


# Scooter MEMORIES

## Flying the A-4 Skyhawk in Vietnam

BY MARVIN QUAID, COMMANDER, U.S. NAVY (RET.) AND STEPHEN GRAY, LIEUTENANT, U.S. NAVY (RET.)  
AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH

**A**lthough the Phantoms, Spads, and Thuds of the Vietnam War seem to get all the glory, the venerable little Scooter, the Douglas A-4 Skyhawk, carried more than its share of the fight to the enemy. It was an airplane that packed more fight per pound into its diminutive airframe and was universally adored by its pilots. The stories of both the airplane and its pilots deserve telling. So, let us tell you one:







“Looking back on my naval career, I was the luckiest commanding officer in the world. Leading these men into combat was a real kick. Whenever I think of it, I am overcome with a sense of nostalgia

and camaraderie. There are few things in life that can compare to the life of a carrier aviator.”  
—Marvin “Marv” Quaid, Commander, U.S. Navy (Ret.), March 2009

Launch crews on the USS Independence hook up an A-4 on the catapult for a mission in March 1968. At the time, the Scooter was one of the Navy's top attack aircraft in the Vietnam War. (Photo by Robert Bolinder via Warren Thompson).



## From props to jets

**MARVIN QUAID:** I was too young to join the fight during WW II and had to wait until 1948 when I finally made it to preflight in Pensacola as a midshipman in the United States Navy. After surviving the rigors of SNJ training, I wound up at the controls of a F4U Corsair. The Corsair was not only a great airplane to fly, it was also a delight to bomb and shoot guns with. But it couldn't compare to the Douglas Skyraider. Eventually, I wound up flying Skyraiders for a living in a far-off place called Korea.



**Above:** Before Marv Quaid went into jets, he flew the behemoth Skyraider on dive-bombing missions over North Korea. (Photo courtesy of author)

**Below:** Maintenance crews ready another A-4 to be brought up to the flight deck on the USS *Ranger*. Most all required maintenance was done below on the hangar deck. It was assigned to VA-93 on that cruise. (Photo by Paul Sellers via Warren Thompson)

The Skyraider was simply a marvelous airplane to fly and fight with—too bad we didn't

have them ready for WW II. It was faster than its predecessors, carried a bigger load, and could dive straight down on target all day long if you wanted. It was as strong as an ox with a big reliable radial engine up front. It landed aboard a carrier as stable as could be and had a large “seeking” hook that seemed to snatch the wire in mid-air. Most of the time, our squadron, VA-195 Dambusters, carried three 2,000-pound bombs with some rockets on the outer wings' stations. Thankfully, the winds howling off the Sea of Ja-

pan were pretty strong as we deck launched from our carrier USS *Princeton* and went looking for targets in North Korea.

After my second Korean cruise, I returned to Pensacola and became a flight instructor in SNJs. I did that for a couple of years and then became the catapult officer on USS *Yorktown* for a few more years before returning to school and finishing my education. When I returned to the fleet, I was told that if I wanted to remain an attack pilot I had to get into jets. I started out in the North American FJ-4 Fury and eventually wound up back in the thick of things in 1967 at the controls of the Douglas A-4 Skyhawk. I headed back out to the fleet and eventually became the XO (executive officer) of VA-212. One mission that clearly sticks out in my mind was in the spring of 1967.

## One mission, two views

**STEPHEN GRAY:** The USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA-31) had just returned to Yankee Station from a 10-day break in operations at Cubi Point, P.I. With Air Wing 21 embarked, the “Bonnie Dick” had begun combat operations in support of The Republic of South Vietnam in late February 1967 with VA-212 Rampant Raiders, VA-215 Barn Owls, and VA-76 Spirits, making up the attack portion of the air wing. VA-212 was equipped with the A-4E model of the Skyhawk, VA-76 had the older, less powerful A-4C, and VA-215 was one of the last “Spad” squadrons flying the A-1J Skyraider. The winter monsoon that engulfed most of North Vietnam from October until late March had prevented intense bombing of northern targets since low clouds, rain, and fog did not provide the visual conditions necessary to execute our normal dive-bomb deliveries. Our missions up to now had consisted almost entirely of interdiction strikes to impede the flow of war material from North Vietnam to the Viet Cong guerrillas in South Vietnam. When we first arrived on Yankee Station, there was a no-bombing restricted area 30 miles around Hanoi, and 15 miles around Haiphong. That was about to change.

