

Midway Magic

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Excerpt:

Dr. Donald Vance rubbed his pounding temples. The number of USS Midway crew needing a psychiatrist had become overwhelming. A recommendation that a psychiatrist spend some time aboard Midway had been denied. As a result, the ship's doctors found themselves playing the roles of father confessor, psychiatrist, big brother, and counselor as men fought to overcome growing demons (on their 1972 Vietnam combat deployment).



As one of Midway's ship's doctors, Vance often set his stethoscope aside to have a heart-to-heart talk with a young Midway sailor who might be homesick, lonely, or simply scared of not surviving. When a sailor paid a visit to Vance, the young doctor sat so that a large poster of a drill instructor, yelling into the face of a petrified recruit, was visible over Vance's shoulder. The caption read, "We didn't promise you a rose garden." It was a message Vance reinforced with his visitors. Vance often reminded the 19-year-old sitting across from him that the young man had signed a contract, was duty-bound to honor it, and someday would look back on its fulfillment with a measure of pride.

Later, some of those private talks haunted Vance at 0200 when he tried to sleep.

Ray "Buzzy Donnelly" had been a polite and stellar athlete at Villanova University who once shared an American swimming medley relay record. He was the kind of pilot who crouched under an aircraft on the hangar deck to hand wrenches to a mechanic working on a fuel drop tank. He made rounds through the aircraft intermediate maintenance department, explaining that day's flight operations or periodically showing mechanics the photos taken on reconnaissance missions. He wanted everyone to know how they helped meet Midway's mission.

One day Ray Donnelly and Mike McCormick climbed aboard their Intruder for another mission over Vietnam. They knew they would have to fly through small-automatic weapons fire by men unseen in the jungle below. Sometimes a single bullet found a hydraulic system knuckle that knocked a sophisticated F-4 Phantom out of the sky. Other times pilots flinched at the *brrrppp* of bullets that harmlessly pierced the length of their fuselage as they continued toward their target.

As Donnelly and McCormick prepared to attack their assigned target, a handful of bullet thudded into the Intruder's nose. Before either could react, a few found the canopy. Donnelly seemed to jump in his seat when they found his neck and head.

Mike McCormick was horrified. His canopy shattered and his buddy covered in blood, McCormick flew as fast as he could back to Midway, screaming into his headset that Donnelly was badly hurt. The wind and decompression from the gaping canopy swirled Donnelly's blood throughout the cockpit. McCormick disarmed the ejection system so that he couldn't accidentally eject from the stricken aircraft. Helpless to stem the flow of blood, the most he could do was get Donnelly back to Midway before Donnelly bled to death.

Onboard, Donald Vance knew high might have only seconds to save Donnelly's life, if McCormick made it back aboard. "Get me a forklift and put a pallet on it! Now! You, get us up against that Intruder before he comes to a stop. You, get up here with me and hang on. No matter what you see inside that cockpit, I want you to secure the ejection seat when we get to the canopy. Ignore what you see or smell. Secure the cockpit!"

The doctor's emergency team stood ready as McCormick vectored toward Midway. As onlookers held their breaths and the LSO coached him down, McCormick somehow brought his plane aboard in a haze of gore and grizzle. In seconds Vance and his team were at Donnelly's side. Cockpit systems were secured while Vance tended to Donnelly. It was too late. Too much blood had been lost. Donnelly was dead from a few bullets on their way up from the jungle toward the clouds.



Gently, Donnelly was lifted out of the plane. McCormick climbed out white with shock. Later the aircraft was taken below to the hangar deck to a knot of hushed men. It fell to Petty Officer John Mscisz and his five-man crew to clean up the horror. Blood and tissue had been sprayed and sucked into every crevice. Seats, flight instruments, and access panels were taken out of the aircraft in order to clean it. Mscisz and his team took turns on the gruesome detail. Frequently they stopped and sat on a wing or took a walk across the hangar deck to collect their thoughts and settle stomachs. Weeks later, Mscisz marveled when another bullet-riddled plane returned from a combat mission. He counted 97 holes from one end of the aircraft to the other. No serious damage was done, and the flight crew returned unharmed.

Meanwhile, the sight of his navigator's blood spewed across his cockpit haunted McCormick. He had seen enough and decided to quit flying. Maybe that would end his nightmares. Donald Vance sat McCormick down for a long talk. They talked about life and death, perspective and purpose. In time, McCormick decided to keep flying. He rejoined the endless cycles of launches and recoveries, daring fate by flying through enemy fire as the peace talks dragged on.

Six months later, another two-man Intruder crew headed for a heavily-forested North Vietnam valley dotted with surface-to-air missile sites. The mission schedule was tight. The Intruder had only seconds to spare in suppressing the SAM fire before the massive B-52 bombers arrived. As the Intruder approached the target,

the dense cloud cover began to glow. More than a dozen SAMs rose to meet the American attackers. Undeterred, the bombers pounded the target, turned, and headed for their base. The Intruder also turned toward the Tonkin Gulf and Midway. It never arrived.

The Intruder's wingman, circling off the coast waiting for the missing aircraft to join up, had heard nothing. No one had seen it hit by enemy fire. He retraced his inbound route and searched the jungle canopy for any sign of a ground fire than indicated a crash. Despite the lack of a single hopeful clue, search teams flew hard for four days. Nothing was found. The Intruder had disappeared without a trace.

The Intruder's two-man crew was listed as mission in action. One was Robert Alan Clark, a likable and funny navigator who hailed from North Hollywood, California. Friends said he left behind a son he never saw. The pilot was Michael Timothy McCormick, the aviator who had decided to keep flying. Long after the war had become a marathon of survival, McCormick had kept flying—right up to the moment he was show down, only 17 days before the SAM sites fell silent and peace was declared in Vietnam.