

The Further Adventures of
YOUTHLY PURESOME

by CDR Jack D. Woodul, USNR(Ref), artwork by Carl Snow



If Puresome's first skipper was the remote, Olympian Charles de Gaulle of Tinker Terror Naval Aviation, his XO was its absolutely straight-shooting, no bullshit Fred Astaire.

Puresome had first noticed his future XO while learning the attack trade at the A-4 RAG at NAS Oceana. As one of several commanders going through training on the way back to the fleet after shore duty tours, the XO had blown a couple of mindless junior officers clean out of the water for not tendering proper respect due an elder. Pondering their effectively scorched beautocks, Puresome, a mindless J.O. himself, took note and resolved to be wary and squared-away and possibly avoid their fate. "You mess with the butcher, you get the cleaver!" was the clear message.

BUFFALO BILL

The second notice came during a big, dress-blue inspection of all hands — students and instructors. Most of the students, fresh from the Training Command, were proud enough to have their shiny, new wings on their chests. Some of the instructors and senior students headed back to squadrons wore a shiny trinket or two beneath their wings. And there was a sprinkling of Korean vets with collections of bright medals. But lean CDR Hardass had rows of major gongs that set off his cold, gray warrior eyes under his heavily-braided bridge cover.

"I heard he was in World War II and Korea!" whispered a wide-eyed, brown-bar ensign.

As the stomping and saluting commenced, bagpipe tunes of glory shrilled through Puresome's head. "When I grow up, I wanna be like that!" he thought.

It was not to be the last time.

Eventually, Puresome finished the RAG and the eternal scrutiny of instructors. Gratefully sacking up his flight gear, he humped it over to the next hangar for the big adventure of his first fleet squadron. The Snakes were conspicuous by the evil, fanged sidewinder poking out of their A-4Es' orange rudder and the "E's" with two hash marks on the fuselage. He wasted no time buying an orange ball cap and decorating his helmet in truly obnoxious orange reflective tape with black snakes on the sides. As one of two FNGs to the squadron, Puresome had to temper his wild, happy-puppy enthusiasms around elder god veteran fleet aviators to listen up and respectfully learn.

The very eldest gods, of course, were Rockets One and Two, known as "Skipper" and "XO." Skipper was a remote, fundamental force of nature with the alternating power of sunshine and calm skies or powerful winds and awesome storms in his smallest gesture. When he addressed the assembled officers at AOMs, it was like the Big Guy with the funny hat standing on the balcony addressing the throng in the square below. Puresome had no doubt that Skipper could zorch him with a single glance.

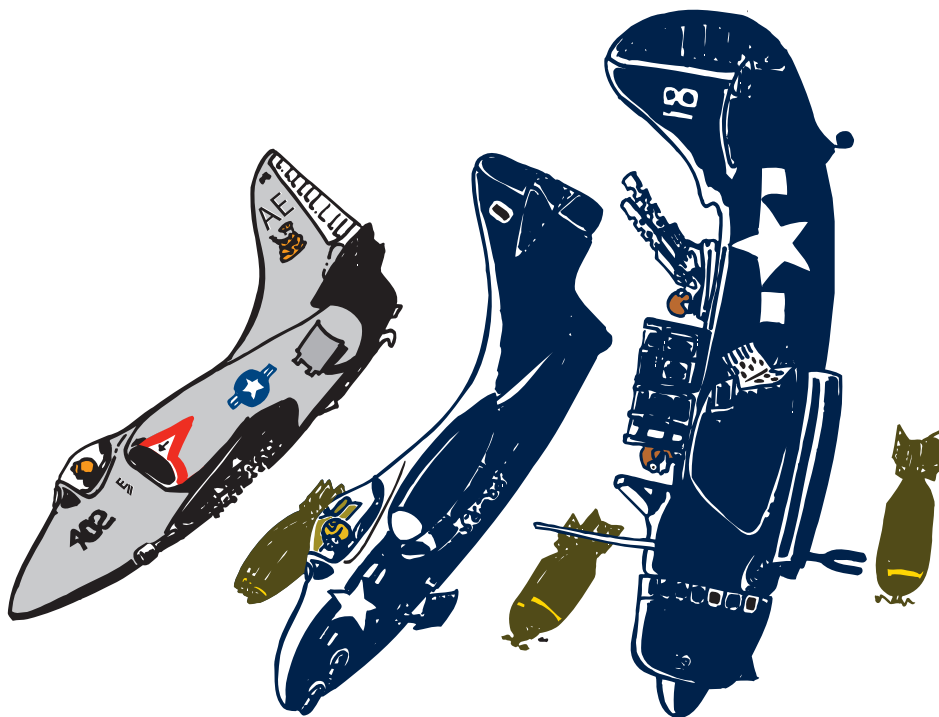
XO, as it turned out, was CDR Hardass from the RAG. XO, Puresome was to learn, translated Skipper's wishes and dealt directly with the troops to turn wishes into action. From Puresome's junior-junior officer perspective, it became obvious that the XO was happy to be back in the fleet. The squadron was his natural element, and his joy in his job showed in his straight-away, effective manner.