Now, in mid April, the winter monsoon was finally releasing its IFR grip on the North. A new “Alpha” list of desired targets had been released by the Johnson war planners to Seventh Fleet, and all the carriers were busy planning Alpha Strikes. Today's strikes on targets around Haiphong promised much heavier anti-aircraft defense than we had seen up to now. All three carriers were conducting sequential raids on their targets with *Bon Homme Richard* first in on the morning strike, and last in on the afternoon mission.

The morning strike recovered with many battle-damaged airplanes and the grim news that VA-76 pilot Charles Stackhouse had been downed by a MiG-19 that had lifted off Cat Bi Airfield just South of Haiphong and squirted an Atoll heat-







VA-55 did a cruise on the USS Hancock in 1972 while flying the A-4F models. This one is ready to taxi up to the cat when the blast shield is lowered. Loaded with missiles, this Scooter was probably clearing the way for the main attack group. (Photo by Ted West via Warren Thompson)

seeking missile right into Charlie's Skyhawk. The combat veterans from the previous year's cruise were telling all us nuggets on our first combat cruise that we were about to "see the elephant" and that once this mission was over, we would have seen it all.

The fear I always felt before each mission was subsiding as I busied myself preflighting and preparing for launch on the afternoon strike. VA-212's A-4Es were configured with a single centerline 400-gallon drop, with TERS (triple ejector racks) on stations two and four. Our standard bomb load was two Mk 81 (250-pound) iron bombs on the outboard stations, one and five, and three Mk 82s on each TER for a total of six 82s and two 81s. If you were lucky enough to man airplanes with your ordnance already loaded, you got to preflight the bombs, making sure they were securely clipped into the racks and the arming wires were properly run through the little propellers secured with Fahn stock clips. You sure didn't want to look out and see one of your bombs without its little propeller in flight! That would mean the little propeller had spun off and armed the fuse. The jolt of the ejector foot driving the bomb away from the rack on release would likely cause it to explode, ending your brief time on this earth.

Four ice cream cone-shaped antennas—two under the nose radar dome and two either side of the tailhook retract pad—provided receive and transmit from the ALQ-51 deception jammer, two black boxes which were supposed to

fool enemy AAA and SAM radars into believing your airplane wasn't where it really was. The only way to know if the unit was operating was a small, green, light on the instrument panel, the pilot just had to accept on faith that the unit was doing what it was supposed to do. The ALQ-51 consisted of two suitcase-sized boxes, which had been installed in the gun can bay under the cockpit floor. This left no room for the 20mm cannon ammo cans, so a chute was installed on either side of the gun bay, giving you 20 rounds per gun. One very short squirt and you were out of beer as far as your cannon were concerned.

To save weight, the A-4 didn't have a battery, so deck edge power was only used for engine starting. Until the engine was running at idle, and the engine-driven generator was providing power, your electronics were dead. As soon as my engine was stabilized at idle, the radio and other avionics came to life. Suddenly, the radio guard channel blared out; "HALLMARK, HALLMARK, BRAVO FOXTROT TWO, PETUNIA FOUR TWO," and then a date/time group. Hallmark was the SAM code word of the day, and Bravo Foxtrot Two was the map square containing the



Stephen Gray strikes a pose before mounting his A-4 Skyhawk for another trip over North Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of author)



Haiphong area. Petunia Four Two was an EC-121 Super Constellation radar plane orbiting out in the Gulf of Tonkin picking up enemy radar emissions. Taxiing up to the Cat again, "HALLMARK, HALLMARK, BRAVO FOXTROT TWO." All during launch, join up, and establishing the alpha strike formation, every few seconds, "HALLMARK, HALLMARK."

