

“Steve knew five or ten minutes before we went down that he was probably going to die

but that he'd be giving me a chance to get out of it.”

The thought didn't occur to Marine Corps Captain Mike Brown until days after a sortie he flew with Air Force Captain Steve Bennett on June 29, 1972.

Brown's notion came a little over eight years after his first deployment to southeast Asia as an enlisted Marine aboard the USS Kitty Hawk (CV-63) in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964.



BRONCO BRAVERY

Captain Steve Bennett, Captain Mike Brown & the Medal of Honor

BY JAN TEGLER

Captains Steve Bennett and Mike Brown flew OV-10As with the 20th TASS. This later model OV-10D+ operated by "OV-10 Squadron" has several updates but still retains the distinctive outlines the Bronco is known for. Angele Bennett-Engle can be seen in the rear cockpit, getting a taste of the aircraft her father and Brown knew intimately. (Photo by Joseph Fischer)

The native Texan subsequently went through officer candidate school, earning a commission with the goal of being a helicopter pilot. But Navy bureaucracy and a desire to fight alongside friends who had gone to Vietnam altered his course.

By 1972, he had done a tour in-country, commanded an infantry platoon and earned his wings as an air observer or AO, becoming a mission and fire-support coordinator.

Steve Bennett had wanted to be an Air Force pilot since birth, his daughter Angela Engele says. After graduating from the University of Southwestern Louisiana, he joined the USAF, eventually receiving orders to Webb AFB in Big Spring, Texas for B-52 training. By 1970, he was flying from U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand as copilot in B-52Ds. But after a year in the right seat flying missions over Vietnam, Bennett volunteered to become a Forward Air Controller in a very different type of airplane.

In 1971, Steve and his family went to Florida where he went through training to fly the OV-10A Bronco at Hurlburt AFB. Operational by 1968 with USAF units including the 19th, 20th and 23rd Tactical

Air Support Squadrons (TASS), the Broncos became critical assets in the fight against North Vietnamese troops as U.S. forces began withdrawing from the country in 1969.

Bronco FACs flew night and day, coordinating strikes by fighters and bombers, directing naval gunfire and land-based artillery, and doing reconnaissance. They hunted for anything that looked suspicious along the treacherous road networks in and around North and South Vietnam. Most missions were flown below 10,000 feet, exposing OV-10 crews to anti-aircraft fire from Soviet-designed 23 mm autocannon and deadly shoulder-fired SA-7 surface to air missiles.

Like Bennett, Brown wanted to be where the fight was. When the North Vietnamese launched their Easter Offensive in March 1972, the Marine Corps' 1st Air and Naval Gunfire Liaison Company had five billets open for AOs. Brown volunteered and was sent to Da Nang Air Base to fly in the backseat of OV-10s with Air Force pilots.

"A bunch of the guys were ex-B-52 pilots, including Steve," Brown notes. He arrived at Da Nang in April, Bennett in early May as a 20th TASS pilot. Both had flown a significant number of missions by the end of June, but not always together. Brown says they had three or four sorties together under their belts.

Covey and Wolfman, 1600 Hours, July 29, 1972: South of Quang Tri at 6,000 feet

Bennett and Brown launched from Da Nang at just after noon local time. Up front, Steve callsign "Covey-87," flew and coordinated with "Big Control," the USAF air controller. In the back, Mike, callsign "Wolfman 45," radioed the Marine fire support coordinator "Trail" in Hue City and checked in with U.S. Navy ships out in the Gulf of Tonkin including the destroyer USS RB Anderson (DD-786).

A 20-minute flight north from Da Nang up the coast and a left turn to the west inland put the captains and their OV-10 where the action was.

"Most of the time, we were looking for something," Brown says. "Maybe the



Bennett's backseater, Mike Brown, as a 1st Lt. in Vietnam in 1969 serving with an infantry platoon prior to his becoming an Air Observer and then flying in Broncos. (Photo courtesy of Mike Brown)

previous Bronco FAC flight had noticed a 23 mm battery and we'd go check it out. We'd also get calls from U.S. Marines serving with the South Vietnamese units wanting us to go check out one place or another. That's what Steve and I were doing when we were hit."

That afternoon, a 40-man platoon of South Vietnamese Marines had ventured a little too far past their lines and broadcast a call for help.

"They had a few hundred NVA storming down a creek bed toward them," Brown remembers. "They were about to get their ass handed to them."

