly out of a small group of trees,  
some less-than brilliant, VC took a "pot-shot" at me!  
Well, I would show him and put on a show for the villagers.  
Gunner, all three guns at once.

As I rolled into my 30% bank and the crosshairs hit his location  
I fired all three guns until dry, about ten seconds.  
What a show, and I took that VC out of the war!  
This battle took about ten minutes as I had expected.

All was clear and I headed back to base, breakfast and a shower, and then to bed, sure sounded good. It had been a long night, ten hours of combat, four outpost saved.

As we landed we were all tired, but satisfied at the job we had done.  
This was the 14th. night in a row we had flown,  
and we had defended over thirty outpost in that time!  
It looked like it would not let up soon.

After a cold shower I headed to the chow hall, and had breakfast with my crew.  
We talked about that small village and how useless it would have been to the VC.  
They had just wanted to harass the villagers and keep them afraid of the VC.

Now chow is over and it is time to hit the hay. I had just gotten to sleep  
and this MP shaking me awake! What did he think he was doing?  
I was off until 1800 hours and needed some beauty rest.  
He said "Sir we have a problem at the main gate"  
What did this have to do with me I am not head of security.  
he said something about some local villagers, about 100 of them, wanting to see me.

**What! Me! I had not done anything!,**  
in fact I had not been off base in 14 days!  
What could I have done to get the locals mad at me?  
Jack just put on a uniform and come with me.  
OK, off I went.

At first I thought they had the wrong pilot, then I remembered the village up river,  
and they kept saying they wanted to see the Dragon Man, well that was me,  
no doubt about that. The MP's had also got my Lt. out to the gate to translate for us.  
As I approached the gate and the Lt. said I was the Dragon Man the villagers began to cheer!  
This was embarrassing!

I could not talk to the Chief except through my Lt. and he liked all this attention!  
I suspect he was "gilding the Lilly" a little bit as every time he spoke the cheers went up again!

Well after about 30 minutes the Chief was able to control the group and speak to me.  
It seems that he and his village had never before been attacked by the VC  
and they were very impressed by my Dragon. They wanted to thank me.

**OK, thanks accepted, now can I go to bed? What they are not done!**  
they want me to take several of their young girls to keep house and clean up for me,



shine my boots, do my laundry and so on. Well I was grateful,  
but I tried to explain that there government had taken care of these things, Thank you very much.  
Well they wanted to thank me somehow.

*I said I am very pleased that you are thankful for what I did,  
but just seeing them alive was thanks enough for me.*

With that I headed off for my bunk and some well deserved sleep.



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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 21. The Navy Swift



*A story appeared in the Stars and Stripes newspaper  
which glorified the Navy's part in the rescue of a Navy Swift,  
that was sunk in Vietnam.  
This was the first Swift sunk in Vietnam.  
The article was written by Lt. Commander Don Scovel.  
His version of the event is far different from mine.  
I will tell you mine,  
if you are interested in his, you will need to look it up.  
I feel that you should know that I was the first aircraft,  
in fact the first anything, to arrive at the scene.  
and Lt. Commander Scovel's account was at least third hand.*



This story started With an Ensign, who was the officer in charge of the Swift, boat #4, saw a buoy floating in a small bay off the southern coast of Vietnam. He thought that the VC flag that was on top of the buoy would make a great war souvenir. he had his Swift pull up along side the buoy, he reached out to gather in the flag, and when he pulled the flag up out of the top of the buoy, the mine it was wired to exploded. This explosion ripped off his leg and seriously wounded or killed all the rest of the crew, except for the radio operator, he was inside the Swift when the explosion occurred, and was unhurt. The Swift had a large hole in its side and started to sink rapidly

Now I come into the picture.  
I was eating dinner at about 1700 hours when I received a message from Paddy Control to take off immediately and giving me the grid position of the Swift, and that there were wounded personnel aboard the Swift.  
Our food had just arrived and so we warped it in napkins and headed for the aircraft!

I cleared the ground at 1740 hours, climbed to 3,000 feet and opened the engines up for full power, I wanted to get there before the VC. We all finished our dinner about now.  
My navigator called the Swift's radio man and he was real excited and scared!  
The Ensign was in great pain and the radio man could not check  
( stop) the bleeding of the Ensign's severed leg.  
And to make matters worse the VC had found them and were firing at the Swift.