The strike was led by VA-212's XO, Cdr. Marvin Quaid. VA-212's radio call sign was "Flying Eagle." Finally Petunia called, "Flying Eagle Leader, Petunia, be aware your entire target area is Hallmark!" Quaid simply responded; "Eagle Lead, rog, Petunia."

### Feet dry

**MARVIN QUAID:** I guess you could say our squadron drew the short straw for the mission on April 25. I prepared to lead them on the third and final attack of the day to the target, which was an

**STEPHEN GRAY:** Being the most junior pilot in the air wing, I was in my usual place as "Eagle Two" in the formation. Naval tradition had the most junior pilot flying wing on the most senior, so I always flew with CAG, the Skipper, the XO, admin, and ops officers. Since we were the last strike group inbound, everyone in North Vietnam was at GQ and really pissed off. I didn't have long to think about all this, we were feet dry and the call came to check switches. Master arm on, station switches on, guns charged, pickle button now hot, don't touch until ready! The fighters and Iron Hands split off and began climbing to about angels twenty. Our tactics at this point were to run into the target area at about 3,500 feet AGL, and 450 knots so that the J-65 powered C models could keep up, pop up to about 7,000, do a 30-degree bomb run with a 4,000-foot release, and out by 3,000. These tactics were the result of some bad gauge concerning the enemy's weapon capabilities. The intensity of the ground fire below 3,000 was real, so the three ground floor was valid. Consequently, Cdr. Quaid led us in at 3,500 feet."

### SAMs everywhere

**STEPHEN GRAY:** The initial point for the pullup was a prominent railroad bridge, and I picked it up even while flying wing. Just as we reached the bridge, the SAM threat receiver on the glare shield started singing its warning song. The red SAM light was flashing. "Eagle Two's got a SAM light," I bleated over the radio. The climb to 7,000 seemed to take forever! I remember how relieved I was when Quaid finally rolled over and started the run. Anxious to get the nose into the dive and avoid the SAM, not having any idea of its location, I pulled inside Quaid's turn and ended up damn near in parade position on him. We were supposed to separate far enough to make individual runs at the target and wheel around

past Lead's run in line to avoid eating the flak which missed him. Now frantically scanning for the target, finding it, low buildings, piper on the first row, 4,000 feet, stabbing the bomb pickle four times, feeling the little airplane buck and jump as the bombs came off.

Suddenly, from right to left, a bright orange flash, Quaid's airplane disappeared in the fireball, and there, directly on my nose, spun the still-burning rocket motor of the SAM. Reflexively, I yanked back on the stick to miss the rocket motor and flash through the smoke and debris field from the explosion. Quaid's airplane was a dim



Taken from Marv Quaid's tail-end Charlie on the April 25th raid, the orange smoke is from the SAM and the white-colored smoke is from Marv's A-4 being hit as he left the area. (Photo courtesy of author)

ammunition storage area at Cat Bi Airfield just outside the city of Haiphong. The area was heavily defended by SAMs, anti-aircraft guns, and anyone capable of aiming a rifle skyward. At the time, we treated the SAMs that were shot at us like another bullet and just kept on going. We later learned that wasn't such a smart idea, but it's how we fought them at the time. I set my engine rpm to 92.5% for the entire attack; that way, my wingman have a bit of speed to play with. I led our flight over the beach and by the sound of Petunia Four Two's SAM warnings, I knew it was going to be a wild ride.



THE DOUGLAS SKYHAWKS HAD GOT THEIR DRIVERS HOME. IF IT WASN'T SHOT IN THE ENGINE, OR SET ON FIRE, THE LITTLE A-4 WOULD KEEP ON FLYING!



The WHF A-4C "Scooter" is painted to represent BuNo 148609, a Skyhawk flown by LCDR Ted "T.R." Swartz of VA-76, operating from the aircraft carrier USS Bon Homme Richard (CVA-31) during the Vietnam War. On May 1, 1967, LCDR Swartz downed a MIG-17 over North Vietnam with an unguided ZUNI rocket. This was the only air-to-air kill by a Skyhawk during the Vietnam War. (Photo by Luigino Callaro)



silhouette of an A-4 in a cloud of fuel and vapor streaming from many holes in wings and fuselage. I yelled, "Eagle Lead, you're hit, head for the beach!"

