

No pilot had ever survived an OV-10 ditching, but unless Steve Bennett tried it, his backseater would have no chance.

Impossible Odds in

By John T. Correll

In the spring of 1972, the North Vietnamese made a radical change in strategy. After years of insurgency-style warfare, they decided to try for a knockout blow against South Vietnam with a conventional military attack on a massive scale.

The “Easter Offensive,” as it was called, began March 30. Some 125,000 troops and hundreds of tanks invaded South Vietnam on three fronts.

One fork of the attack came directly across the Demilitarized Zone into Quang Tri Province. The other two thrusts of the offensive—from Laos against the Central Highlands and out of Cambodia into the area northwest of Saigon—sought to cut South Vietnam in two.

The invasion force was well-equipped. Over the preceding year, the Soviet Union and China had been shipping to North Vietnam large numbers of tanks, long-range artillery, and other weapons. Among the new items was the heat-seeking, shoulder-fired SA-7 Strela anti-aircraft missile, which was enormously effective against low-flying aircraft.

The Easter Offensive was planned by North Vietnam’s top military leader, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who believed that the South Vietnamese forces would be too weak to hold and that the political situation back home would limit the US response.

“Vietnamization,” the process of turning the war over to South Vietnam, had begun in 1969. Eighty percent of the US forces were gone. The Vietnamese Air Force was flying 70 percent of the air combat operations.

Initially, the South Vietnamese were swept back by the onslaught. In-theater air forces gave them as much support as they could. Soon, other USAF units redeployed to Southeast Asia. Giap had more trouble than he had expected from Air Force and Navy fighters and B-52 bombers. The United States also resumed the bombing of North Vietnam, halted four years previously.

Nevertheless, Quang Tri City, the provincial capital, fell May 1, and Giap turned his attention toward Hue, the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam, 30 miles farther south.

Wherever the invasion force went, it was accompanied by mobile air defenses—23 mm and 37 mm anti-aircraft guns mounted on rubber-tired trailers—as well as the SA-7s.

In the course of resisting the invasion, the US Air Force by June had lost 77 aircraft, including 34 F-4 fighters. The North Vietnamese were beginning to withdraw from some positions, but they still held most of the area immediately south of the DMZ.

On June 28, South Vietnamese ground forces, under an aggressive new commander, launched a coun-

Capt. Steven Bennett volunteered for forward air control duty in Vietnam, piloting an OV-10 Bronco. For his valor on June 29, 1972, he posthumously was awarded the Medal of Honor.

SAM-7 Alley





Wife Linda pins pilot wings on Bennett after his graduation from undergraduate pilot training at Webb AFB, Tex. Years later, facilities and even a ship would be named in Bennett's honor.

terattack to retake Quang Tri City and keep the enemy out of Hue.

Two From Texas

The counterattack on Quang Tri was supported by US Air Force and Navy fighters and by Navy warships in the Tonkin Gulf. The firepower of these aircraft and ships was directed by forward air controllers (FAC) from the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron, flying single-engine O-2s and twin-engine OV-10s from Da Nang.

On June 29, the second day of the counteroffensive, an OV-10 flown by Air Force Capt. Steven L. Bennett had been working through the afternoon in the area south and east of Quang Tri City.

Bennett, 26, was born in Texas but grew up in Lafayette, La. He was commissioned via ROTC in 1968 at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. After pilot training, he had flown B-52s as a copilot at Fairchild AFB, Wash. He also had pulled five months of temporary duty in B-52s at U Tapao in Thailand. After that, he volunteered for a combat tour in OV-10s and had arrived at Da Nang in April 1972.

Bennett's partner in the backseat of the OV-10 on June 29 was Capt. Michael B. Brown, a Marine Corps airborne artillery observer and also a Texan. Brown, a company commander stationed in Hawaii, had volunteered for a 90-day tour in Vietnam spotting for naval gunners from the backseat of an OV-10. Air Force

FACs were not trained in directing the fire of naval guns.

The two had flown together several times before on artillery adjustment missions. They had separate call signs. Bennett's was "Covey 87." Brown was "Wolfman 45."