As I arrived at the scene I could see the Swift, which was about one half under water, with the nose sticking up.

The radio operator was firing the Swift's machine guns toward the shore,  
When he saw me he ducked into the cabin to talk to me on the radio,  
he informed me that the VC had only small arms and a mortar.  
The mortar rounds were slowly getting closer to him. I replied that I wanted him to fire  
the Swift's machine gun towards the mortar, as I could not see the flash from it at all,  
and then a blast towards the largest concentration of VC.  
It took him about two minutes to get on deck,  
I found out latter that he had told the Ensign about my arrival.  
When he hit the deck he fired a long burst towards the mortar position  
and two short burst at different parts of the shore.

It was still daylight so I reminded my crew to keep a sharp lookout for ground fire,  
not ground fire directed at the Swift, but ground fire directed at us.

The mortar location was just behind a small hill, I fired from the bottom of the hill to the top,  
and that ended the mortar problem. I made several passes at each of the other locations,  
and every now and then a short burst were the mortar had been to discourage anyone  
from trying to use that area again. There was no more firing towards the Swift.

Since I had seen no fire up towards me I was thinking that the VC commander would try  
and wait me out, to lay low until after dark and then slip out to the Swift on sampans  
and kill the crew and capture the guns, normally this would work,  
all other fighters would need to land at dark and not return until daylight. Not Puff!

At this point I called Paddy Control and told them to instruct Spooky 43 to load on extra flares  
and ammo and fuel as he would need to relive me around midnight,  
or sooner if the VC were really brave and I had to fire a lot of ammo early.  
I called the Swift and told him that I or another Puff would like to stay here all night,  
did that sound good to him, would he like the company?

**His reply**

**"You bet! I either want out of here, or lots of company".**

I told him that since it was getting dark he would have to stay on the Swift until morning,  
but I would see to that he had only the best company,  
no VC's on his Swift while Puff was around!

Now the cat and mouse game, the VC trying to sneak out and get the Swift  
and "Puff" trying to keep them away from it.  
The VC knew that by daylight the entire US Navy would be down here to get that Swift back,  
so they had to move quickly!  
I figured that the VC would either get a boat or sampan and try to paddle out to the Swift,  
or they would just swim out there and try to surprise the only crew member.

I had a big ace up my sleeve, The VC in this area had not seen Puff,  
and would not know that I had flares that would light up the night for a five mile radius!  
I advised the Swift to alert me to ANY sound in the water,  
he could use the radio or he could fire his machine guns at the noise,  
I did not care which way he informed me of the VC.  
I would drop flares and or hose off the area for him.  
I figured that if the VC were foolish enough to try to get to the Swift they would suffer  
the effects of either the Swifts guns or mine, it really did not matter,  
just save the radio man, and the Ensign and keep the machine guns out of the hand's of the VC.

The Navy had lots more Swift's. Besides this one had a big hole in it anyway,  
they would not want it back.

As darkness fell I could tell that the radio man was getting very nervous, I can't say as I blamed him,  
he had never seen a Puff in action, except for a few seconds in the day time, night was different!

The real question was; how long would the VC wait,  
and how many men would he sacrifice to get the Swift?  
I could not know the answer to these questions until the night was over.

I had thought about pulling one of my fake departures in order to get the VC to move  
into the bay were I could easily kill them, but the radio man was afraid  
as this would leave him alone for about ten minutes, with no one to cover him.  
I can't say that I blame him I would be scared too.

Let's see... I had thirty flares and I started off with 150,000 rounds of ammo,  
I had fired about 25,000 already, this means that I had better be a little  
concerned with both flares and ammo. Each flare would burn about five minutes,  
so I certainly could not keep the place lit up all night, in fact I only had  
about two and one half hours of light on board. I had better use it wisely!  
I decided that I would be as conservative as I could,  
but I would not put the radio man in jeopardy,  
after all he was the individual that had the most to lose!

We were all on the lookout for any signs of small arms fire, that would pin point the VC to me  
and I could hose them down quickly.

