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AC-119 gunships packed deadly fire, but operating both low and slow, were best suited to night operations. In May 1972, that wasn't an option for their crew of Stinger 41.

'Prepare to Abandon the Aircraft!'

Inside a Vietnam War aircrew's shutdown and the fight to honor their courage.

By Matthew Cox

The 10 Airmen of Stinger 41 knew the risks of flying their AC-119K gunship in daylight over enemy anti-aircraft gunners—a rare mission for an aircraft designed for night operations in the Vietnam War.

It was May 1972, an intense period in the war, and they had their orders. Besieged South Vietnamese forces near Saigon needed help. Once over their objective, explosions from North Vietnamese Army (NVA) anti-aircraft fire rocked the slow-moving gunship as the crew struggled to locate their target. After several unsuccessful passes, enemy 37 mm fire tore into the plane's two right engines, engulfing them in flames.

Stinger 41 was going down. Seven crew members managed to don parachutes, bail out, and survive in the enemy-infested jungle until being rescued several hours later. The pilot and two other crew members perished in the crash.

In the aftermath, Capt. Terry Courtney, the pilot, was honored posthumously with the Air Force Cross,

"The courage and sacrifice of these Airmen demands recognition befitting their gallantry."

—Former Secretary of the Air Force Whit Peters

the Air Force's second-highest award for valor, following only the Medal of Honor. Award packages prepared for the remaining nine crew members were never reviewed; they were lost when the 18th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) was deactivated in December of that year.

Now, a half century later, the AC-119 Gunship Association is fighting to right that wrong and ensure that the crew of Stinger 41 is recognized for the courage displayed on that mission and to overcome two rulings amid the chaos of the May 1972 mission. To win, they will have to overcome not one but two rulings by the Secretary of the Air Force Decorations Board, in 2022 and 2024, that downgraded awards for two crew members killed in the crash and denied decorations for the seven survivors.

STINGER 41 CREW:

■ **Staff Sgt. Ken Brown**, illuminator operator and jumpmaster, (KIA)

■ **Capt. Terry Courtney**, pilot and aircraft commander, (KIA)

- **Capt. Rod Slagle**, Navigator, (KIA)
- **1st. Lt. Larry Barbee**, navigator and night operations scope operator
- **Staff Sgt. Allen “Yogi” Bare**, flight engineer, (Deceased 2000)
- **1st. Lt. Jimmy Barkalow**, copilot, (Deceased 2021)
- **Airman 1st Class Richard Corbett**, aerial gunner
- **Staff. Sgt. Dale Iman**, aerial gunner
- **Staff Sgt. Francis Sledzinski**, lead aerial gunner
- **Lt. Col. Byron Taschioglou**, forward looking infrared operator, (Deceased 2002).

Former Air Force officials leading the awards request effort—backed by a former Air Force Secretary and 24 retired generals—have written to Colby Jenkins, assistant secretary of defense for special operations forces and low intensity Conflict and to President Donald Trump for support. They argue that the board “failed in process and fairness” when considering the dangers crew members faced while flying in daylight through concentrated NVA anti-aircraft fire to support embattled South Vietnamese forces.

In a letter to Jenkins, former Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters requested an “independent and impartial review” of the Stinger 41 case. Peters, a Navy veteran, is a former Board Chairman of the Air & Space Forces Association, which publishes Air & Space Forces Magazine.

“The courage and sacrifice of these Airmen demands recognition befitting their gallantry,” the June 17 letter states.

AIRCREWS UNDER FIRE LATE IN THE WAR

In March 1972, the North Vietnamese Army launched its Easter Offensive, sending more than 100,000 troops equipped

with Soviet-built tanks, artillery and anti-aircraft systems, into South Vietnam. They quickly began overwhelming South Vietnamese defenses.

The U.S. Army had already begun its “Vietnamization” program, withdrawing ground combat troops from Southeast Asia and turning the fighting back to the South Vietnamese Army. But American airpower was still actively engaged in combat. AC-119 crews, equipped with infrared targeting sensors, four 7.62 mm miniguns and two 20 mm cannons, routinely braved anti-aircraft fire flying night missions against enemy tanks and ground vehicles.

The Korean War-era AC-119 didn’t fly on daylight missions because it was slow, and its all-black exterior made it an easy target. But on May 2, 1972, the crew of Stinger 41 took on an urgent daylight mission: A pallet of ammunition had been misdropped during an aerial resupply mission in An Loc, 65 miles north of Saigon, and with the NVA having encircled the city, it had to be destroyed before the enemy could seize it.

