



### **BRAVE WILLY HACKETT**

The following story was written one night not long ago by Susan, my wife of 44 years, and is based on a lot of fact. I had to share it with the other great folks that flew in, and worked so hard to keep our great airplanes in the air. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

Ron Dowdy (Pilot, 309<sup>th</sup>/311<sup>th</sup> , Phan Rang, Oct 69- Sept 70)

Willy Hackett was feeling blue. He was a long way from home in a country called Viet Nam. Not only was he a long way from home, but he was having a hard time making friends. You see, Willy was an airplane called a C-123. He was not bright and shiny; he did not streak across the sky at supersonic speeds, and he was not very big and macho. None of the other airplanes paid any attention to Willy because they thought that he was outdated and useless. After all, he had been designed as a glider in World War II, and that was a long time ago. Granted, someone had decided to give him two new jets to go with his two old propellers. With the added power that these jets gave the little airplane, he was able to fly into even the most rugged and isolated parts of Viet Nam where soldiers were depending on him for food and supplies. They called him a “Provider”.

The more important airplanes just laughed at this. “That’s work for trucks and pack animals to do,” they scoffed. “Airplanes should be flashy and showy.”

Willy did have a good friend, however. The young lieutenant who flew Willy was always so happy to see him and he told Willy every day how much he loved to fly him. Before each flight, Lieutenant Ron would talk to Willy and tell him how important this day’s mission would be to the soldiers who desperately needed the supplies they were bringing. Willy grew to like this young lieutenant and tried very hard to please him and keep him safe. After all, the lieutenant had a wife and little girl that were counting the days until they would see him again. Lieutenant Ron had told him this and had shown him their picture.

Sometimes Lieutenant Ron would fly Willy into bases in the mountains where they might have to dodge bullets or rockets. These flights were often scary because sometimes a bullet hit Willy as he was taking

off or landing. Then he was really glad that someone had thought to give him his new jets so that he could keep on flying. He was beginning to feel important and happy about what he was doing, even if the newer airplanes did not feel that he was important.

One day, Lieutenant Ron had to fly Willy into a mountain village where people were trying to leave before some Viet Cong soldiers invaded and destroyed their homes and killed their families. A small boy was crying because he had been separated from his parents. Lieutenant Ron found out that the family had been taken to Saigon with another group. The little boy was afraid to get on the plane. Lieutenant Ron told the little boy that the airplane's name was Willy Hackett. You can see his initials, WH, on the back of his tail," the Lieutenant explained. "Willy will get you safely to where your family is waiting for you." The little boy still looked scared, but he liked the way Willy looked, and so he climbed aboard.

When Willy landed at Saigon, the little boy saw his parents on the ground waiting for him and ran to hug them. Then he took them over to see Willy. The little boy said, "Thanks, Willy Hackett" and he hugged his tire. Willy burst with happiness. How many other planes got hugs from little boys.

When the war was over, Willy heard that he would be put to rest in a "graveyard." He did not like this very much. Then one day, a group of people came to see Willy. They looked him over and seemed to like him. He was flown to a place called "Disney World." His bullet holes were fixed and he was given a new paint job. Then he was placed in the middle of a busy location where many people came to see him. Although he missed the excitement of his days of flying all over the country, he was happy to see all of the happy families with their children stopping by to look at him.

One day a man with five small children stopped to see him. The man said, "Look at you, Willy Hackett!! You've become quite a star." Then Willy knew who the man was. Although he didn't look quite like the Lieutenant Ron that Willy remembered from Viet Nam, Willy would know that voice anywhere. Willy was bursting with happiness and wished that he and Lieutenant Ron could go for a ride just like in the old days. Now, which one of the children was Lieutenant Ron's little girl?

"Willy, these are my five grandchildren," Lieutenant Ron told Willy. My little girl has grown up. I also had a little boy who is grown up, too. These are their children. The children wanted to see you because of the stories I have told them about our adventures in Viet Nam. Thank you Brave Willy Hackett. We are all here because of you."

"We love you Willy Hackett," called the children, and they all hugged his tires.

It looked like a tear slid down Willy's old face.

---

Note from an old "combat pilot"; There is a special feeling or bond, that may even be love, that develops between a pilot and the aircraft that he has flown in combat-especially when they have "taken hits" many times and flown again. If you doubt this statement, ask one of the "old guys" that have been there and watch those old "steely eyes" ..... Maybe that feeling is just extreme gratitude for a job well done. Thanks Willy! And Susan too!