The pilot and AO were just about at the end of their sortie around 4 pm local when the call for help came. "We were waiting for our relief bird [another OV-10] from Da Nang. But he had some problems getting airborne. We still had fuel onboard," Brown notes.

Orbiting at about 6,000 feet, the two were staying out of 23 mm range. They dropped down to a lower altitude to find the trapped platoon, spotting them near a gravel road with the forked creek bed just to the west.

THE PILOT AND AO WERE JUST ABOUT AT THE END OF THEIR SORTIE AROUND 4 PM LOCAL WHEN THE CALL FOR HELP CAME.



Capt. Steve Bennett in the front cockpit of an OV-10A, a position that was to cost him his life when he ditched a Bronco to save backseater, Capt. Mike Brown. (Photo courtesy of Angela Bennett-Engele)

"The North Vietnamese were moving down the Y of that creek bed, maybe 100 meters up the creek, heading for the gravel road."

Steve tried calling in air support but none was available. Behind him, Mike considered calling for naval gunfire from "Masked Rider," the USS RB Anderson, but that was problematic, too.

"When you shoot artillery, the imaginary straight line from the gun to the target is called the gun-target line," he explains.

Capt. Steve Bennett flew B-52Ds from U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand for a year before volunteering to fly the OV-10. (Photo courtesy of Angela Bennett-Engele)





AS WE BANKED LEFT OFF THE TARGET ... THAT'S WHEN A SAM-7 HIT US. I NEVER SAW IT COMING.

"With naval gunfire, since it shoots a little flatter and a little faster than Howitzers do, if the target is just inside the gun target line you have a good chance of maybe hitting the good guys. I couldn't put naval guns on them because they were right at the end of the gun-target line."

That left the Bronco crew with one option. "We were looking at this situation and I'm telling Steve, 'Look, we've got to get in there with the guns.' We knew we weren't allowed to do it, but Steve was talking to 'Big.' I said, 'Get on there and get us clearance. We're going to go in and get these guys out of this.'"

Brown was communicating with a Marine Warrant Officer embedded with the platoon via a Marine Captain serving with the South Vietnamese, trying find out where the platoon's lead man was so that he and Steve could make strafing runs on the North Vietnamese troops without hitting anyone from the platoon.

"I told them to put out a panel, a white t-shirt, anything to give me a visual."

In the meantime, Bennett told Brown he was ready.

"Finally, Steve came back on the ICS and said, 'OK. We're going in.' To this day I still don't know if he got approval or he decided

we were going to do it anyway," Brown adds. "At that point, I didn't really care."

Bennett brought the Bronco to the east, then swung west and pushed the nose down, dropping below 1,000 feet.

"I could see the North Vietnamese through the trees when we lit up the guns," Brown says.

The duo's OV-10A carried 2,000 rounds of 7.62 mm ammunition for its two M60 machine guns. They didn't cause much vibration when fired Brown notes, "just a little noise."

Steve pulled up off their first pass in a left bank to the south. Brown said it was "pretty clear we'd have to make more passes" to give the South Vietnamese platoon a chance to retreat to safety.

In the meantime, another Bronco piloted by Air Force Captain Darrel Whitcomb joined in. Call-sign "Nail-70," Whitcomb was flying a 23rd TASS OV-10A. He began strafing the North Vietnamese troops as well.

"He was in the pattern, but I didn't even know it because I was working so much with the ground communications," Brown admits. "He was airborne west of us, and they directed him in, told him to go over and help out Covey."

A view of OV-10 Squadron's D+ model adorned with markings from Marine squadron VMO-2. Seventeen D models were produced, extensively modified from OV-10A airframes, adding a forward-looking infrared night-vision system with a turret-mounted camera under an extended nose, more powerful engines and larger propellers. D+ models had strengthened wings and new wiring and cockpit instrumentation. (Photo by Joseph Fischer)

SAM!

Brown remembers having made three or four more strafing passes when the duo decided to make one more run.

"We still had ammunition left. As we banked left off the target, I was leaning forward in my seat trying to look back behind us to assess the situation and that's when a SAM-7 hit us."

"I never saw it coming. Apparently they fired a couple of them at us and I didn't know it. I believe it hit the outboard side of our left engine. It must have gone right up that exhaust pipe and took out the engine, setting it on fire."

Brown simultaneously heard a loud bang and had the sensation of the airplane rolling 360 degrees as Bennett fought for control. He had just leaned back in his seat when the 4-foot, 10-inch-long missile impacted.