Carrying as much ammunition as possible, Stinger 41 took off from Bien Hoa Air Base at noon and was over the target area by 2 p.m. Below, thousands of NVA soldiers were launching repeated attacks on An Loc.

Flying at 3,500 feet, crew members realized it would be difficult to spot the orange-marked ammunition pallet in the triple-canopy jungle that surrounded the city, and began orbiting the target area in search of their quarry.

That’s when three enemy 37 mm anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) positions opened fire. Airbursting munitions exploded into black clouds of shrapnel around the plane.

“Whenever the shells burst around the plane ... you see this



Surviving members of the Stinger 41 crew pose in front of one of the A-1 Skyraiders that assisted in their rescue. Top row—Staff Sgt. Allen Bare, 1st Lt. Larry Barbee, Staff Sgt. Francis Sledzinski, Lt. Col. Byron Taschioglou. Bottom row—Airman 1st Class Richard Corbett, Staff Sgt. Dale Iman, 1st Lt. Jimmy Barkalow. Far left— 1st Lt. Larmar Smith, A-1 Skyraider pilot who flew air support on the rescue mission. Far right—Denny Morgan, A-1 Skyraider pilot who flew air support on the rescue mission.



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Most gunships, like this AC-119G, were painted black on the bottom. It made them less visible from the ground at night.

flash and then those black particles going out,” recalled 1st Lt. Larry Barbee, navigator and night operations scope operator, years later in a video interview. “You could hear whenever they were hitting the fuselage.”

The aircraft climbed to 4,500 feet as the crew continued their search. Crew members leaned out of the aircraft, two at a time, trying to spot the source of enemy fire. But the well-camouflaged enemy gunners knew to wait until the aircraft had passed them before firing, and tracer fire disappeared in the sunshine.

Then Capt. Tom Milligan, flying an O-2A Skymaster alongside Stinger 41, recalled the radio traffic. Stinger 41’s pilot said he planned to make one more pass in search of the target, then break off, wait and return again.

“All of a sudden, I saw his right wing just explode in fire,” Milligan, who retired as a lieutenant colonel, told *Air & Space Forces Magazine* in summer 2025, the memory as vivid now as ever. “His wing just was in flames from the piston engine out past the jet [engine] and all the way to the wing tip, and flames were leaping back 20 or 30 feet behind the wings down the side of the fuselage.”

Inside the aircraft, Airman 1st Class Richard Corbett heard a loud “foom, foom!” As the wing ignited, he witnessed the “reflection of the flames on the inside of the aircraft.”

Both right engines lost power and crew members began their emergency procedures.

“There was all kinds of sheet metal hanging and blowing in the wind,” Barbee said. “I thought to myself, ‘we are going to be all right. We are just going to shut down the engines and fly back.’”

It wasn’t so simple. The pilot’s voice boomed over the intercom—“prepare to abandon the aircraft!”

BAILING OUT

The crew strapped on parachutes, helping each other, and Staff Sgt. Francis Sledzinski opened the jump door and jettisoned the flare launcher to clear the way.

“I heard Capt. Courtney say ‘abandon the aircraft’ twice. I

unplugged my mic, and I was out the door,” he recalled in his video account.

Sledzinski recalled pulling the ripcord, opening his parachute.

“I’m looking around trying to figure out what was going on, and I heard this phit, phit, phit sound,” he said. “I realized that the bad guys on the ground were shooting at me.”

Sledzinski descended through the trees, but his parachute snagged on a tree and he hung there, just 2 feet from the ground. He unhooked his parachute and started moving.

“The jungle was so thick that I had to get on my hands and knees and crawl until I came to an area that had a small opening with a dead tree in it,” Sledzinski said. “I sat down there, drank one of my canteens dry, and turned on the radio.”

Corbett recalled approaching the jump door surprised that “this is really happening.” He told himself, “don’t stop at the door and don’t look down,” he recalled in a video. “The next thing I knew, I had opened my eyes and I’m looking up and I pulled my ripcord.”

He saw Sledzinski being shot at on the way down, but powerless to do anything, he focused on his own survival, steering his parachute toward a small clearing.

Barbee’s parachute descended into trees. “I put the visor on my helmet down, I put my legs together, I turned my head to the side so I wouldn’t get stabbed by the tree limbs and I shut my eyes,” Barbee said, tree limbs breaking off as he thumped and banged through the canopy.