If we saw no firing then I would to assume that the VC were trying to get out to the Swift.  
About every thirty minutes I would hose down the area were the mortar had been,  
to prevent anyone else from setting up a mortar. I also started to fire along the shore line  
and out into the bay. Some times I would drop a flare  
and not fire just to change my style and keep Charlie guessing.

I had been on target for over five hours and I was low on flares and ammo.  
I would need a replacement Puff out here soon.  
I radioed Paddy Control and told them to send out Spooky 43.  
When he arrived I introduced him to the radio man, briefed him on the location of the VC,  
and headed back to base to refuel, and rearm.  
I would probably be back here before the night was over!

That is what happened, I had to relive Spooky 43 shortly before dawn and watched  
as the Navy arrived to pick up the radio man, the guns and to sink the Swift,  
to keep it away from the VC.

**All together Puff expended  
287,00 rounds of ammo  
and dropped 72 flares  
in defending the Radio man and the Ensign,  
and the Swift.**

**All together Puff Spent fifteen hours on target  
in defense of those two men and a Swift boat,  
because**

**a young Ensign just could not resist the temptation  
of acquiring a flag for a souvenir.  
I think that flag was a very costly memento.  
This does not cover the price paid  
by the crew members that died!**



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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
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*USAF Ret.*

## 22. The Academy Graduate



This chapter is dedicated to a special young Officer:

**Lieutenant James D. Goodman,**

**"Goodie"**

**as we called him.**

**He graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1964.**

**He was my fourth copilot here in Vietnam.**

**When I met him we was still very green,  
but he was the most dedicated officer I have ever met.**

*Goodie was career motivated  
and wanted to learn all about our mission in Vietnam  
as well as the overall mission of the Air Force.  
He was very self motivated and very resourceful,  
he would make a decision and carry it out, as this next story shows.*

**Goodie arrived in Saigon early in the morning,  
he reported immediately to the squadron operations officer.  
The Sergeant at the desk told him that he was to report to me at Bien Thuy immediately!  
Of course Goodie asked "How do I get there, and where is Bien Thuy"?**

**The Sergeant jokingly said  
"You can figure that out yourself,  
you have 24 hours to get there"!**

**Goodie did not realize this was a joke.  
He headed for the flight line to find a flight to Bien Thuy,  
the only flight was the mail run and it had left.  
At least he now knew where Bien Thuy was.**

**Goodie climbed aboard an old bus, loaded with chickens, pigs, ducks,  
and way too many people, he had to hang on to the outside of the bus, as did several other men.  
It was three hours to Can Tho, through country side that was controlled by the VC!  
Naturally he did not know this, or that he was the luckiest man alive!  
I guess that the VC figured that there were more Soldiers on the bus  
and he was the look out!**

**By the grace of God and a prayer he had arrived at Can Tho!**

**There was still 17 miles of VC controlled road to go to get to Bien Thuy!**

**This road was used by the VC to get to Can Tho.**

**Can Tho was the VC's rest and recreation (R & R) base.**

**Even the Green Beret would not travel this road after dark. Goodie started to walk the road, and after about one mile a farmer picked him up in an old beat up truck and dropped him off at the main gate to Bien Thuy!**

**Somehow Goodie had managed to arrive, alive! at Bien Thuy, it was well after dark. Goodie figured that he had orders and he was going to follow them no matter what!**

He had a pleasant personality and got along well with the rest of my crew, although at first we all got tired of all his questions.

He wanted to know about everything, the how and the why!

Well after a couple missions it all started to fit together and the questions slowed down.

He became a member of our AAA AA Athletic Club.

I remember the first time I put him in the Pilot's seat, and I flew as copilot. I told him that he would be doing it all, and be responsible for the crew and my aircraft.

This was his fourth mission and he was not sure he was ready for this responsibility.

I convinced him that he was ready and the responsibility came with the job.

What would he do if I was wounded or killed in the middle of a mission and he had to take over and finish the mission and be responsible for the crew?

Goodie understood what I was talking about, but was still a little apprehensive about being in charge! I assured him that I would not let him get into trouble, or into a position that we could not get out of, that helped him to relax, he took over.

His biggest concern was that he would shoot the wrong people.

I told him that I would not let that happen, I would talk him through his first battle.

