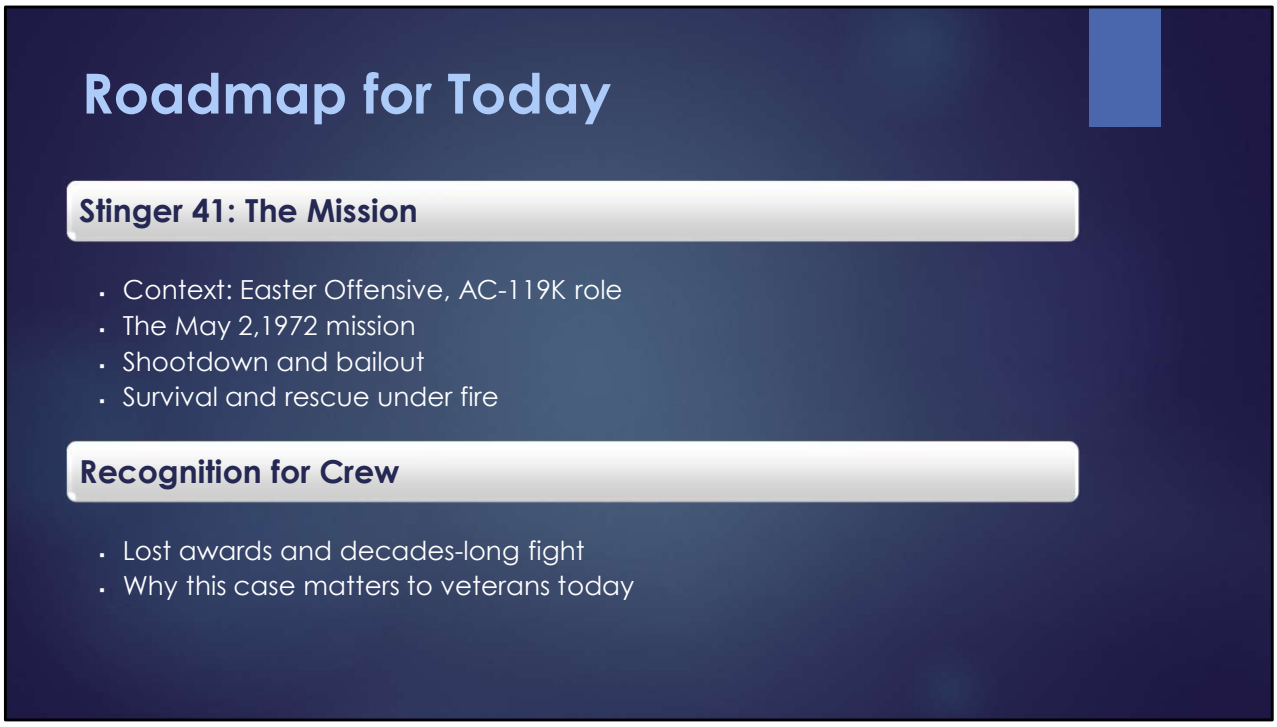
Stinger 41:

The AC-119K Gunship Mission of May 2, 1972

Courage, Survival, and the Fight for Recognition

Presented by: Tom Waskow, Lt Gen USAF (Retired)

"Today we're looking at one mission near the end of the Vietnam War—an AC-119K gunship call sign 'Stinger 41,' shot down in May 1972.
We'll walk through what happened that day, how seven out of ten Airmen survived in the jungle, how they were rescued under heavy fire, and why, more than 50 years later, there is still a fight to properly recognize their actions.
I know many of you have your own stories from that war and others; my goal is to honor this crew in a way that also honors your service."



“Here’s how we’ll use the next 40 minutes. We’ll set the stage in 1972, walk through the mission and the shootdown, then focus on the survival and search-and-rescue that followed.
The second half will look at what went wrong with the awards process, and why veterans and former senior leaders are still pushing the Air Force and DoD to revisit this case.”

The AC-119K Gunship

- Korean War–era C-119 converted to gunship
- Armed with:
  - 4 × 7.62 mm miniguns
  - 2 × 20 mm cannons
- Infrared sensors for night targeting
- All-black paint, slow and heavily armed
- Designed for NIGHT operations, low and slow
- Highly vulnerable in daylight to AAA

Low and slow - day



Infrared Sensors



7.62 mm Miniguns



20 mm Cannons



"The AC-119K 'Stinger' was a tough old C-119 cargo plane turned into a night gunship—slow, armed to the teeth, with infrared sensors for finding trucks, tanks, and troop movements in the dark.
Its strengths were firepower and loiter time, not speed. At night it was deadly. In daylight, that big black, slow-moving aircraft was a perfect target for anti-aircraft batteries. That's key to understanding why this particular mission was so dangerous."

