

The Purple Bullet Legend

by L.J. "Jack" Stevenson, LCDR USN (ret) AKA Speedo

This isn't so much a tale of high-risk aviation, as it is an anecdote on how to get the result needed from a training situation that isn't going quite right. (I've omitted the names to protect the various nefarious reputations.)

At VQ-I in the early 1970s, before each deployment to Danang, as pilot and aircraft commander, I always required a successful crew bailout drill utilizing the plane we were deploying. We ran the drill while parked in the hangar, exiting onto mattresses placed under the lower escape door/chute.

As luck would have it, we were deploying this particular time without our normal crew. Although this was to be the usual Tonkin Gulf and other places patrol assignment, the crew included a fresh new 0-1 ensign. He had been included in order to prepare him, via real-time operations, to become an evaluator and eventually supervise his own back-end crew. This run was to be sort of a graduation-type thing prior to him getting out on his own.

After two full-dress attempts, the time between the bailout order and getting all seven crew members out of the bird was entirely too slow. The one person who could not move fast enough was the new ensign. He just seemed to get all tied up in an "assholes and elbows" situation whenever he tried to slide out of the bird.

I called a halt, went over to my flight gear, and retrieved my shoulder-holstered, empty .38 revolver with a bandoleer full of purple-tipped tracers. I held up the bandoleer and asked the ensign if he knew the significance of having purple-tipped bullets. He opined that he did not. I then described the bullets, informing him they had been especially made for me and that the tips contained a combination of krait and cobra venom. The reason for this, I added, was so the bullets guaranteed a quick kill of the intended target.

I asked if he knew why I was showing him all of this stuff. He didn't know. I then told him that since I would be the last person to leave the aircraft, this was my guarantee that no one would prevent or slow down my egress. He still didn't get it.

I pointedly told him it was my intent to shoot anyone who got in my way. He became very indignant, expressing his belief this was not the proper way to do things. I said this was the way it was done in the real world and the power of an aircraft commander was right up there with the commanding officer of a unit. I also very firmly informed him of how much I valued a quick, successful bailout drill.

We returned to the plane, tried again, and got two run-throughs that successfully passed my minimum requirements for the drill. We then deployed without further incident.

VQ-1 operated with around a thousand people at that time. Apparently the ensign began to ask around, and although none of the crew or officers he spoke with was aware of the drill incident, they backed up the story. Not a single Black Bat compromised the scam. Actually, everyone knew we had been using the purple rounds since the NVA and VC had begun trying to suck in rescue helos by using our survival gear (which had previously included red tracers) and pretending to be downed airmen.

The tale doesn't quite end here—in 1971, we'd returned from a particularly bad run over Laos—bad because on a "black" track where there was to be no triple A, we'd encountered a whole gaggle of stuff trying to get us. (It was during the days when we wondered why so many of our tracks seemed to be known in advance by the bad guys.) Anyway, I found myself vastly in need of some self-prescribed appropriate libation. (Unfortunately, no flight surgeon had been forthcoming with any free booze.)

My NAV, EVAL, and I had made our way to the Bat Nest and were just getting started with our liquid refreshment, when we happened to overhear a couple of A4 drivers discussing something about a "crazy" guy

who eliminated non-performing crew members by shooting them with poisonous purple-tipped bullets. The NAV was about to get with it with these two gents, but I held up a hand and we continued to listen.

It seems our drill story had made the rounds to the point that I was now “certifiably insane” and not to be messed with, especially on a dark night.

At this point, I ambled over to the pair and asked if they were being taken care of satisfactorily at our club. It was a tradition there that if a plane was diverted to Danang, we provided the crew a first round on the house. (The Bat Nest was a work in progress that every deployed C-121, P-3, and/or A-3 crew tried to contribute to with some kind of repair and/or improvement. Like the time we found that C-4 could start charcoal better than av gas. You know, lifestyle improvements)

The visitors reported everything was fine and thanked me for the generosity. I then asked them if they had ever met this crazy guy we’d overheard them discussing. Neither had.

I next revealed that I was that person. Both just stared at me with disbelief.

I offered, “If you don’t believe me, ask those two men over there.” My guys confirmed my claim, and the two were dumbfounded. As I turned to go, one managed to ask how many crewmen I’d offed.

With a shrug, I nonchalantly responded, “I’ve lost count.”

Fond memories of a bad war attended by many great fellow warriors. It was the only one we had, so I think we made the best of it.—L.J. “Jack” Stevenson, LCDR USN (ret) AKA Speedo