All went well on his first target, he was a little slow at firing those guns --

he wanted to be sure he was right before he fired those weapons

and rained death on the enemy below. By the time he had hit three target areas,

he was in full control, in fact I had to slow him down a little bit,

keep an eye out for heavy weapons I would remind him, conserve ammo and flares, try to never empty all three guns at once.

Keep one gun for backup in case a fifty would suddenly appear, you always wanted to be ready to fight back!

Now I made him plan the attack before he started to fire.

It took him several missions before he was a finely polished Puff pilot.

***He never did stop asking questions, this was good.***

***Every time I would change my technique he would ask "why"?***

***I would tell him that I did not want the VC to find a pattern that I used, or they would setup to take advantage of it.***

***I always tried to have one more trick up my sleeve to keep us alive!***

On our slow nights I would question him about the aircraft's operation, and the operation of the guns and flares. I taught him to look at the ground,

look for changes from the last time he was in this area,

this would tell you what the VC were doing,

and help you figure out what they were going to do next.



Let me give you an example: I asked him to tell me what was different down below tonight?

He looked and at first saw nothing. I told him to look again,  
and remember it was still early evening, even though it was dark. Finally he saw it ,  
and said " Sir all of those villages are dark and they are usually lit up  
so that I can see the people walking around! Why are they dark tonight?  
I asked him were he thought all the villagers went? his response; " I don't know."  
I told him to look out towards the sea, and tell me what he saw.

About three miles out to sea he saw " about a thousand fishing boats  
and sampans, all with lanterns. Why?" Then it hit him the VC were up to something,  
and the villagers had been warned and fled out to sea!

In a few short minutes we saw one of the villages start on fire!  
Now we knew what was up!  
Thirty minutes later there were three villages going up in flames!  
Goodie called Paddy Control and was waiting for their approval to fire  
on the VC in the villages.

I think that I can safely say that Goodie was ready for battle now, He has not green anymore!

Of course Paddy Control's message was  
**"Wait one puff."**  
We called them again after about ten minutes and heard  
**" Wait one Puff" again!**

After about ten more minutes I got mad and called for anyone on the ground  
near the fires to respond. In less then ten seconds I had a Green Beret  
that confirmed what we thought; the villages had been warned and all the villagers  
and their Chief's were out to sea for safety!

Hundreds of VC and we had no clearance to fire! Now what?  
Then Goodie had a great idea.  
He call the Green Beret on the ground and told him to fire a short burst into the air,  
the Green Beret did and Goodie called Paddy Control and told them we had been fired at.  
This gave us instant authorization to fire back!  
Good thinking Goodie!

The night was so bright that we could see the VC running  
down the streets setting everything on fire!  
A few burst's of fire from Puff and in less then five minutes it was all over,  
except the clean up!

It took about 30 days before things got changed to prevent this type of thing  
from happening again, after all whose side were we on?

Goodie became one of my best trained copilot, because he was willing to learn  
what and why I did what I did. He was dedicated to destroying the enemy  
and in doing so in the quickest and safest way possible.

**If all Air Force Academy Graduates  
are this dedicated to preserving peace**

**and the moral standards of the Air Force,  
we will be in good hands in the future.**

I received a letter form Goodie shortly after I returned to the States.  
He thanked me for all the training I had given him and wished  
that all the pilots he had flown with were as well trained as I had been,  
that things had changed for the worse since I had left.

*These were great complements.*

He knew that Puff was the aircraft the VC feared more  
then any other weapon we had over there!

**Two weeks later, I received a letter telling me.  
Goodie was killed while on a Puff mission.  
May God Bless him and all those like him!**



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AMERICAN VETERAN SEARCH



PATRIOTIC WEB SITE AWARD

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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 23. Tonight You Die



**The outpost was located at  
10 degrees 12 minutes North  
and 105 degrees 35 minutes East.**

It was a small outpost, but very important to the VC.  
It was built at the intersection of two major canals, and could keep the VC  
from getting within five miles of the providence capitol, Can Tho.

**The VC wanted this outpost bad!**

The VC Company Commander had been unable to take the outpost by force,  
thanks in large part to Puff, he decided to try psychological warfare tactics.  
He felt that this would scare the villagers in the outpost into giving up.