1972: The Easter Offensive

Vietnam, Spring1972

March 1972: NVA launches Easter Offensive

100,000+ NVA troops, Soviet tanks, artillery, AAA

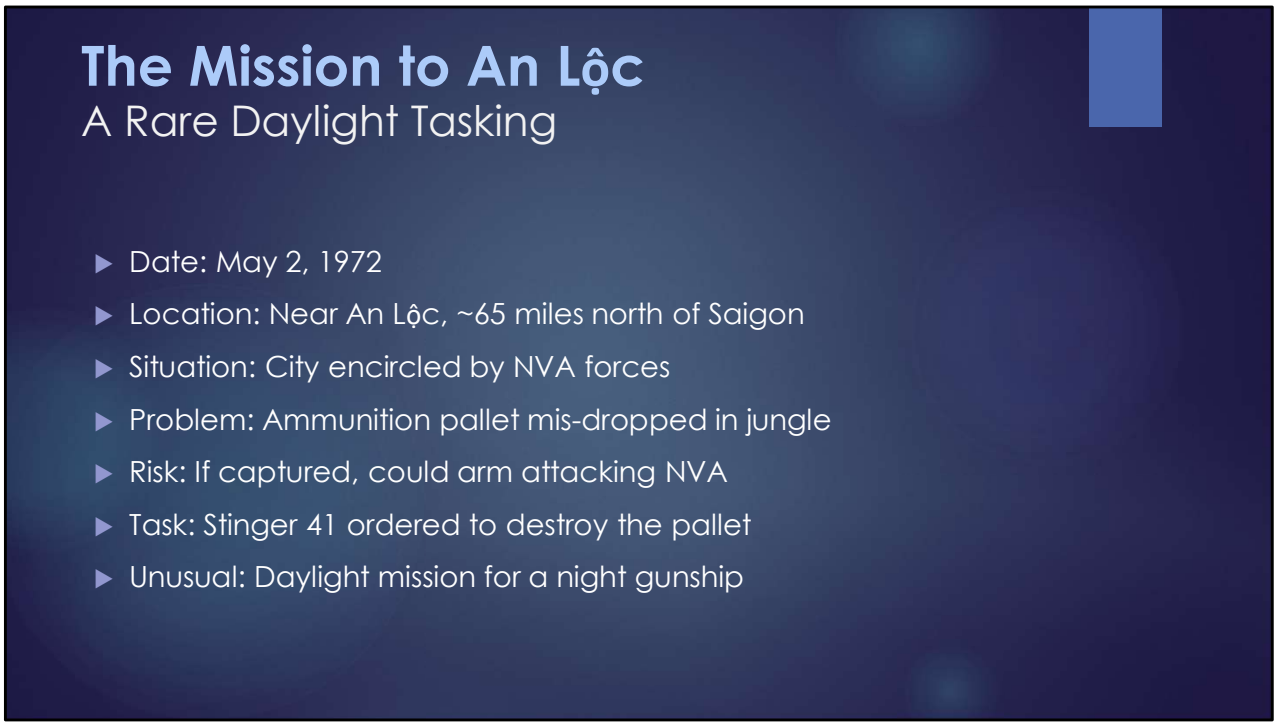
South Vietnamese forces under heavy pressure

