

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

A Gift of Life

Over the Gulf of Tonkin, Capt. Steve Bennett made a fateful decision to save the life of his back-seater.

By 1969 public and congressional support for US involvement in Vietnam had dwindled to a point where withdrawal of our 543,400 troops was inevitable. The US had suffered more than 200,000 combat and related casualties. Several attempts to negotiate a cease-fire with North Vietnam had failed. Withdrawal began in July 1969, the ground fighting being turned over as rapidly as possible to South Vietnam. The South's air force, VNAF, had been expanded but was still not highly capable by the end of 1972 and needed much help from USAF and Navy aviation.

Emboldened by the decline of US support, North Vietnam launched its March 1972 Easter offensive. The main thrust was in I Corps area, where some 30,000 North Vietnamese troops supported by tanks and artillery were massed along the DMZ. They rapidly overran the South Vietnamese Army's (ARVN) 3d Division, capturing Quang Tri. In May the ARVN counterattacked, moving back toward Quang Tri along SAM-7 Alley where shoulder-held, heat-seeking anti-aircraft weapons were taking a heavy toll on low-and-slow US and VNAF aircraft.

On June 29, Capt. Steven L. Bennett of the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron at Da Nang, the pilot of an OV-10 forward air control aircraft, had been marking targets for friendly forces. In his backseat was Marine Corps Capt. Mike Brown, calling targets for the guns of Navy ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Bennett had been in Vietnam for less than three months. Brown, a company commander stationed in Texas, had volunteered for Vietnam duty and was versed in laying fire for Navy guns that had a flatter trajectory than those of the Army.

The OV-10 was an excellent FAC aircraft with good range and visibility,

two engines, an ejection system, and four 7.62 mm machine guns. It had one weakness, well-known to all its crews. Because of its structure it could not be ditched successfully. No pilot had ever survived an OV-10 ditching.

This day they had been on station for about three hours. It was dusk. They were ready to return to Da Nang, about 25 miles to the south, but learned that their replacement had been delayed. No problem. They had plenty of fuel remaining. Then came an emergency call. Several hundred North Vietnamese troops were attacking a South Vietnamese platoon that desperately needed help. There were no fighters that could arrive in time, and Navy gunfire couldn't be called in without threatening the friendlies. If the platoon was to be saved, Steve Bennett would have to do it, striking at low altitude where his OV-10 would be a prime target for SAM-7s and AA guns.

Four passes forced the North Vietnamese to back off, but Bennett wanted to be sure. One more pass should do it. On that pass a SAM-7 caught them from behind, blowing up one engine, damaging the left landing gear that dropped to an extended position, wounding Brown slightly, and setting the aircraft afire. Bennett could not jettison his reserve fuel and rockets over the area held by the South Vietnamese. He headed for the gulf where the fuel and ordnance could be dropped safely. They were down to 600 feet, but the OV-10 still was flyable. Then an escorting aircraft warned Bennett that he had better punch out before his plane exploded.

The two men were preparing to eject when Brown looked over his shoulder and saw that his parachute had been destroyed by the hit they had taken. Bennett had a good chute, but he knew he could not eject and leave Brown in the aircraft with no pilot. There was a good chance that Brown, in the back-seat, could survive a ditching, find his way out of the wreckage, and be picked up by a rescue chopper. There was no chance that Bennett, in the front seat,



could survive. Many times during the war a pilot had risked his life to save another. Bennett was prepared to give his life to save Mike Brown.

With damaged landing gear dangling, the OV-10 hit the water with a heavy impact, flipped over on its back, nose down, and began to sink. Brown managed to escape from the rear cockpit and swim to the surface. Pulling himself along the fuselage, he was unable to reach the nose of the aircraft before it sank, taking Bennett with it. Brown was picked up by a rescue chopper. Bennett's body was recovered the next day.

For his act of supreme self-sacrifice, Capt. Steven L. Bennett was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. His was the last act of extraordinary gallantry to be awarded the nation's highest decoration for valor in the Vietnam War. At the ultimate cost to himself, Steve Bennett had given Capt. Mike Brown the greatest of all gifts, the gift of life. On Aug. 8, 1974, the medal was presented by Vice President Gerald Ford to Bennett's widow, Linda, and his daughter, Angela.

In an unprecedented tribute, on Nov. 20, 1997, a US Navy-chartered commercial sealift ship was renamed *Capt. Steven L. Bennett*. ■