They took off from Da Nang at about 3 p.m. During the time they were airborne, Brown had been directing fire from the destroyer USS *R.B. Anderson* and the cruiser USS *Newport News*, which were about a mile offshore in the Tonkin Gulf. Bennett and Brown had also worked two close air support strikes by Navy fighters.

It was almost time to return to base, but their relief was late taking off from Da Nang, so Bennett and Brown stayed a little longer.

The area in which they were flying that afternoon had been fought over many times before. French military forces, who took heavy casualties here in the 1950s, called the stretch of Route 1 between Quang Tri and Hue the "Street Without Joy." US airmen called it "SAM-7 Alley."

SA-7s were thick on the ground there, and they had taken a deadly toll on low-flying airplanes. The SA-7 could be carried by one man. It was similar to the US Redeye. It was fired from the shoulder like a bazooka, and its warhead homed on any source of heat, such as an aircraft engine.

Pilots could outrun or outmaneuver the SA-7—if they saw it in time.

At low altitudes, that was seldom possible.

"Before the SA-7, the FACs mostly flew at 1,500 to 4,500 feet," said William J. Begert, who, in 1972, was a captain and an O-2 pilot at Da Nang. "After the SA-7, it was 9,500 feet minimum. You could sneak an O-2 down to 6,500, but not an OV-10, because the bigger engines on OV-10 generated more heat."

The FACs sometimes carried flares on their wings and could fire them as decoys when they saw a SA-7 launch. "The problem was reaction time," Begert said. "You seldom got the flare off before the missile had passed."

A SAM From Behind

About 6 p.m., Bennett and Brown got an emergency call from "Harmony X-ray," a US Marine Corps ground artillery spotter with a platoon of South Vietnamese marines a few miles east of Quang Tri City.

The platoon consisted of about two dozen troops. They were at the fork of a creek, with several hundred North Vietnamese Army regulars advancing toward them. The NVA force was supported by big 130 mm guns, firing from 12 miles to the north at Dong Ha, as well as by smaller artillery closer by.

Without help, the South Vietnamese marines would soon be overrun.

Bennett called for tactical air support, but no fighters were available. The guns from *Anderson* and *Newport News* were not a solution, either.

"The ships were about a mile offshore, and the friendlies were between the bad guys and the ships," Brown said. "Naval gunfire shoots flat, and it has a long spread on impact. There was about a 50-50 chance they'd hit the friendlies."

Bennett decided to attack with the OV-10's four 7.62 mm guns. That meant he would have to descend from a relatively safe altitude and put his aircraft within range of SA-7s and small-arms fire. Because of the risk, Bennett was required to call for permission first. He did and got approval to go ahead.

Apart from its employment as a FAC aircraft, the OV-10 was rated for a light ground attack role. Its machine guns were loaded with 500 rounds each. The guns were mounted in the aircraft's sponsons, stubby

wings that stuck out like a seal's flippers from the lower fuselage.

Bennett put the OV-10 into a power dive. The NVA force had been gathering in the trees along the creek bank. As Bennett roared by, the fire from his guns scattered the enemy concentration.

After four strafing passes, the NVA began to retreat, leaving many dead and wounded behind. The OV-10 had taken a few hits in the fuselage from small-arms fire but nothing serious. Bennett decided to continue the attack to keep the NVA from regrouping and to allow the South Vietnamese to move to a more tenable position.

Bennett swept along the creek for a fifth time and pulled out to the northeast. He was at 2,000 feet, banking to turn left, when the SA-7 hit from behind. Neither Bennett nor Brown saw it.

The missile hit the left engine and exploded. The aircraft reeled from the impact. Shrapnel tore holes in the canopy. Much of the left engine was gone. The left landing gear was hanging down like a lame leg, and they were afire.

Bennett needed to jettison the reserve fuel tank and the remaining smoke rockets as soon as he could, but there were South Vietnamese troops everywhere below. He headed for the Tonkin Gulf, hoping to get there and drop the stores before the fire reached the fuel.

As they went, Brown radioed their Mayday to declare the emergency.



An Air Force OV-10 pilot fires a smoke marking rocket at a target in Vietnam in 1969. The Bronco pilot's primary task was to serve as a FAC, but the aircraft also had light ground attack capability.