**MARVIN QUAID:** When we got close to the target area, I did a pop and roll to the right with everyone behind me. The North Vietnamese were shooting SAMs at us like there was no tomorrow. I got the target centered and dropped my bombs. As I pulled out, I had a missile at my six o'clock. I looked over my left shoulder and nothing was there. I looked right and bingo—it zoomed past me and exploded right in front of my Scooter. I flew through the shrapnel cloud and all my electrics died. The engine was still running and my flight controls were working so I left everything alone. I don't dare touch the power and head for the water. The chaos was far from over as another Skyhawk — Eagle Six — took a direct hit.

Al Crebo's rudderless Scooter after being hit by a SAM on April 25th. Heavily damaged and out of options, he eventually had to bail out of the stricken jet. (Photo courtesy of author)



**WE ALL STARED AT HIS SKYHAWK IN AWE AND WONDER ... FULLY HALF OF THE VERTICAL STABILIZER WAS GONE. FOOTBALL- AND BASKETBALL-SIZED HOLES ALLOWED US TO SEE THROUGH THE TAILPIPE IN SEVERAL PLACES.**

**STEPHEN GRAY:** I pulled up alongside as Quaid's Skyhawk was steadily losing speed and altitude. Quaid appeared slumped forward in the cockpit. "Oh sh-t, he's dead," I thought. Bright yellow flashes caught my eye off to our left. There was a six-gun heavy AA site in a revetment on the end of a long jetty extending out from the mouth of Haiphong harbor, pounding away at us. We passed by at about 450 knots and 2,000 feet. Over the cacophony of chatter on the radio, a frantic call registered — "Eagle Six, I'm hit and

I'm losing control!" The threat receiver and SAM light came to life again with a high warble, and I looked right in time to see another SAM at the limit of its range splash into the bay behind us and explode in a bright orange cloud. The ram-air turbine (RAT) popped out of the right side of Quaid's A-4, below the cockpit, and Quaid said something garbled. "Eagle Lead, do you know you're hit?" I called in my addled state.

"DO I KNOW I'M HIT!" came back the irate answer. "Yeah, how bad is it?" We were safely out over the gulf now, and I slowly crossed under Quaid's airplane to assess the damage. There were multiple holes in the wings and fuselage with fuel still leaking. He obviously only had fuselage fuel left, and the wing tanks had many holes in them. I relayed the damage report and Quaid confirmed he had about 1,100 pounds of fuel remaining.

## Long ride home

**MARVIN QUAID:** I got my RAT out and I had electrical power so things were better except for the fact that I didn't have any elevator trim—zero, zip, none. Our flight of Skyhawks regrouped as we headed for the ship. Eagle Six was a sight to behold—his rudder was completely gone, most of his inspection panels were open and there was smoke trailing out of his twisted fuselage. What was most amazing was that the A-4 was still flying.

**STEPHEN GRAY:** All the elements of the strike group were now feet wet and we headed back down the gulf towards home. Eagle Six was Lt.(jg) Alan R. Crebo. We all stared at his Skyhawk in awe and wonder as we all joined on him. Fully half of the vertical stabilizer was gone. Football- and basketball-sized holes allowed us to see through the tailpipe in several places. Someone pointed out that viewed from dead astern, the horizontal stabilizer was twisted about three degrees out of alignment

with the trailing edge of the wing. He was flying with the hydraulic boost package disconnected and had very limited maneuverability, so we all flew on him.

