



Christmas 1967, Khe Sanh, celebrated Ugly Angels style!
Capt Ben Cascio, standing, with fellow Ugly Angels in the foreground

The One-Eyed Ugly Angel – A True Marine Corps Legend

By Elaine Zimmer Davis
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An upside to searching for the remains of my first husband, Capt Jerry Zimmer, USMC, an F4 Phantom pilot shot down in the Que Son Mountains

of Vietnam and MIA since August 29, 1969, is my renewed respect for Marines whose countless acts of bravery during the Vietnam War saved the lives of many fellow Marines. One of those heroic acts was recorded on April 30, 1968--the first day of the hard-fought, four-day Battle of Dai Do.

Stationed aboard the Iwo Jima—a Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH) ship, floating about five miles off shore, from the mouth of the Cua Viet River in South Vietnam, Capt Ben Cascio and his crew of Ugly Angels (HMH-362) were on medevac stand-by when the call came from a unit with the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines (2/4), requesting a medevac for five seriously wounded Marines. Within minutes, Ben and his wingman, 1st Lt Robbie Robertson, were at the controls of their H-34 helicopters, en route to Dai Do, a stone's throw from Dong Ha and approximately eight miles south of the DMZ. Flying in the dead of night with 850 missions to his credit, Ben was unaware that the mission they were about to undertake would become a true Marine Corps legend.

As I prepare to write this blog, Ben has one request: “Please don't call me a hero — this mission was a team effort.” But even with the passage of time, many of his Marine Corps brethren still credit Ben with an enormous heroic feat that earned him the name, “The One-Eyed Ugly Angel” -- a moniker that Ben wears with pride. I think you'll agree that his story makes us all proud, no matter what we call him.

To put the story in perspective, medevac missions were always dangerous — even when a chopper was called in to pick up a victim with a combat medical emergency during the daylight hours, in what appeared to be a secure area. Nowhere was absolutely secure in Vietnam during that era. But the ante was raised when a call for medevac came at night — these missions were true emergencies, and pilots knew that they likely would be landing in a hot zone during a fire fight to evacuate recently wounded Marines. And although a moonless night could camouflage the big green workhorse, it did little to silence the H-34s huge Wright 1820 radial engine that emitted a loud guttural sound, announcing its arrival to our troops, as well as to the enemy. I asked Ben if he had a gut feeling that everything was going to blow up in his face — literally - on this particular mission. His response: “Doesn't make any difference — you go, no matter what. It's a matter of life and death.”

Before Ben and his crew of Ugly Angels -- co-pilot 1st Lt. Larry Houck, crew chief Bob Bush and a gunner -- dropped into the zone, he radioed ahead to the troops on the ground when he was a couple of miles out, telling them to put a strobe light where they wanted him to place his right wheel. They were flying into the zone without lights, and this would become the pick-up point for the medevacs. Ben was told that there had been heavy fighting earlier, but it was quiet at the moment. "When I broke the coast, I told Robbie to stay high and cover," said Ben.

At 0300, Ben dropped into the zone, and Bush immediately began loading the wounded. When he had three to five guys aboard, all hell broke loose. "The enemy opened up, and we started catching fire from all over the zone."

Between the time when the VC opened fire and the wounded were loaded, a minute or two seemed like forever, said Ben, who was wounded also during the barrage. Although unable to see, Ben didn't realize that he'd been hit. "I never felt any pain," he said, describing the sensation as 'being hit with a cold steak.' Meanwhile, Bob tells me we're okay, let's go. I still couldn't see. I called Larry, my co-pilot, but the noise was deafening from the automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). Larry didn't answer, so I reached over and still couldn't get a response from him. I called Bob, my crew chief, and told him that I thought Larry was hit, so I needed him to talk us out of the zone. Meanwhile, Bob is continuing to return fire, getting hit twice in the process."