“I thought, I’m going to get stuck in a tree and they are going to come along and shoot me,” he recalled, but when he opened his eyes, he was only a foot from the ground. In what “seemed like a half a second later I was already across that clearing ... and deciding which way to go.”

Lt. Col. Byron Taschioglou, Staff Sgt. Allen Bare, and Staff Sgt. Dale Iman also bailed out and landed safely. First Lt. Jim Barkalow, the aircraft’s copilot, was the last to bail out of the plane. Only about 300 feet in the air, it was far below the minimum safe altitude for a parachute to open safely.

“Terry Courtney and I were flying the airplane as best we could with the drag and the lack of power,” recalled Barkalow, who survived the fall and later retired as a lieutenant colonel. “I ran to the back and jumped out,” he says in a video. “I pulled [the ripcord] the second I exited the airplane, and I hit the trees.”

Barkalow’s parachute collapsed and he plummeted 40 feet through trees, lacerating his head.

Seconds later, retired Lt. Gen. Thomas Waskow, who was then a first lieutenant, serving as a second forward air controller that day, witnessed the aircraft “pitch up and roll inverted and hit the ground almost straight nose down.”

Courtney, Brown and Slagle were killed before they could escape.

SURVIVING ALONE IN THE JUNGLE

As soon as the crew of Stinger 41 started bailing out, Milligan and Waskow began coordinating one of the largest search and rescue operations of the war. They radioed to launch a search and rescue force, which included two HH-3E Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters escorted by two A-1 Skyraider combat aircraft.

This was a highly complex rescue. Milligan said he typically would have to keep track of one or two downed pilots, but this time he was trying to track seven crew members. He noticed a stream running through the jungle and traced it on his windshield with a grease pencil.

“Then as each survivor came off and came down, I [marked] where they landed in reference to this little stream,”

Milligan said.

The survivors on the ground tried to manage their fear and fall back on their survival training.

“I found a hiding place and I remember shaking like this,” Corbett said, shaking his hands frenetically. He remembered struggling to put camouflage paint on his face.

“Mosquitoes were buzzing around. I was sweating. I said, ‘You need to calm yourself down.’”

Taschioglou landed in a grove of bamboo trees. Escape and evasion training taught him to move away from his landing site for 15 minutes.

“I just ran and I didn’t care whether it was 15 minutes or not; I just stopped when I was tired,” Taschioglou said in an audio letter to his family on May 7, 1972.

“I picked a fairly good hiding place—the best thing I could find at the time—because I was too tired to move any further,” said Taschioglou, who then called Milligan on the radio. He put his radio down briefly and then heard Milligan answer, “I read you loud and clear ... assume cover, help is coming, and don’t worry, buddy.”

The next thing Taschioglou heard was machine gun fire only about 20 meters from his position.

“I just got up, and I started going like crazy on my hands and knees through the jungle in the opposite direction of that machine gun,” he said. “I really don’t know how long I crawled.”

He found a new hiding place under a dead tree limb. He crawled in backward, so he was facing out, Taschioglou said. “I camouflaged myself, darkened my face, then I pulled out

Capt. Terry Courtney sitting alone in the cockpit of a AC-119K gunship. With his plane’s wing on fire, Courtney twice ordered the crew to abandon the aircraft, ensuring most survived. He did not.



AC-119 Gunship Association

my gun and just sat there and waited.”

Gunfire erupted all around him as NVA forces began shooting at the forward air controllers and arriving helicopters. Skyraider aircraft strafed enemy positions with machine guns and fired rockets, Corbett said.

Barbee fought to maintain his self control. “To actually gain control in that situation and maintain it was very difficult,” he said.

One by one, Milligan talked to each crew member on the radio, saying, “I know where you are. Stay hidden. Stay cool.”

Sledzinski, connecting with Milligan by radio, recalled their brief conversation.

“He asked me where I was, and I told him I was in the jungle, and he started laughing,” Sledzinski said. He heard Milligan’s airplane and told him so. “He turned around, came back, put [his aircraft] on the side, looked over at me and smiled and waved.”

RESCUE

Sledzinski was the first to be rescued, but not without a fight. Waskow had coordinated with two Army UH-1 Huey helicopters in the area. One got within about 20 feet of his position, but “ground fire opens up all around us and starts hitting the chopper, and the chopper pulls off smoking,” Sledzinski said.

Two Skyraiders flew in on either side of Sledzinski, firing machine guns into the jungle. An Army medevac Huey followed close behind. Sledzinski popped a flare to mark his location.

“This medevac chopper comes, they slide the door back ... and the three of them opened up with M-60 machine guns around me,” he said.