**We had received an intelligence report that the VC Commander  
had told his superiors that he would have the outpost in 90 days!**

From here on out every night Puff would get a call that the outpost was under attack!

I would fly over there and see nothing! no firing at all.

I would contact the outpost and ask "What is going on down there?"

Well it took two nights to figure out that the attack was the VC  
and what they were doing was setting up several very large speakers  
and then Charlie would say

**"leave tonight or you die. Leave all your weapons  
and leave peacefully you will live."**

I would strafe the fields and the tree line and the VC would leave,  
the messages would stop for the night, and all was well.

This went on for just over 30 nights. Then Charlie changed his tactics.  
He started to dig a ditch from the trees to the outpost, about three feet deep and three feet wide.

Of course the speakers would blast all the time the VC were digging.

The outpost would call when they could see the VC digging and I would show up,  
shoot the fields where the ditch was and the VC that were left alive would retreat,  
until tomorrow night! The villagers would fill the ditch back up each morning!

After a couple days the VC started setting mines on the dirt piles by the ditch,  
the villagers would hit the mines, setting them off and killing or wounding several people!

The next step was for the Green Beret to remove and replace the mines in the ditch,  
so when the VC dug out the ditch they would hit the mines and they would die!

One of the benefits to the mines in the ditch was that the outpost would not call for Puff

until a mine went off! Well this battle of wits went on with slight changes  
for about two months, and suddenly just quit!

It was a little while before our intelligence learned that the old VC Commander  
had been "replaced" for his failure to capture the outpost as he promised!

The new VC Commander was familiar with Puff, and I doubt that he would make a promise  
to take over the outpost in 90 days!

He knew, from prior contact with me,  
that if he attempted to take over the outpost that he would lose too many men.  
The nightly call from this outpost were over.

One night when it was slow, I contacted that outpost and asked them how they felt about Puff.

The outpost Chief informed me that they were never afraid of being over run by the VC.

They knew that Puff the Magic Dragon would drive the VC away.

Besides watching Puff was more fun than watching TV!

***I think that was a complement!***

I only wish that I could ALWAYS keep the VC away and defend everyone as well  
as this Chief thought I had defended his outpost!

The villagers in the outpost deserve a lot of credit,  
many villagers would just pack up and turn everything over to the VC.

Sometimes all it took was a message from a VC sympathizer  
and a entire village would be abandoned!

This is hard to imagine, until you see the fear in most villagers eyes  
when they hear about VC threats!



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## 24. A War We Can't Forget



The following chapter was written by

**LT. Col. Charles A. Riley.**

**"Chuck"**

to all of us.

Chuck belived in our mission, and poured himself more then 100% into his work.  
He knew we could win, and that we should win, for the sake of the South Vietnamese people!

*This is his story about his two tours in Vietnam.*

*The United States officially ended it's involvement  
in the Vietnam war in 1974.*

*For those of us who fought over there  
it may never be over!*

*There are those that say the war was not a war at all,  
but a counter insurgency,  
fought mostly along the lines of a conventional war.*

***It was a war.***

***It was never clearly understood by either our Government  
or by most Americans!***

Vietnam was a war in where a fully armed Army Helicopter could be,  
and often was, shot down by a VC armed with a cross bow!  
And the VC might think that he was still fighting the French.  
It was a war in which our Commander in Chief, President Johnson,  
bragged that "the Air Force could not bomb a North Vietnamese  
outhouse without his approval".

To those of us that fought there it was a strange and war, where nothing was normal.

**Just a note here in case you feel  
I might not know what war is:**  
***This was the third war I have fought  
for this Great Country.***

What ever happened no longer would surprise us.

It was a war where our enemy was given support and comfort by our people at home  
and by many U.S. Congressmen!

**Vietnam was a class on  
"American Imperialism in Vietnam."  
The class hosted by a U.S. Congressman,  
and held in a room of the House of Representatives.  
It was a war that American citizens gave open aid to our enemy  
and jeopardized the lives  
of American Prisoners of War.  
They even visited North Vietnam to make them feel important!**

*Here goes with my first tour.*

It was 1963, there were approximately 15,000 US troops serving in Vietnam  
in an advisory and support capacity. The war was a little strange even then.

