

Leave No Man Behind

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(On 9 October 1966) a Phantom from VF-154 off USS *Coral Sea* was shot down about 30 miles south of Hanoi, 50 miles deep inside North Vietnam. The HS-6 Big Mother on the SAR station got the green light to attempt a rescue. It was escorted to the scene by two SPADs of VA-176 also off *Intrepid*. At the site of the downed Navy fighter, the SH-3A, commanded by Lieutenant Bob Burnand, and the A-1s, joined the search for the two men, who had not yet been precisely located, despite the green light given to Burnand to attempt the rescue. All the aircraft of the SAR task force, the helicopter and the SPADs, began to attract the attention of AAA, but the search continued.

Not satisfied with opposing the rescue with the heavy flak, the North Vietnamese scrambled MiG-17s to the scene, and the two Navy A-1s found themselves in a dogfight, jets versus round-engine props. The A-1s dove for the deck, commenced frantic, tight scissors on the treetops, turning into the speedy MiGs and forcing the MiGs into overshoots, spoiling their gunnery solutions. Slower than the Mig-17, running for home was not an option, the A-1s could only keep turning, dodging the MiG gun runs, and scream for help.

Help took the form of two other Navy Skyraiders from VA-176, pilots Lieutenant Pete Russell and Lieutenant Junior Grade Tom Patton, escorting a second H-3 to the search scene. Two Spads coming to the rescue of two Spads under attack by MiGs was not exactly the War College solution, but no other help was nearby or close enough to get there in time to matter.

Tom Patton recounted his eventful afternoon. His group of aircraft was escorting an Air Force rescue helicopter to the scene of the SAR when the MiGs struck. In reply to the RESCAP's desperate cries for help, he radioed: "Hang on! We're coming! Two Spads and a helo!" (That must have eased their minds a lot, he said). Arriving on scene, Patton and Russell slid in right behind a MiG who was too preoccupied trying to shoot down the Spad in front of him to see them coming, and was down low and slow, having lost much of its energy. Patton opened fire on the MiG, but was unable to hit his writhing target. He said the MiG zigged when he should have zagged, climbed when he should have dived, banked when he should have simply run away, generally made every move wrong, and could not shake off the tenacious Skyraider.

Patton used up all his 20mm ammo trying without success to hit the MiG. Finally, all the ordnance he had left was an air-to-ground 5-inch Zuni unguided rocket. Patton, certain he would never have another chance like this to shoot down a jet MiG with his prop Skyraider, decided he might as well take a shot with the unguided Zuni.

When the supersonic Zuni streaked close over the MiG canopy, still without hitting the jet, the pilot, with a very close look at the enormous trail of flame from the rocket motor, must have had enough, because he immediately ejected. Patton believed he had not scored a single hit on the MiG while emptying all his 20mm ammunition, and that he frightened the MiG pilot into abandoning his jet with the Zuni.

Patton joined an exclusive Vietnam War club, an all-Jaygee-all SPAD-all Navy-three man club, with Clint Johnson and Charles Hartman of VA-25 (they shared a kill 20 June 1965) as the only prop pilots to have downed jet MiGs in combat.

At low fuel state, the Big Mother reluctantly returned to feet wet. No sign of the two airmen was found, and after the war it was learned they had been captured very soon after reaching the ground and the search had been, in retrospect, futile. Lieutenant Commander Charles Tanner and Lieutenant Ross Terry were POWs for the next seven years. But it was not entirely in vain, Patton the underdog, not only bared his teeth, he sank them into his tormentor and gained a victory for CSAR everywhere.