

MAJOR STEPHEN MOUNT

On August 5, 2004, AH1 Cobras and Huey gunships flew in to support embattled Marines in Iraq, but they were soon attacked by a wall of concentrated small arms fire.

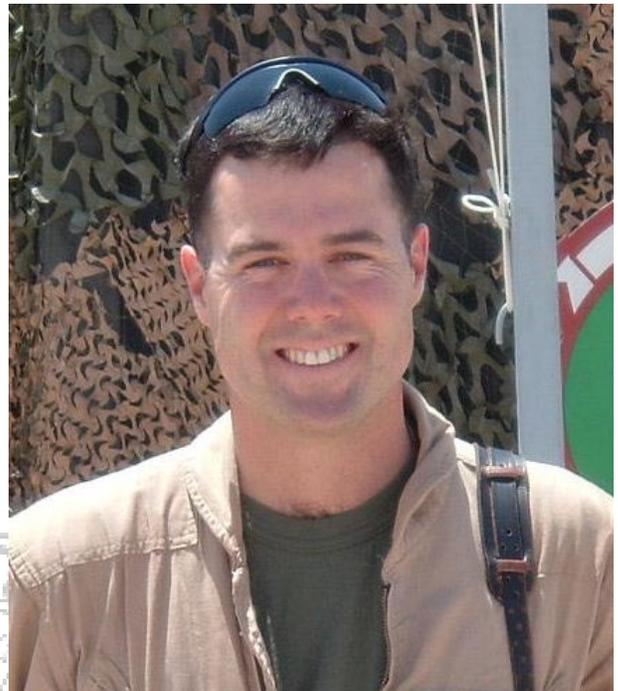
Marine pilot then-Capt. Stephen Mount was the designated section leader for the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 166 aircraft. He and his section were attached to the Battalion Landing Team 1/4, a ground combat element, and routinely provided their close air support.

On this particular day, the BLT 1/4 Marines had reinforced friendly Iraqi forces in contact with Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Militia forces. They were near the Wadi al-Salaam Cemetery when they came under enemy fire from multiple sources.

Mount's section was flying in a holding area outside the city of An Najaf when he got word that the BLT needed assistance. Despite receiving heavy small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire, Mount courageously led his section in multiple attack runs on enemy forces. Eliminating the threat, he was called to make another run against a suspected mortar position.

"We came in on a south to northwest attack at about 90 to 100 knots but we couldn't see it," said Mount. "As we came around to the right, we got hit." Mount was struck in the head. According to the summary of action, "the bullet passed through his helmet visor, into his right eye and out his right temple."

"It felt like I got whacked in the head by a bat. There was a loud ringing in my ears, and I lost vision except for light and dark," said Mount.



Encinitas, CA
Purple Heart

He recalls what happened next. "I involuntarily jerked back on the stick. The nose of the aircraft climbed until it was nearly straight up," Mount continued. "Capt. Andrew Turner [Mount's co-pilot], instantly took control, leveled the aircraft and got some forward momentum just as we slammed into the ground.

According to his Air Medal (Gold Star) citation, despite the immense pain from the gunshot, Mount helped coordinate the flight control inputs with Turner to land the helicopter, saving the lives of the crew -- Cpl "Ted" Naranjo and then-SSgt Patrick Burgess.

"We hit on the edge of the street, bounced a couple of times, hit a lamp post and skidded to a stop in a courtyard. It happened so fast, we didn't have time to shut down the engines," continued Mount.

Within minutes, a reaction force that saw the Huey go down, was on site warding off approaching Iraqis who had RPGs and RPK machine guns. Meanwhile, Burgess, the lead crew chief, helped drag Mount to a covered position behind a small wall. The firefight from the cemetery kicked off an intense three-day battle.

Mount received the Purple Heart for his injuries. He remains on active duty in a non-flight status.