Bush ultimately received credit for 12 kills but was devastated when days later he saw that his plane had taken 500-plus hits and looked like Swiss cheese. Bush also saw something else that caught his interest -- the map case in the cockpit was destroyed. He realized that when Ben leaned over to get Larry's attention, a round came up through the front panel and went through the map case that was mounted behind the pilot's head. Had Ben not been leaning over, the round would have gone through his head and likely killed him.

Ben knew they needed to get moving quickly. His crew chief was yelling, "Sir, we need to get out of here, or we're all going to get killed."

Ben took out his Kabar [knife] and broke the glass covering the critical gages on the instrument panel and started adding power. He used his fingers to feel the position of the needles but initially didn't have enough power to get the aircraft off the ground. At the time, he didn't realize that they had picked up eight medevacs, instead of five, and now had too much weight. Ben started rolling forward to get translational lift, with Bob telling him to go straight. There were trees on both sides, as they bounced along a dry, rocky riverbed, before finally getting airborne. I asked Ben if he felt as if they wouldn't make it out. "No, I never thought in those terms," he said.

Once in the air, Ben talked on the radio with his wingman, Robbie Robertson, telling him that he couldn't see and thought Larry had been hit. Due to the volume of fire, Robertson didn't think Ben would be coming out but now flew next to him. The two H-34s headed southeast to the point where the Dong Ha/Cua Viet River emptied into the Gulf of Tonkin. "Robbie had called ahead to the Cua Viet USN/USMC Base, and they refused to turn the lights on, so he told them, 'you either light up the area, or I'm going to fucking light you up.'" Apparently they turned on the lights, said Ben.

As the old saying goes, any landing you can walk away from is a good landing. Tucked in close to Ben, Robertson talked them down, and although it was a hard landing on the beach, it proved much less eventful than everything else that had transpired. At some point as they were getting ready to land, Ben could feel pressure fighting him on the controls. Houck evidently had recovered from being temporarily incapacitated and losing all radio communication during the firefight. When the shooting began, Ben eventually learned that Houck had ducked and ripped the cords out of his helmet and couldn't hear what was going on. Relatively new in-country, Houck had experienced his first medevac mission and first night mission in a baptism of fire. (Years later, Ben found out that co-pilot Larry Houck had not died as a result of wounds received during the Dai Do mission, as he had assumed, but rather in a mid-air crash not long after.)

Once on the ground, several other Ugly Angels arrived from the Iwo Jima to help transport all the wounded to the *Repose*, the hospital ship that was near-by. The squadron's corpsman, Master Chief "Doc" Jones,

immediately performed emergency procedures to keep Ben from bleeding out. “Doc saved my life,” said Ben, whose voice quivered for the first time, telling me that Doc and he had remained friends until his untimely death a decade ago, the day after Ben was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame in New Jersey.

When they arrived at the *Repose*, Ben was rushed into surgery, undergoing a serious operation to save his eyes. It was confirmed that shrapnel had entered both eyes. “I didn’t know if I’d ever see again,” said Ben, but thanks to a skilled Navy ophthalmologist, Dr. Bernabe Loret De Mola, Ben underwent experimental laser eye surgery, and it was a partial success. Although the left eye was gone, Dr. Loret De Mola was able to save the right one. After the doctor’s tour of duty ended with the Navy, he returned to New York City, where he was on the staff of St. Vincent Hospital and opened a private practice in West New York, NJ — not far from Ben’s hometown. “Dr. Loret De Mola was my eye doctor for 45 years, and he never would send me a bill in all those years,” said Ben, who credits Dr. Loret De Mola with saving his vision.

Following the surgery, Ben spent the next seven days recuperating aboard the *Repose*, before they let him return to the *Iwo Jima* to gather his gear and say good-bye to his buddies - everyone was thinking the same thing, including Ben. Would the one-eyed Ugly Angel ever fly again? Enter Walt Casey, a favorite among the Ugly Angels with a wicked sense of humor. He and Robbie Robertson elected to fly Ben back to the *Repose* for the ride of his life. The guys knew that Ben was concerned that his flying career had come to an end. So Walt decided to shortcut the system. After all, how could the military say that Ben couldn’t fly if he already had flown? “Especially if he put one on the back of the hospital ship (a little tricky even on a good day) without putting the struts through the rotor head or the chopper in the drink,” wrote Walt in an email before his death in 2001, to fellow Ugly Angels, recounting the events of that day.

