

DaNang was a huge air base. Besides the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing and the 37th ARRS, it hosted two South Vietnamese Air Force squadrons, one O-1 Birddog and the other Skyraiders. DaNang was always busy and during the night, maintainers often could see AC-47 gunship tracers as they fired down on enemy positions, especially around a promontory known as “Monkey Mountain.” The tracers appeared as a slow-moving ribbon of fire weaving from the aircraft to the ground. After watching a gunship work during at night it was easy to understand the term “Puff, The Magic Dragon.”³¹²

Once, detachment pilots informed the maintainers that a South Vietnamese O-1 was heading back to the base. The Birddog’s pilot had been shot while calling in air strikes and the aircraft was being flown from the back seat by the observer. The observer notified the tower of the circumstances and declared: “He was going land the damaged aircraft.” As the aircraft wobbled through the air, the Birddog suddenly nosed over and crashed in front of the Skyraider area. The little aircraft did not burn, and both crew members were quickly removed.

Later, a recovery crane picked up the severely damaged Cessna and placed it on a flatbed trailer. The Birddog was taken to the South Vietnamese area. The little aircraft had been ripped in two when the wing separated from the fuselage. When the detachment maintainers went over to inspect the damaged aircraft, most were taken aback by blood that was everywhere in the small cockpit. Clearly visible in the blood-stained cockpit were a gold crucifix and chain. Most likely, it had been a good luck charm. It was not known whether the airmen survived.³¹³

One of the most satisfying SAR efforts occurred on October 27, 1968, when the Spads were able to recover one of their own. Lieutenant Colonel Victor J. Cole, was striking an enemy

³¹² Author’s recollection.

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storage area deep in southern Laos when hit by 37-millimeter antiaircraft gun fire. His left wing was blown off and Cole ejected at approximately 500 feet. The wingman did not see Cole eject and assumed the pilot did not get out and went in with the aircraft. A pall of gloom hung heavy over the Spad squadron, a comrade had gone down: this was too close to home.³¹⁴

It took almost an hour for Cole to get a message out on his survival radio. That single transmission was all that was needed to set a SAR effort into action. Majors Frank Snedden and Harold Pierce, were the first on-scene. Having no idea where Cole landed and not able to locate Cole's parachute in the triple canopy jungle, they made extremely low passes in an attempt to locate the survivor with their UHF directional finding equipment. This had to be accomplished prior to any attempt to suppress ground fire. Several of the low passes had to be aborted due to intense ground fire received from the 37-millimeter antiaircraft gun that had shot down Cole.³¹⁵

Major Snedden, with the help of a Covey FAC, located Cole's parachute. Vietnam era military parachutes were multi-colored, with white, green and orange panels. The high-visibility colors aided aircraft to find a downed aviator. Knowing where a downed airman was made it possible to silence any ground fire. A total of ten fast movers, F-4s and F-100s, were diverted for ground fire suppression. There were ten Spad flights expended their ordnance on gun positions or were held high to be used as air cover for the final pickup attempt.³¹⁶

Later, Major William P. Farnham, Spad 11, the on-scene commander, made several low passes in the area to determine if there might still be some ground fire. Not getting any fire on three passes, he declared the area safe and the Jolly Green helicopters moved in. Spad 11 and 12

³¹⁴ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 9.

³¹⁵ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 9.

³¹⁶ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 10.

laid down a smoke screen with their CBU-22s to cover the hazardous operation. All Spad aircraft rolled in and strafed the area surrounding the hovering Jolly Green to suppress any enemy ground fire or troop movement. The recovery of Colonel Cole was successful. After the rescue and celebrations at Pleiku, Cole was asked what he did while waiting for rescue. He responded “I sat down and finished three crossword puzzles that I had placed in my flight suit pocket prior to the flight.”³¹⁷ Major Dineen recalled the rescue with a smile stating “Cole had stolen my newspaper that I used to complete the puzzles while waiting for a mission.”³¹⁸

The relationship between the Jolly Green unit and the Skyraider detachment quietly grew as each appreciated what the other was doing. The teamwork and comradeship between the two vastly different units was easily observed. The 37th had a large white sign on its revetments. A green giant was depicted standing, holding his arms across his torso and smiling at all who passed. The sign showed the number of satisfied customers: those rescued. On one dark night, three-foot long green footprints suddenly appeared all over DaNang Air Base. They were easy to see because they had been made with florescent paint. It was easy to follow the prints around the base. They went to the dining hall, officers club, and headquarters building. They went to the flight line and “walked” everywhere, sometimes standing on aircraft. When the prints came to the 6th ACS Skyraiders, they came to attention in front of the aircraft. The how and who was never discovered, but those who observed the footprints smile when they recall the trick.³¹⁹

Another example of the comradeship between the two units was the offering of flights on Jolly Green helicopters. Maintainers were offered a ride. The flights were not extra flights, but

³¹⁷ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 10.

³¹⁸ Dineen interview.

³¹⁹ Author’s recollection.