Over the Gulf, Bennett safely dropped the fuel tank and rocket pods.

The OV-10 was still flyable on one engine, although it could not gain altitude. They turned south, flying at 600 feet. Unless Bennett could reach a friendly airfield for an emergency landing, he and Brown would have to either eject or ditch the airplane in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Every OV-10 pilot knew the danger of ditching. The aircraft had superb visibility because of the "greenhouse"-style expanses of plexiglass canopy in front and on the sides, but that came at the cost of structural

strength. It was common knowledge, often discussed in the squadron, that no pilot had ever survived an OV-10 ditching. The cockpit always broke up on impact.

Another OV-10 pilot, escorting Bennett's aircraft, warned him to eject as the wing was in danger of exploding.

No Other Way

They began preparations to eject. As they did, Brown looked over his shoulder at the spot where his parachute should have been. "What I saw was a hole, about a foot square, from the rocket blast and bits of my parachute shredded up and down the cargo bay," Brown said. "I told Steve I couldn't jump."

Bennett would not eject alone. That would have left Brown in an airplane without a pilot. Besides, the backseater had to eject first. If not, he would be burned severely by the rocket motors on the pilot's ejection seat as it went out.

Momentarily, there was hope. The fire subsided. Da Nang—the nearest runway that could be foamed down—was only 25 minutes away and they had the fuel to get there. Then, just north of Hue, the fire fanned up again and started to spread. The aircraft was dangerously close to exploding.

They couldn't make it to Da Nang. Bennett couldn't eject without killing Brown. That left only one choice: to crash-land in the sea.

Bennett faced a decision, Lt. Col.



A North Vietnamese soldier shoulders an SA-7 portable surface-to-air missile. On a stretch of Route 1 between Quang Tri and Hue, SAMs were so thick that US airmen called it "SAM-7 Alley."



An OV-10 sits in its revetment in South Vietnam. The superb visibility provided by the huge canopy came at a price: a reduction in structural strength. Every Bronco pilot knew no one had ever ditched in the water and survived.

Gabriel A. Kardong, 20th TASS commander, later wrote in recommending Bennett for the Medal of Honor. "He knew that if he saved his own life by ejecting from his aircraft, Captain Brown would face certain death," said Kardong. "On the other hand, he realized that if he ditched the aircraft, his odds for survival were slim, due to the characteristics of the aircraft, but Captain Brown could survive. Captain Bennett made the decision to ditch and thereby made the ultimate sacrifice."

He decided to ditch about a mile off a strip of sand called "Wunder Beach." Upon touchdown, the dangling landing gear dug in hard.

"When the aircraft struck water, the damaged and extended left landing gear caused the aircraft to swerve left and flip wing over wing and come to rest in a nose down and inverted position, almost totally submerged," Brown said in a statement attached to the Medal of Honor recommendation.

"After a struggle with my harnesses, I managed to escape to the surface where I took a few deep breaths of air and attempted to dive below the surface in search of the pilot who had not surfaced. Exhaustion and ingestion of fuel and water prevented me from descending below water more than a few feet. I was shortly rescued by an orbiting naval helicopter and taken to the USS *Tripoli* for treatment."

Of Bennett, Brown said, "His per-

sonal disregard for his own life surely saved mine when he elected not to eject ... and save himself in order that I might survive."

Bennett's body was recovered the next day. The front cockpit had broken up on impact with the water, and it had been impossible for him to get

out. He was taken home to Lafayette, where he is buried.

North Vietnam's Easter Offensive, battered by airpower, stalled. The South Vietnamese retook Quang Tri City on Sept. 16, 1972. The invasion having failed, Giap was forced to withdraw on all three fronts. It was a costly excursion for North Vietnam, with 100,000 or more of its troops killed and at least half of its tanks and large-caliber artillery pieces having been lost.

South Vietnam continued to exist—for a while.

Medal of Honor

The Medal of Honor was awarded posthumously to Steven L. Bennett on Aug. 8, 1974. It was presented in Washington to his wife, Linda, and their daughter Angela, two-and-a-half years old, by Vice President Gerald R. Ford in the name of Congress. (Ford made the presentation because President Nixon announced his resignation that day. Ford was sworn in as President the next day, Aug. 9, 1974.)