Another Soldier threw a rope down, Sledzinski tied it to his equipment and he dangled at the end of it while the Huey flew him to a nearby South Vietnamese firebase.

It was early evening when Jolly Green Giant helicopters were able to lower their jungle penetrator devices to pick up the other downed crew members. The first time Taschioglou reached for the penetrator, he “just about had my arms around it when they lifted it right up and they left,” he said. “I almost sat there and cried.”

The helicopter returned and lowered the penetrator again, this time closer to Barbee’s position.

Barbee let the penetrator hit the ground so he wouldn’t get shocked by the static electricity generated by the rotor blades. After being hoisted up and pulled inside, “one of the guys on the helicopter handed me an M16.” He was now on watch for the enemy.

When Taschioglou’s turn came around again, he said he held the penetrator so tight the Soldiers had to pry his hands loose once he was in the helicopter. As darkness fell, the helicopter picked up Bare and began to leave. Taschioglou said he got up and asked, “Why are you going? There’s more guys down there.” That’s when he learned that the other Jolly Green had already picked up Corbett, Barkalow, and Iman.

After a brief hospital stay, the seven survivors received a heroes’ welcome. They received automatic Purple Hearts for their injuries but no official recognition for their role in the dangerous mission. To Milligan and Waskow, there is no question that the crew of Stinger 41 acted with heroic professionalism throughout the harrowing ordeal.

Flying the mission in daylight over previously identified enemy anti-aircraft guns in a “big, lumbering plane” placed the crew in incredible danger, Milligan said.

“There were several reasons why they deserve recognition—one was just flying that plane over that very dangerous place,”

Milligan said. “Secondly, they were attacked by some mighty big guns, and they stayed. They just didn’t leave ... they stuck it out. And then, of course, they get shot down over one of the most dangerous places in Southeast Asia.

THE FIGHT FOR RECOGNITION

In June 2021, the gunship association submitted the first version of a reconstructed awards package. The Air Force returned it requesting more information. Association Vice President, retired Air Force Col. Roy Davis, Waskow, and others revised the package and resubmitted it in January 2022, this time with the backing of Sen. Mark Kelly (D-Ariz.), a Navy veteran and former astronaut.

The decorations board ruled in April, downgrading the Silver Star recommendation for Brown to a Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor and the DFC recommendation for Slagle to an Air Medal. Both had died in the crash. But the board denied the Silver Star for Barkalow, the copilot who stayed with the pilot until the last minutes of flight. It also denied DFC recommendations for the remaining six survivors.

Undaunted, Davis pressed ahead. He sought and won the support of Peters and 24 retired Air Force generals, all of whom had combat experience, and formally requested the board reconsider in May 2024, but the board’s original decision was upheld. The board considered the “entire submission anew” in October 2024 and decided “there was no basis to disturb the original decision,” Steven Harris, Air Force Personnel Center’s director of complaints resolution wrote in a Feb. 28 response letter regarding the decision.

Harris wrote that the board doubted the suggestion that the original awards packages were lost, believing instead that it was “more likely than not, the entire crew of Stinger 41 was duly considered for recognition” in 1972.

Davis questioned that conclusion, noting that among the documents submitted was a signed affidavit from retired Air Force Lt. Col. Charles Pollock, the awards and decorations officer for the 18th SOS, who wrote the original awards package for the crew members in 1972.

Pollock said the original awards package was approved by the squadron commander and wing commander and sent up the chain of command, the affidavit states.

“The entire crew distinguished themselves by extraordinary achievement in combat,” Pollock’s affidavit states. “It appears that these important awards got lost in the fog of war as we were closing out combat operations.”

Davis, a pilot with combat experience, criticized the board’s ruling and disputing the notion that the crew “did not meet the criteria” for valor awards. Undeterred, he took his mission to a higher authority, writing on July 4 to President Trump, asking the President to take a “personal interest in this case and help restore justice to these heroes and their families.”

Attempts by Air & Space Forces Magazine for comment from the White House, Jenkins, and the Air Force went unanswered by press time.

To Waskow, the crew members’ actions throughout the mission’s “horrific” conditions “resulted in seven of the 10 surviving.” He added that AC-119s flew no more daylight missions because the “air tasking authority realized that was just too dangerous for them.”

“We’re not doing this because it’s a medal hunt,” Waskow said. “We’re doing this to say thank you to the crew and for the young [Air Force Special Operations Command] kids today to know that people recognize what you do and want to thank you for it, even if it was 55 years ago.”