Walt, Robbie, Ben and the crew chief all climbed aboard the H-34, and Walt asked Ben, “Do you want to fly?” Ben pulled the bandages off his good eye and got into the co-pilot’s seat, next to Robbie who was the Helicopter Aircraft Commander (HAC) for the mission. Ben could make out large objects, so he took over the controls, while Walt went down

below to prepare for a little more drama. The crew chief wrapped Walt's body -- from head to toe -- in battle dressing.

Approaching the *Repose*, Ben called and announced, "Medevac Inbound." The landing went perfectly. Ben greased it on with no problem. Meanwhile, Walt was spread out in the belly of the aircraft, wrapped like a mummy, when the stretcher crew ran over to remove him from the back of the plane. Instead, Walt stood up and started unwinding his bandages, telling them that they had the wrong guy. Out comes Ben, who climbs down from the cockpit, still in his pajamas with one-eye bandaged, and gets on the stretcher. Walt and Robbie made a quick getaway, which was a good thing. Ben said that the Commanding Officer of the *Repose* was apoplectic, but for Ben it was an unforgettable send-off, before his return to the states. Ben spent the next nine months in Philadelphia Naval Hospital recuperating, before his return to duty. Finally clearing all the red-tape, Ben got back on flight status and remained on active duty for another year, before his retirement in 1969, following a decade of service.

Ben's career may have been cut short because of his vision, but not his flying days. For the past several years, Ben and Capt Rusty Sachs, USMC, Ret. -- a fellow Ugly Angel from their Vietnam days — have been flying a restored H-34 (Ugly Angel, of course) to air shows and Marine Corps bases around the country. And more recently, the two Marines returned to Vietnam for the first time in over 40 years with Military Historical Tours, led by Capt Ed Garr, USMC, Ret. "It was a marvelous experience," said Ben, who spent a full day with Rusty and Ed at the Dai Do battle site, before visiting other areas where the Ugly Angels had left their mark. Although Rusty had left Vietnam six months before the Dai Do encounter, his two final in-country landings were at the exact same location where Ben had landed on the beach in a state of blindness, after the shootout at Dai Do.

Ben said that he never would have gone back to Vietnam had it not been for the invitation he received from Major General James Livingston, USMC, Ret, whose recently published, *NOBLE WARRIOR**, has received excellent reviews for its recounting of the Battle of Dai Do for which he received the Medal of Honor. "When the General asks you a question, it's an order, and I said, "Yes, Sir." "The trip was perfect in every way,"

said Ben, who remembers that none of the Vietnamese people used to smile. “Today, everyone smiles, and there is no animosity. Vietnam is an outstanding country.”

Postscript: For years, Ben wondered what had happened to his eight medevacs from the Battle of Dai Do. In 1978, Gen Weise, who was LtCol Weise, CO, 2/4, during the battle, invited Ben to their 10th reunion at Camp Lejeune. While there, he learned that all the medevacs had survived, and he had an opportunity to meet five of them during the reunion. Another surprise awaited him. The 2/4 made Ben one of their own, anointing him with the name, “One-Eyed Ugly Bastard” to complement the Battalion’s nickname, “The Magnificent Bastards.” Like Ben’s two extra prosthetic eyeballs, one of which displays a USMC globe & anchor and the other a skull and cross bones, Ben now has use of two prestigious names -- The One-Eyed Ugly Angel, and the One-Eyed Ugly Bastard. “Sometimes it’s a dilemma,” laughs Ben.

***NOBLE WARRIOR: The Story of Maj. Gen. James E. Livingston,
USMC (Ret), Medal of Honor. By James E. Livingston with Colin D.
Heaton and Anne-Marie Lewis.**