No one seemed very excited about it, not even the South Vietnamese.

At this time it was recognized as a "Counter Insurgency" war,  
and the right people were involved.

The Army's involvement was mostly Green Beret.

There was one Air Force Squadron of Air Commandos  
that were trained for unconventional warfare.

From the start we were never really sure who the "bad guys" were, until they shot at you!

I remember one bright moon lit night in late 1963, I woke up to see a Vietnamese  
crawling through the window at the head of my bunk,  
I grabbed him and yelled to have the lights turned on.

When all was said and done it turned out he was "friendly" and not a VC!  
Just a common thief!

One night I flew a load of ammo into Tut Hao, back when the runway was grass.  
The Vietnamese who met us were a motley looking bunch, but they had a note authorizing  
them to pick up the ammo. I told my crew

**"Keep alert and keep your weapons cocked and ready!"**

I still don't know if they were the "right Vietnamese" there was no way to tell,  
the VC don't wear uniforms like us.

I picked up three bad looking dudes one morning at Nha Trang,  
they showed up just before we departed for Da Nang. They did not speak English,  
but had a note signed by a Lieutenant saying that they were authorized to fly on military aircraft.  
I was flying a Gooney Bird, with the side cargo door removed.

**my Flight Engineer said to me**

**"I Don't like the look of these guys."**

**I said "I don't either so put them near the cargo door and if they do anything suspicious,  
even just pull out a weapon, I want you to throw their butt's out that door immediately!"**

**The Sergeant never took his eyes off of them!**

I can remember being asleep at Nha Trang when **Captain Tom Blake**,  
my navigator woke me up to tell me that President Kennedy had been assassinated.

Tom was known to joke about things like that, so I said

**"don't even say that as a joke it is not funny!"**

**" He told me**

**"I wish I was joking I just heard it on the Armed Forces radio!"**

I laid awake for several hours, my eyes were more than a little wet.

It made no sense at all, here we were half way around the world fighting for our lives and the lives of the Vietnamese, and some crazy man in Dallas kills our President!

What a crazy world! Well back to the war.

**It is the day before my navigator and I are going home!**

**Back to the States!**

**WOW!**

**Seems like a dream!**

Well OK... one last trip to the Green Beret camp near the Cambodian border. They need ammo the VC were going to attack tonight, and they need more ammo.

When we arrived it was late afternoon and they helped us get unloaded.

One of the Green Beret tried to get Tom to "accidentally" leave his M-16 rifle, the Green Beret had not been issued them yet, but they wanted them bad. Tom said "No way man I need to turn it in to supply tomorrow, I am going home."

The next day we heard that the VC had overrun the outpost and the Green Beret had been killed, along with several other Americans.

When Tom heard this he was very upset.

He said

**"I wish that Green Beret had kicked my butt  
and taken that M-16,  
it probably would have saved him."**

That afternoon Tom and I boarded a plane at Ton Son Nhut and were on our way home.

Tom will never forget his last day in Vietnam, neither will I.

**In spite of all this I volunteered for another tour.**

**Someone has to fight for our country.**

It was in the fall of 1965 that I came back.

I was amazed at how the war had changed and escalated!

Now it was a real War!

I had barley arrived back at Ton Son Nhut, for the start of my second tour, when while I was standing on the taxi way thinking about the last tour, a helicopter took off, in about three minutes it was back! A VC sniper had shot the pilot right between the eyes!

And the copilot had to bring the helicopter back. He was badly shook up!

Very early the next morning, 0330 hours, I was ready to go to bed.

That meant that I needed to ride in the back of a "crew pickup", a pickup truck with wire all around the back, except over the tailgate area used to transport troops from one side of Saigon to thier quarters.

This truck was driven by a Vietnamese.

Because of the time there was no other traffic on the road.

All of a sudden a small French car raced up behind us.

I say us because there were four other GI's in the front, with the driver, and me in the back.

The passenger in the car held a grenade!