"It sent a bunch of stuff through the left side of my canopy and diagonally out the right side of Steve's canopy. If I had still been leaning forward looking back, it probably would have taken my head off."

Fire erupted around the engine and the left main gear dropped out of the engine nacelle, dangling in the breeze. "Steve wasn't hit," Brown says. "I asked him if he was OK, and he said he was. I told him, don't clean up or drop the ordnance until we get clear of the troops! I wanted to make sure we were clear before we dropped our centerline [tank] and rocket pods off."

Bennett turned the Bronco toward the coast. He was able to maintain level flight, but the aircraft was crabbing. He and Brown had to stand on their left rudder pedals to keep the aircraft in a straight line.

"As we got back to the water and headed south, the fire around the engine had died down. We were level at about 2,000 feet over the water trying to get Hue. But Hue's runway didn't have foam. We needed a strip that could be foamed so we could land with that left gear hanging down. We were about 20 minutes out of Da Nang, trying to make it back there."

Whitcomb brought his OV-10 alongside Bennett and Brown as Mike was talking on the radio.

"It makes you feel good when the best ship on the line, the RB Anderson, calls you. They said, 'Hey Wolfman, Masked Rider. We have you in sight. We have a boat in the water if you need to come by and eject.'"

Just then Whitcomb radioed Bennett. "He looked at the cockpit area behind my seat and saw a big hole on the left side where shrapnel blew in behind me when the missile hit," Brown says. "I could see little pieces of silk floating around back there. That wasn't good. My parachute was damaged."

In the next moments, fire began to flare again on the OV-10's left wing, fed by fuel in the wing tank.

"That's when Darryl told us to eject because the airplane was going to explode. But I couldn't eject."

Ditching

The design of the twin-boom Bronco with its centerline cockpit and the terrific visibility from its large canopy was ideal for the FAC mission and light attack. But the configuration was known to be deadly for the pilot in the event of a water landing and there was a rule among OV-10 pilots: don't attempt to ditch, punch out.

But backseaters still had a chance of survival.

"Under the rules and regulations, I think Steve could legally have punched us both out. But of course, I didn't have that option. I didn't know the rule about no ditching. Steve made the decision to stay with it."

Three hundred yards off the beach Bennett told Brown, "Get ready and brace yourself!"

"The last thing I said was 'See you in the water, Steve!' Then we hit."

Mike sensed the Bronco rolling wingtip over wingtip when they hit the water. "Next thing I know, I'm totally underwater. It wasn't one these situations where you're waiting for the water to rise. It was just—Bam! Bam! I'm totally submerged."

As the airplane sank, Brown struggled to release himself from his seat harness, still hooked in by one Koch fitting. "I'm gulping down water and I can't get it to release. I



OV-10 Squadron Keeps Broncos Flying

At 13 years-old, Mike Manclark fell in love with the OV-10 Bronco, an airplane few others noticed. He first saw one at an MCAS El Toro airshow in the 1970s, and despite all the fast jets on hand, the Bronco made the biggest impression.

"This funky looking airplane with a big tail boom comes flying by, pitches up and four guys come tumbling out of the back, parachuting," he remembers. "I always dreamed of having one, one day."

Now he has eight Broncos: seven OV-10Ds and one OV-10G.

Manclark, a longtime pilot, philanthropist, and former owner of Los Angeles-based Leading Edge Aviation Services, Inc., acquired his first Bronco after years of searching in 2016. He shipped it from a museum in Virginia to Matt Nightingale's California Aerofab restoration shop at Chino Airport for a complete restoration to airworthy condition. But he wasn't sure he had all the parts he needed.

"Out of nowhere I got a call from a museum in Mineral Wells, Texas that had seven Broncos!"

Manclark traveled to the National Vietnam War Museum in Mineral Wells, looked over the airframes "scattered in parts everywhere around the property" and purchased them all, helping to fund the museum's operations.

Eight flatbed trucks transported the fuselages, wings, booms, engines, and parts to Chino in early 2018 and Manclark formed "OV-10 Squadron" to pay tribute to the overlooked warbird and to restore as many to flight as possible.

"It was hard to find anything about an OV-10 and you couldn't see one fly. I wanted to preserve the history for those who flew and maintained these underappreciated airplanes, from Vietnam to Afghanistan and Syria."