Al Crebo was tail-end Charlie in the bomb stack. He reached the top of the pop-up and hung at about 220 knots waiting for sufficient separation from Eagle Five before rolling in. He never saw the SA-2 that delivered a direct hit on his airplane. The force of the hit and explosion rolled Al on his back. He recovered with the nose pointed at the target, so he completed his run. As



he began his pull out, the badly wounded Skyhawk made an uncommanded roll inverted over the target. At that point he made the "Eagle Six hit and losing control" call. Al reached under the glare shield and yanked the flight control boost disconnect handle, and flew the little A-4 upright on manual flight controls. Now, NATOPS stated that before disconnecting the hydraulic flight controls, one should be dirty, below 200 knots, and lined up with the landing runway. The A-4C even had an extendable stick to give the pilot more leverage when flying on cables and pulleys with no power steering. Al was doing about 450 knots when he disconnected and rolled upright. He said he didn't remember the airplane being hard to fly at all!

## Out of options

**STEPHEN GRAY:** Approaching the "Bonnie Dick," Al decided to see if he could control the airplane well enough to attempt a landing. His constant speed (CSD) electrical power generator had thrown in the towel, and the only instruments he had were pressure operated, i.e. airspeed, altitude, turn & bank, so he had no idea what was his fuel state. He extended the landing gear and the nose gear and tail hook came down, but the main mounts remained jammed in the wing due to buckled plates. He flew up the starboard side of the ship at between 3-4,000 feet and ejected safely. Al was promptly picked up by the plane guard helo. Cdr. Quaid called the ball telling the LSO, "I'm the guy with nothing," referring to all the systems he had lost and indicating that he better make it aboard this pass.

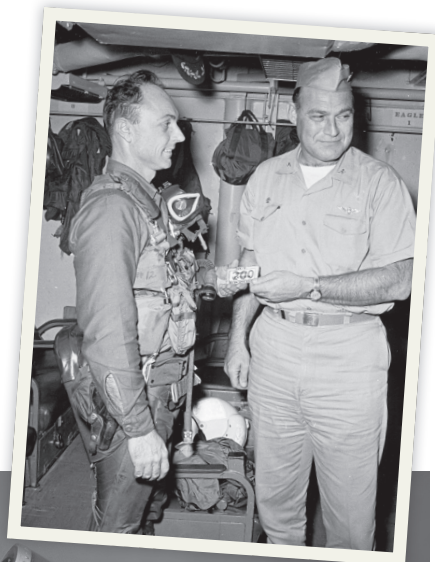
**MARVIN QUAID:** Thankfully, it was a beautiful calm day with gentle winds. I came in last because I certainly didn't want to foul the flight deck and keep the other guys in the air so I landed last just in case. I had no elevator trim and when I reduced the power to 130 knots, my nose dropped violently. I passed over the round down and the LSO said, "Land it, Boss!" I relaxed a bit, came in; hit the flight deck liked a flipped egg—splat! I caught the wire and the troops swear I bent the axles on the A-4.

That Haiphong mission was a watershed mission with two tactical changes. First, the fighters followed us wherever we went after that. We lost

Charles because the thinking was, "Why have the fighters fly through such flak when they will be so close off shore?" Bad stuff. My old classmate Paul Speer was CO of VF-211, an F-8 squadron, and he said, "From now on, I will be at your six."

The other thing we did was we quit saying that a SAM was just another bullet; we learned to dogfight them instead and win!

**STEPHEN GRAY:** We salvaged Quaid's airplane and it flew again on later missions. The Douglas Skyhawks had got their drivers home. If it wasn't shot in the engine, or set on fire, the little A-4 would keep on flying! Post-strike intelligence



indicated that the North Vietnamese had fired over 30 SAMs at us that day. Two weeks later, the North Vietnamese released a propaganda photo of Charlie Stackhouse, arm in a sling, being marched down the streets of Hanoi.

That was just a prelude of things to come in the summer of '67. †

**Above:** Marv Quaid is all smiles after completing another successful A-4 mission.

**Inset:** Marv Quaid is congratulated after making his 200th carrier landing—this one aboard the USS *Bon Homme Richard*. Marv ended up with over 700 carrier landings during his Navy flying days. (Photos courtesy of author)

*Want to learn more about VA-212 Rampant Raiders? Be sure to read Stephen Gray's book, Rampant Raider: An A-4 Skyhawk Pilot In Vietnam.*