XO only shot people, it turned out, that really needed it. And the icing on the cake was that he loved to fly and had more time snagging three-wires and dropping bombs than Puresome had time out of diapers.

"Son," he once told an incredulous Puresome after punching multiple Mk 76 practice bombs through the eyeball of a target, "I've dropped bombs from *Helldivers*, F9Fs and now this A-4. The secret to getting hits is to get as steep as you can, press it till you can't stand it any more, then pickle and pull like a sonuvabitch!" The logic of it all certainly appealed to the scientist in Puresome. And the proof was certainly in the puddin'.

What Puresome really admired was XO's no-nonsense headwork. Puresome had once flown as XO's wingman for a long, low-level flight over most of Robert E. Lee country. Whoostling along in the weeds through the Shenandoah Valley at a hundred feet and five miles a minute, they worked hard, thumbs following the minute elapsed-time hack marks on carefully constructed charts made for tiny cockpits as they searched for obscure checkpoints. They were careful of their timing, just like if they were carrying an actual doomsday device. Finally, the section had accelerated past a hysterically-jinking flock of Chesapeake Bay ducks and simulated a lay-down bomb delivery against the unsuspecting commie tobacco farm that ComFAirNorfolk had designated as their target.

"Yaahoo!" Puresome hollered as the pair climbed up for a nice, relaxing VFR stroll in the park back to home plate. The only problem seemed to be that a mass of thunderstorms had Oceana completely surrounded. When they switched over to Oceana Approach Control for some sort of instrument approach, the frequency was completely clobbered with hysterical, low-fuel-state aircraft demanding to land, now.



"They've got their problems, we've got ours," XO said. "Besides, they are all trying to kill you and you just don't let 'em. You tell them what you are going to do — it's your butt! Aviation is just common sense. If it makes sense, do it. If it doesn't, frabb 'em!" It made perfect sense to Puresome, and he etched it into the hard stone of his attack puke head as Aviation Rule Numero Uno.

When Puresome found out from the Child Bride via the Squadron Wives' Intelligence Network that his squadron was saddling up for Vietnam, he was real glad XO was on the pointy end of the squadron spear.

When USS *Independence* (CVA-62) finally steamed into Subic Bay, *Coral Sea* (CVA-43) and her veteran air group, fresh from the Tonkin Gulf, were already there. The new guys wasted no time in looking up old pals to find out how things really were in the Big War.

"You guys take any hits?" Puresome asked an ex-NAVCAD pal from the training command, who was also flying Scooters.

"Yeah," he nodded gravely, "we've taken some hits." Puresome believed him. "Holy merde!" he thought as his pal went through a litany longer than he cared to hear.