The first D-model to be restored flew in 2019. Two more have been restored to flight and are now helping to train U.S. Air Force Joint Terminal Air Controllers with Las Vegas-based Blue Air Training (blueairtraining.com).

Manclark hopes to have a fourth Bronco flying in 2022 with a fifth in the air in 2023. To learn more about OV-10 Squadron visit their website, ov10squadron.com.

Meanwhile, Angela Bennett-Engle is a part of the Fort Worth Aviation Museum, which displays three Broncos (fortworthaviationmuseum.com).



Top: Angele Bennett-Engle, Steve Bennett's daughter holds his Medal of Honor in front of OV-10 Squadron's OV-10D flanked by pilot/restorer Matt Nightingale the group's founder Mike Manclark (in light blue shirt) and photo plane pilot JJ Johnson (in black shirt).

Above: OV-10 Squadron founder Mike Manclark poses with Steve Bennett's Medal of Honor. (Photos by Joseph Fischer)

said to myself, 'OK Marine, try it one more time and if it doesn't work pull your Ka-Bar [knife] and cut it.'"

He got the fitting released and floated sideways out a big hole in the Bronco's canopy, noting that the rear cockpit had partially separated from the front cockpit in the impact. Not knowing which way was up, Brown followed bubbles to the surface.

"I saw there was about six or seven feet of the tail boom sticking up. I paddled around trying to find Steve. I swam along the airplane trying to get to the front cockpit, but I was throwing up all the water and maybe some fuel I'd ingested. I was within a few seconds of drowning. After about the third or fourth try, I couldn't reach the cockpit."

Brown's life raft automatically inflated and popped up next to him. He scrambled into it but realized it was sinking, still tethered to the Bronco.

Di di mau!

"At this point, I noticed that there were canoes coming out from the beach. This was half Cowboy, half Indian country and I'm paddling around as the boats are coming, yelling 'Di di mau! Di di mau!' Vietnamese for 'Go away!'"

"The guy in the lead boat had an AK-47. They were in civilian clothes, but he had that rifle. I got out my .45 and I shot. He went out of the boat. I don't know if he jumped or I hit him or what, but I heard firing—bap, bap, bap, bap!"

Brown dove under water. When he came up for air he realized that the shooting was coming from OV-10s. A second Bronco had joined Whitcomb and the two laid a line of fire between him and the men in the canoes, chasing them away.

Suddenly, Brown saw a Navy-blue CH-46 fly by.

"They circled around, dropped a rescue collar to me and snatched me up. Coincidentally, it was a rescue bird from the USS Tripoli and the guy flying it was a Major Gerard who I'd flown with before. He said they were making a mail-run to Da Nang from the ship, and they saw this flaming OV-10 go down near the beach. They turned in my direction and found me."

THE REAR COCKPIT HAD PARTIALLY SEPARATED FROM THE FRONT COCKPIT IN THE IMPACT. NOT KNOWING WHICH WAY WAS UP, BROWN FOLLOWED BUBBLES TO THE SURFACE.

Medal of Honor

Brown was flown to the amphibious assault ship where wires from the circuit breaker behind his seat in the OV-10 that had become embedded in his back were removed.

"They picked them out, it was just a little tingling, like acupuncture," he says.

He was returned to Da Nang the next day and flew another Bronco sortie the following day. "I was on temporary duty with the 20th, and they told me I could go home. But I said, 'No, I've got to get back in the airplane.' I wanted to find the NVF somewhere with the empty SA-7!"

Mike flew for another six weeks before going home.

A Navy SEAL team recovered Steve Bennett's body. He had managed to escape the front cockpit but had severe head wounds, probably the result of slamming into the Bronco's gunsight or panel.

Brown was one of several officers who suggested that Bennett be awarded the Medal of Honor. The award came through swiftly. On August 8, 1974, then Vice President Gerald Ford presented the medal to Steve's wife Linda.

In November of 1997, Military Sealift Command ship T-AK-4296 was given the name she would carry until her decommissioning in 2015: MV Capt. Steven L. Bennett. The 20th TASS is now the 20th Attack Squadron, based at Whiteman AFB, flying MQ-9 Reapers. Bennett is remembered by the unit to this day.

Mike Brown retired from the Marine Corps in 1984 after a distinguished career. He and Bennett saved the lives of the South Vietnamese platoon, but he wasn't given an award for the 1972 flight and doesn't want one. He thinks about Steve Bennett "probably part of every day." →