I realized that he could very easily throw it into the back of the truck!  
I was getting very nervous about now!  
I did have my sidearm in a Air Force issue shoulder holster, out it came  
and I aimed right between the passengers eyes!  
I figured that if his arm came out the window I would fire before he could throw the grenade  
So here we have a Mexican stand off, he has a grenade and I intend to shoot him  
if he even looks like he might throw it anywhere!  
I could tell that the driver and the "bomber" were talking back and forth.  
I can just imagine their conversation.  
"Driver": I speed up along side him, you throw it in the back.  
"Bomber" If you do that he will shoot me, not you, I will not do that!.  
Or at least words to that effect anyway!  
Well they followed me for about 100 yards, then slammed on the brakes  
and turned and disappeared into the night! That was fine by me!

This was typical of the war. You could not tell who was on your side.  
in fact the Vietnamese that was on your side today, would slit your throat tomorrow,  
because a VC told him to, or the VC would come and kill his family!  
To make matters worse our own troops would sometimes use us for target practice!

*Let me illustrate.*

While flying a Puff the Magic Dragon one night I heard another Puff call Paddy Control.  
The other pilot was a friend of mine, Major John C. Haller (Jack). The message went like this.

**"Paddy Control, this is Spooky 42,  
the outpost below is firing at me,  
we have tracers from a fifty coming our way,  
directly from the center of the outpost.**

**"Spooky 42. this is Paddy Control, that is impossible,  
that outpost is controlled by our Army and is friendly."**

**Jack came back, his voice a pitch or two higher, and very mad.  
" Friendly, hell, you tell them they have ten seconds to stop firing at me  
or I will fire back.  
And I guarantee I will not miss."**

*I turned my Puff and headed in Jack's direction,  
I figured that it would take me about three minutes to get to him,  
and I could help him out.  
Of course we would both face a Court Martial,  
but I was not going to allow him to go down without my support!  
Well, twenty seconds later I still had not seen any tracers from his Puff,  
and so I called Jack,  
"Jack are they still firing at you? If so I want a piece of them too!"  
" His answer was " No Chuck, they have quit,  
I guess they get to live to fight another day.  
Thanks for the support."*

What happened to "Jack" was not that unusual in Vietnam. In fact a few month's later, Jack was landing at the Marine base at Dong Ha when we received incoming fire **from one of OUR tanks!**

Not just once but three times as he tried to land they wound fire towards him!  
He was supposed to stay on Dong Ha to help defend them when they came under attack from the VC.

The third time he just landed and turned his guns toward the tank and had the Base Commander woke up to come and have a "**chat**" with him or he was going to fire all three guns at once, that would have ground up that tank, at that range, 40 feet, into scrap metal, and turned everyone inside into hamburger! I have no doubt that Jack would have fired had the Base Commander not arrived and calmed everyone down.

Jack did turn his aircraft around and immediately left Dong Ha,  
That was the last Puff crew assigned to defend Dong Ha.

The war was full of this type of crazy stuff at all levels of Command.

**We had Colonel Jack Broughton facing a Court Martial because he tried to protect his men.**

**They were in the heat of battle and suddenly this Russian ship, in Cam Pha Harbor, started to fire at them. They immediately fired back. For this he deserved a Court Martial? I don't think so. In WW II or Korea he would have been called a hero for such quick judgment to save his men!**

**Then there was General John D. Lavelle, U.S. Air Commander. He was forced to retire because he authorized air strikes into North Vietnam, against heavy Anti Aircraft (AA) gun emplacements, to protect his (our U.S.) bombers and give them a better chance to come back from a bombing run, but did not get the local Vietnamese civilians permission. He was just trying to help bring home more U.S. Airman alive. The North Vietnamese were building stronger defenses each day!**

I believe it was General Douglas McArthur who said  
**"A Country that goes to war without the will to win is making a grave mistake."**

***I personally believe that for our government to have sent men to war and not allowed them the means to win is nothing short of criminal.***

**Note:**

**Lt. Colonel Charles A. Riley, USAF Ret.  
served 25 years in three separate branches of the U.S. Armed Forces.  
He is a Veteran, as is Lt. Colonel John C. Haller,  
of World War II, Korea, and of Vietnam.**

**Lt. Colonel Riley is a Command Pilot, a Master Parachutist and flew 307 combat missions in Vietnam in the AC-47 "Gooney Bird", Also called Puff the Magic Dragon.**

