

Lasting Tribute

Memorial is reminder of Air Force pilot's heroism, sacrifice



TRAVIS GAUTHIER

A monument to Capt. Steven L. Bennett, who was presented a posthumous Medal of Honor, was placed by Acadian Chapter, 82nd Airborne Division Association and Charter 141 Vietnam Veterans of America.

A MONUMENT IN FRONT OF THE Cajundome pays tribute to Air Force Capt. Steven Bennett, the second alumnus in UL Lafayette history to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The first was Jeff DeBlanc, who was cited for valor during World War II. The Marine pilot had put his life in jeopardy to protect American dive bombers from attacks by the Japanese in the South Pacific. President Harry Truman presented the award to DeBlanc during a White House ceremony on Dec. 6, 1946.

Twenty-five years later, on Aug. 8, 1974, Vice President Gerald Ford presented the Medal of Honor – the nation's highest military honor – posthumously to Bennett's widow, Linda, and 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Angela.

Ford was sworn in as the 38th president of the United States the next day, after Richard Nixon resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

Bennett had been commissioned through ROTC at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now known as UL Lafayette) in 1968. The circumstances that led to his death have been chronicled in at least two issues of *Air Force Magazine*. One was published in August 1998, the other in December 2004.

By the time Bennett arrived in Vietnam in early 1972, the United States had been withdrawing troops from there for almost three years. The withdrawal had begun after public and Congressional support had dwindled.

In Spring of 1972, North Viet-

namese troops overran the South Vietnamese Army's 3d Division and captured Quang Tri City. On June 28, South Vietnam counterattacked in an effort to retake Quang Tri, supported by U.S. forces.

On June 29, Bennett, a member of the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron at Da Nang, was piloting a twin-engine OV-10 aircraft. Marine Corps Capt. Michael Brown was seated behind him. They were marking targets for friendly forces, wrote author John L. Frisbee in the 1998 issue of *Air Force Magazine*.

Frisbee noted that the OV-10 had many excellent characteristics and one major weak-

ness that was well-known to its crews. "Because of its structure, it could not be ditched successfully. No pilot had ever survived an OV-10 ditching," he wrote.

Bennett and Brown were ready to return to Da Nang at dusk that day. As they waited for their replacement, they received an emergency call for help. A South Vietnamese platoon was being overrun by North Vietnamese troops.

Bennett's plane was the only aircraft in the area that was able to respond, but it would be a target for heat-seeking anti-aircraft weapons.

In the December 2004 issue of *Air Force Magazine*, author John T. Corell states that Bennett's OV-10 made four strafing passes. The North Vietnamese began to retreat. But Bennett decided to



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Air Force Capt. Steven Bennett

make another pass to give the South Vietnamese a chance to get to safer ground.

“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 headed for the Tonkin Gulf to jettison reserve fuel before fire could reach it. By now, another OV-10 was escorting his aircraft. Its pilot told him to eject.

Bennett and Brown prepared to do that. Then Brown saw that his parachute had been blown away by the rocket blast.

“Bennett would not eject alone,” Corell wrote. “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.”

Corell described the situation this way: “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.”

There was no last-minute miracle. Bennett ditched the OV-10 in the water and it flipped on its back before beginning to sink. Brown managed to escape from the rear cockpit and swam to the surface. But he was unable to reach Bennett before the aircraft sank. The next day, Bennett’s body was recovered.

In the 1998 issue of *Air Force Magazine*, Frisbee observed: “(Bennett’s) was the last act of extraordinary gallantry to be awarded the nation’s highest decoration for valor in the Vietnam War.”

In 1997, the U.S. Navy named a chartered propositioning ship the MV Capt. Steven L. Bennett as a tribute. According to a Military Sealift Command press release, “It is believed to be the first time a Navy-controlled ship has been named for an Air Force service member.” ■



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Vice President Gerald Ford presents Capt. Steven Bennett’s Medal of Honor to his widow, Linda, and daughter, Angela.

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