

# LEATHERNECK

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U.S. MARINES

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# LEATHERNECK

## MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES

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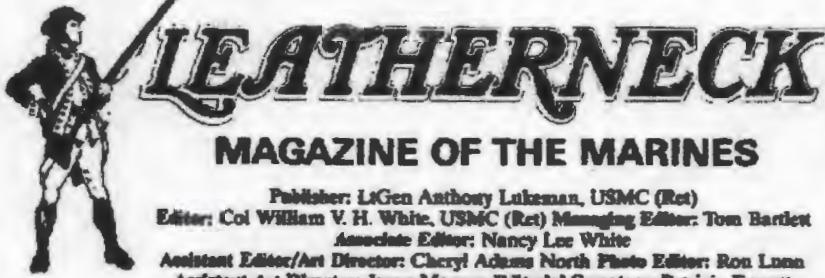
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**O**n a dreary day in December 1969, a young Marine, serving at a mountain outpost (Hill 845) in Vietnam, tripped an enemy booby trap. He was in danger of dying unless he could obtain immediate medical treatment.

At "LZ Baldy," HML-367 helicopter pilot First Lieutenant David Cummings and his aircraft commander, Captain Roger Henry, were standing by their AH-1G Cobra gunship on routine alert. A call came to escort emergency medevac helicopters. They launched with two CH-46 Sea Knights and headed 40 miles southwest of Da Nang into the Que Son Mountains in Quang Nam Province.

Foul weather had developed in the medevac pickup area, making it virtually impossible for the Sea Knights to make the pickup. Despite persistent but unsuccessful maneuvering, the 46s terminated their approach, retiring to the edge of the weather mass hoping for a break which would allow a quick dash-in.

After consultation with the medevac mission commander, permission was granted for the AH-1G to scout the LZ to facilitate a more expeditious pickup. During ingress, however, the weather worsened, prompting Capt Henry (positioned in the front seat) to assume the controls. Visibility was zero.

Exercising superb airmanship and excellent crew coordination, the two Marines flew into the weather and worked their Cobra up the mountainside amidst severe turbulence generated from the mountain slopes. Scraping tree tops and sporting air-speeds that often dipped below 30 knots, the flyers anxiously waited for a call from the outpost giving their position above the elusive, ill-defined landing zone. Undaunted by the burden of weather that presented them to almost certain hostile enemy fire, Capt Henry and Lt Cummings finally found their mark. The ingress had taken three hours and five separate attempts.

Sporadic radio reports confirmed suspicion that the wounded Marine's condition was worsening. Guiding the Cobra down through tall

trees, Henry landed the aircraft on the edge of a bomb crater. While the Cobra remained in its precarious, balanced position, Dave Cummings climbed out of the aircraft to investigate.

Determining that no further time should be wasted, he directed placement of the casualty into the Cobra. Strapping the semiconscious Marine securely into his own rear cockpit seat, Cummings fastened the canopy. As ground personnel curiously looked on, Lt Cummings climbed atop the inboard, starboard, stub-wing rocket pod. Straddling the pod (facing aft), he banged his fist on the wing to get the pilot's attention and gave him a "ready" thumbs up. With a grim smile, Capt Henry nodded and took off.

As the Cobra departed the LZ, radio operators snapped to life, broadcasting descriptions of the incredible scene they were witnessing. Atop the rocket pod, Lt Cummings flashed a "V" for victory to those remaining in the zone, and the Cobra dramatically vanished into the blanket overcast. It was the ultimate showstopper!

Leveling off in a brooding gray cloud mass at 4,000 feet, Henry accelerated the Cobra to 100 knots to maintain more fluid surface aerodynamics. Once stabilized, he glanced over his shoulder to check on his extra-vehicular partner. (The outrider gave him a sheepish grin.)

Slashing rain and extreme cold, plus the deafening shrill and shuffle vibration of engines and rotors, exacted their worst punishment. To further complicate matters, the wind grabbed at Cummings' helmet and flexed it forward, causing his chin strap to choke him. But nothing could shake him from his perch.

After what seemed an eternity, the gunship, now an agent-of-mercy, descended through the clouds. The two aviators, with their wounded Marine in hand, broke into relative clear sky conditions at 1,200 feet over Spider Lake and raced for the desperately needed medical facility.

Fatigued to his limits, Capt Henry had trouble discerning the landing site when he sensed a series of thumps coming from the starboard

# Rescue At Hill 845

Story by  
LtCol Gregory J. Johnson



(ABOVE) After strapping the casualty into his own seat, Lt Cummings climbed atop the wing rocket pod and signaled Capt Henry to take off. He flashed a "V" for victory sign to those remaining on the ground.



Photo courtesy of LtCol Roger Henry

*LtCol Johnson is a CH-46 pilot currently serving on the staff of the commanding general, Third Marine Aircraft Wing.*

(LEFT) Capt Roger Henry piloted the Cobra used in the rescue. He is now a lieutenant colonel on the staff of the Training and Education Center, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, Va.



wing. Glancing to his right, he noticed the rigid, pointing forefinger of his copilot directing his attention to their desired destination below.

After landing, the wounded Marine was whisked into a medical tent for stabilization and pretransfer emergency preparation. A short time later, a CH-46 Sea Knight arrived to fly the patient to Marble Mountain for emergency surgery. Sprinting along through the air with the Sea Knight to the more sophisticated "in-country" medical facility, were two weary Cobra pilots. They were concerned with the safe arrival of the wounded Marine in whom they had a vested interest. (He eventually recovered, was discharged, married, and is now living in Texas.)

For their actions, Capt Henry and Lt Cummings were each awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The two were personally invited by the commanding general of the First Marine Division to dine as his special guests in the "Eagle's Nest."

*Author's note. A recent one-line obituary in Navy Times noted the death of Lieutenant Colonel Dave Cummings. I felt that this distinguished warrior and fellow Marine, an individual with style*

**(RIGHT)** Dave Cummings, then a major, was photographed in 1983 with Major General Ernest C. Chestham Jr., commanding general of the First Marine Division.

**(LEFT)** In this 1972 photo, Capt Dave Cummings greeted President Richard M. Nixon at Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, Calif.

ed in a firefight with Viet Cong forces, he was evacuated to the States. Following recuperation he was selected for flight training and earned his "Wings of Gold." He returned to Vietnam in September 1969.

Dave ultimately rose to the grade of lieutenant colonel, earning during his career four Distinguished Flying Crosses, four single mission Air Medals, the Bronze Star with Combat "V", a Purple Heart, and an impressive array of other personal awards.

Late last year he reached a major goal when he was selected to command a Cobra squadron. En route to Albany, Ga., to attend a maintenance orientation course, he stopped for the night in Atlanta. Following a brief, customary workout, he returned to his room and later suffered an apparent heart attack and died. He was 42.

For those of us who knew Dave, he was a special piece of our past. We will sorely miss the presence of this courageous Marine who knew the meaning of going that extra mile to save a comrade. A true measure of his values is illustrated by the fact that he was more proud of the medevac rescue mission than any of the later awards and recognition that he received.

Semper fi, Dave.



and a lot of heart, rated a more suitable tribute. That belief led to this article.

The Woburn, Mass., native enlisted in the Marine Corps in September 1966. Upon completing recruit training, he attended Officer Candidates School and The Basic School at Quantico, Va. Second Lieutenant Cummings then served for several months as a platoon leader with the Second Battalion, First Marines in Vietnam. Seriously wound-