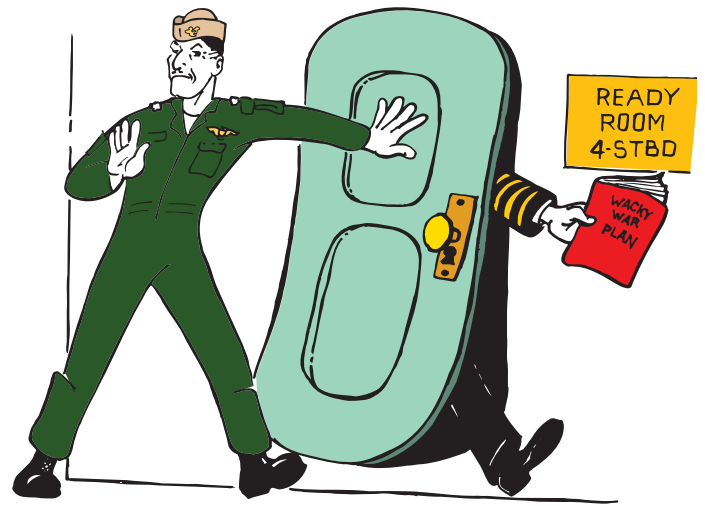
XO asked the same thing from a friend of his whom he later described as having the biggest canugies in Naval Aviation. "Yup," he answered. "And of 22 planes hit, 20 of them were below 2,000 feet. Draw your own conclusions!"

He did, and Skipper issued the policy that nobody went below 3,000 feet when they were up North. Not only that, when some ambitious staff captain showed up aboard ship with a pet theory that the way to win the War was with the peace-time tactic of half-flap, 180-kt., low-and-slow bomb delivery, the squadron pilots were forbidden to talk to him. Puresome didn't realize it then, but Skipper, counseled by XO, saved lots of their young butts by not letting ambitious bastards kill them with stupid schemes designed to further their careers.

So, XO was fighting his third war. He had been a child ensign in the last part of WW II and had gotten a major gong for dropping a bomb on the battleship *Yamato* during the Battle of the Philippine Sea. Seemed that everybody knew the war was almost over and nobody much wanted to fly, so ... launch the ensign! Later, after they had sunk the ship and the powers that be were draping awards on everybody, the heavies were all asking, "How'd an ensign get in on this?"

"The Navy understands about sinking a ship," XO explained. "You can bomb a land target all day — no big deal. But sink a ship and here come the goodies!"

The intelligence pukers from the ship's Integrated Operational Intelligence Center (IOIC) presented him with a different kind of goodie for performance above and beyond the call of duty during warm-up flights in-country South Vietnam against the deadly water buffalo. According to a forward air controller, the bad guys in the black pajamas were using the beasts to further their evil plans, and would they please hose them with 20-mike mike? XO was happy to oblige, and Puresome got to help. The FAC's damage report included some six WBs KBA (killed by air), which XO dutifully reported to the squadron's air intelligence officer, who passed it along to Mr. Robert Strange MacNamara's computers. This important war effort was acknowledged by IOIC, which awarded XO a small monkeypod water buffalo on a stand with a brass plaque — "The Buffalo Bill Award." XO was, of course, touched.



Nonetheless, his first Alpha Strike on North Vietnam impressed him greatly. Looking down at clusters of radar-guided 57mm AAA sparkling up at him prompted him to tell Skipper, "I think we'd better dye our flight suits green!"

Attacks Up North also prompted him to try to shake up the awards system. It had been prescribed before the air wing got in the war zone that medals would be awarded on the basis of rank. COs and XOs, along with the odd division leader, would get the DFC while JOs would get the Air Medal and the Green Weenie (the Navy Commendation Medal) with a Combat "V."

"Hell," XO explained, "I've been there! Flak for me in WW II wasn't anything. In Korea, there was the occasional flak trap, but that wasn't the usual thing. North Vietnam is worse than anything I've seen, and we've got young guys routinely flying up there all the time and not getting squat!"

So, in typical fashion, he wrote a letter and sent it up through the chain of command. It caused quite a stir and even may have helped change things a little. The important thing was that the young guys knew the troops were being looked out for.

Puresome was too young and dumb to really appreciate his squadron leadership at the time. But during the following years of reading accounts of other air wings in Vietnam, he came to understand that the reason his air wing didn't have the nickname "Bloody" stuck in front of it was because the squadron leadership stuck their necks out to protect their pilots from themselves, the self-serving and the merely stupid.

At a squadron reunion 25 years later, Puresome stood with a cold beer in his hand and toasted Skipper and XO, thanking them for watching out for them all. The two were embarrassed by the applause. "Ah, hell!" said Buffalo Bill, "we just did the best we could."

Everybody knew it was more than enough.