***Many of us wholeheartedly agree with Lt.Col. Riley's analysis of the Vietnam war and we were often frustrated by the stupid rules of engagement that we had to put up with every night.***

***Many times I would deliberately draw enemy fire, even if I had to drop down almost to the tree tops, so that I could return fire, to save the outpost from being over run or to save a patrol from being killed.***

*All because I couldn't get an immediate clearance to fire,  
from BOTH the American Commander, and the Vietnamese Commander.  
Sometimes the Vietnamese Commander would leave orders  
not to be disturbed until morning!  
There would be no way to get clearance then!*

**The first four months that I was in Vietnam we could not fire  
even if we were fired on, unless we had authorization first!  
At least I was able to change that.**

**Yes... this war was hard to understand,  
apparently there were no real rules of engagement,  
no Geneva Convention rules,  
just do whatever one wanted as long as you killed the enemy!  
IF you had local authorization!**



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AMERICAN VETERAN SEARCH



PATRIOTIC WEB SITE AWARD

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*The C-47*  
*"Puff the Magic Dragon"*  
*by Lt.Col. John (Jack) Haller*  
*USAF Ret.*

## 25. The Heart of The Dragon



**The 4th. Air Commando Squadron** was constantly frustrated by the directives that were coming from USAF headquarters and the 7th. Air Force headquarters in Saigon.

It was apparent that neither of them understood the mission  
or the capabilities of Puff the Magic Dragon.

Our problems started the very first day we landed at Ton Son Nhut air base in Saigon,  
and we realized that our fate was going to be controlled by higher headquarters,  
not by our own accomplishments and capabilities. No one seemed to understand,  
except the Green Beret on the ground, the ability of Puff to kill hundreds of VC  
in a very short time, if deployed properly!

The only real opportunity the 4th. Air commando squadron had to perform  
to it's potential was at Bien Thuy. In the first five month I spent at Bien Thuy I alone,  
just one crew out of five, had recorded over 250 outpost saved from the VC,  
over 1285 confirmed VC kills, the other four crews had almost as impressive records.  
This information was documented and can be verified through USAF Headquarters.

The rest of my tour my crew and I continued to support and defend the outpost  
and ground troops with equally devastating results to the VC.

I do not know exactly how many confirmed kills I had but it was well over 2500 VC  
that I permanently removed from the war.

That is 2500 VC that could not kill or wound any American personal again!

My crew and I are pleased with our record and only wish it was better.

It would have been better if we had not had to "fight " the local South Vietnamese,  
even the ones that were supposed to be on our side.

My tour was a constant battle to get the local village Chief to allow me to shoot the VC.

If he felt that the village was slow in paying it's taxes or could not pay,  
well he would be asleep and have a don not disturb sign on his door.

No one would dare disturb him, or they would be sent  
to visit a village that would just "happen" to come under attack  
while he was there and he of course would die while  
"defending" the poor villagers!

The 4th. Air Commando squadron suffered the highest losses of any unit in the war,  
it was the most highly decorated unit in the war also.

Most of the losses were due to the improper use of Puff,  
coupled with the inability of the Puff crew to fight back when fired upon!

I was in WW II and Korea. During both of those wars if someone shot at you tried  
your best to destroy them, they were the enemy.

In fact if you did a good job of destroying them you were a hero!  
In Vietnam if someone shot at you, first you had to get headquarters approval,  
then the local Chief's approval, then IF you were still in the air  
and capable for firing back you could.  
We had aircraft literally shot out of the air while "waiting" for approval to fire back.  
In fact we had some pilots that faced a Court Martial board because they did not wait  
to fire after being fired upon themselves!  
I would not wait for approval if I was fired upon.  
I would fire back and suffer the consequences!  
More then once I was told that I would face a Court Martial review board for my actions!  
I felt that at least I would be alive to attend the Court Martial!

The real credit for the success of Puff the Magic dragon in Vietnam was the pilot's  
and there crews who in spite of all the politics and red tape still did there best to do their job.

**These men were the real  
HEART  
of Puff the Magic Dragon!**

**We as a nation owe these men  
and all our fighting forces in Vietnam  
a great debt of gratitude!**



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