The citation accompanying the Medal of Honor recognized "Captain Bennett's unparalleled concern



On Aug. 8, 1974, Vice President Ford presented the Medal of Honor to Bennett's wife, Linda, and young daughter, Angela. Ford was sworn in the next day as President.

for his companion, extraordinary heroism, and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty, at the cost of his life.”

Since then, there have been other honors. Navy Sealift Command named a ship *MV Steven L. Bennett*. Palestine, Tex., where Bennett was born, dedicated the city athletic center to him. Among other facilities named for or dedicated to Bennett were the ROTC building at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, the gymnasium at Kelly AFB, Tex., and a cafeteria at Webb AFB, Tex.

In 1987, the *Dallas Morning News* published an article about Bennett, and Mike Brown—then living near Dallas—saw it. He called the newspaper, which put him in touch with Linda Bennett, who was then living in Fort Worth. Brown made contact with Linda and Angela, who was then a high school student, and has been a friend of the family ever since.

As she grew older, Angela learned more details about her father.

“He was known as the ‘Ox’ in high school for his abilities as a football player,” she said. “He was short and stocky, but good luck knocking him over!”

His build did not fit well with the Air Force’s height and weight charts. “He was so stocky that the doctors used to apologize to him when they told him he had to lose weight due to regulations,” Angela said. “My mother said there were many times when he ate lettuce leaves, and that was it.”

Bennett was still on his initial tour of active duty when he died, but he probably would have stayed in the Air Force for a career. “According to my mother, daddy would have been a lifer,” Angela said. “He would have stayed in as long as they let him fly.”

Angela and Jake

In the 1990s, Angela Bennett—then in her mid-20s, married, and mother of a two-year-old son—decided to seek out people who could help her know her father better.

“I found tons of people,” she said. “I found all but three of his Webb Air Force Base pilot training class, to the point that I was able to get them in touch with each other and they decided to have a reunion. ...



OV-10 Bronco Association members surround Bennett’s daughter, Angela, and her son, Jake. The group includes former OV-10 crew members of all services, including Bennett’s backseater, Mike Brown (third from left).

Then I found 10 or so of his buddies from Da Nang. I found maybe five classmates from his high school and even one teacher. ... I’d say it got pretty close to 100 people by the time I was done.”

Mostly, they remembered Bennett as a man they were proud to have known. “Daddy was described to me as being someone who would have died helping an old lady cross the road if he would have survived Vietnam,” Angela said.

Small things also made an impression. “They all remember that he had a cowlick on his forehead that just drove him nuts,” Angela said. “Little things like that are what I have been told. The stories I have heard make him more real to me.”

Angela Bennett found Jim Carlton, who was commander of the OV-10s in the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron and who helped write the Medal of Honor recommendation for her father. She also met Begert, the O-2 pilot from Da Nang, who, along with Bennett, was part of a group that played bridge almost every night. Begert (who recently retired as the four-star commander of Pacific Air Forces) was with Angela at the Navy ceremony naming the *MV Steven L. Bennett*.

Angela Bennett is a life member of the OV-10 Bronco Association

and attends the Bronco Fests that are held each year. She often sees Brown, who lives in Richardson, Tex., about 20 minutes away from her home in Lewisville. Brown has attended many of the dedications with her and is a member of the OV-10 Bronco Association. “He has become a wonderful friend and someone whom I feel close to even if we don’t talk all the time,” she said.

“Every year on 29 June, I find a quiet place and thank Steve for his sacrifice and say a prayer for him,” Brown said recently.

Angela’s son, Jake, now 10 years old, also goes to the Bronco Fests and other events. “Jake is very interested and loves planes and air shows,” she said. “He likes to hear about my dad. ... He attends as many of the dedications as he can. ... He fully understands this is a legacy he will need to honor and carry on for as long as people will listen.”

All that she has learned has given Angela Bennett a definite perspective on the loss of her father and how she remembers him.

“Many who lost family members in the war are bitter or resentful,” she said. “While I would love nothing more than to have had my father all those years, I am not bitter because I know he died doing what he believed in and what he felt was necessary for others. ... He was a wonderful man, and I am proud to be his daughter.” ■

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