U.S. ground combat troops mostly withdrawn

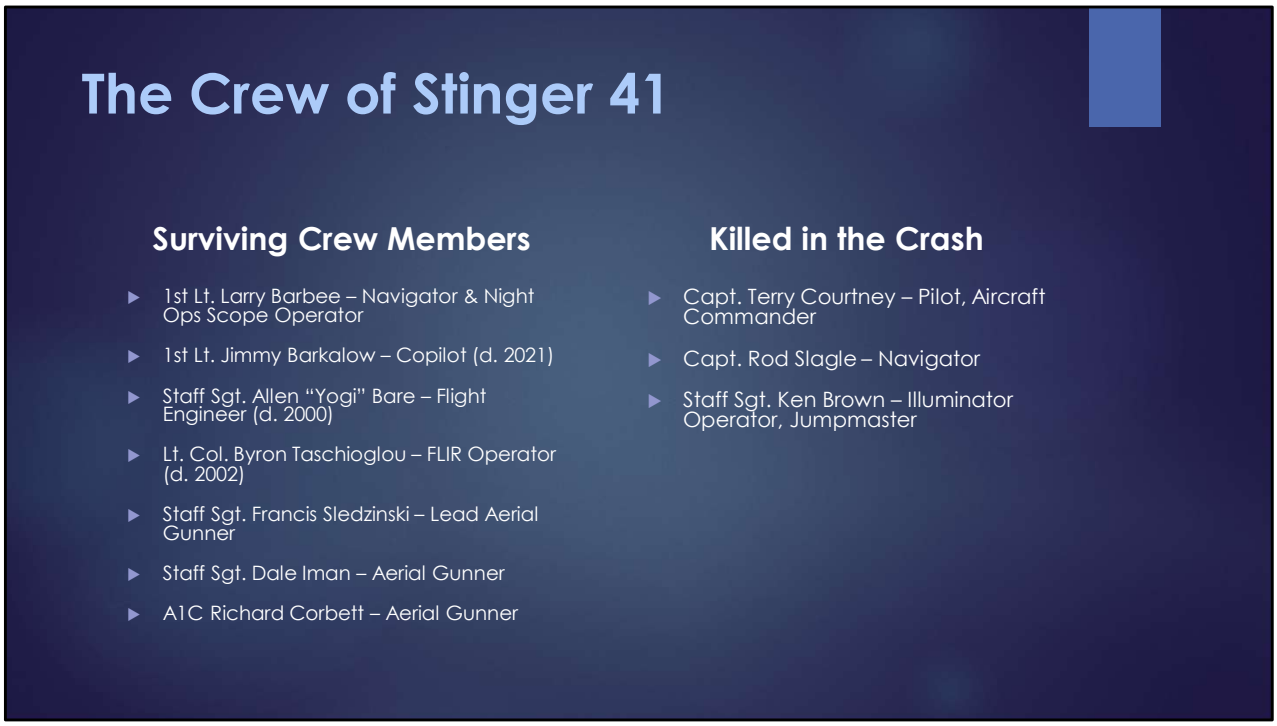
U.S. airpower still in the fight

AC-119s: night interdiction against tanks and convoys

"By 1972, the U.S. was drawing down ground forces. 'Vietnamization' was underway; ARVN units were supposed to carry the ground fight. But in March, the North Vietnamese launched a major conventional offensive—armor, artillery, and a lot of anti-aircraft guns.
Airpower—fighters, bombers, gunships—was still heavily engaged. AC-119 crews were routinely flying at night over heavily defended areas, going after tanks and vehicles pushing south."



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"This is the ten-man crew of Stinger 41. Three never made it out of the aircraft; seven bailed out and survived.
If you're presenting to veterans, you might pause here and mention any service branch or era connections in the audience—many will recognize roles like flight engineer, FAC, or Jolly Green crews from their own experience."

The Crew of Stinger 41

Killed in the Crash

- Capt. Terry Courtney – Pilot, Aircraft Commander
- Capt. Rod Slagle – Navigator
- Staff Sgt. Ken Brown – Illuminator Operator, Jumpmaster



Capt. Terry Courtney



Capt. Rod Slagle



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Capt. Terry Courtney



Capt. Rod Slagle



Staff Sgt. Ken Brown

The Crew of Stinger 41
Surviving Crew Members

- 1st Lt. Larry Barbee – Navigator & Night Ops Scope Operator
- 1st Lt. Jimmy Barkalow – Copilot (d. 2021)
- Staff Sgt. Allen "Yogi" Bare – Flight Engineer (d. 2000)
- Lt. Col. Byron Taschioglou – FLIR Operator (d. 2002)
- Staff Sgt. Francis Sledzinski – Lead Aerial Gunner
- Staff Sgt. Dale Iman – Aerial Gunner
- A1C Richard Corbett – Aerial Gunner



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Searching Under Fire:
Searching for the Target

- Takeoff: Bien Hoa, around noon
- Over target area by ~1400 hrs, altitude ~3,500–4,500 feet
- Objective: Spot an orange-marked ammo pallet in triple-canopy jungle
- Three NVA 37 mm AAA sites open up
- Airbursts: flashes, black shrapnel clouds
- Shrapnel heard striking the fuselage
- Crew continues making passes to find the pallet



"Once over An Lộc, the crew started orbits, trying to visually and sensor-track one pallet in thick jungle. Pretty quickly, three 37-mm anti-aircraft positions opened up.
Survivors later described seeing the black bursts above the aircraft and hearing fragments hit the fuselage—familiar sounds to a lot of you. Despite this, they stayed in the pattern, still trying to find the pallet and complete the job."

Catastrophic Hit: Wing Ablaze

- O-2A FACs alongside (Tom Milligan) and above (Lt Gen Waskow) witnesses hit
- Right wing erupts in flames, piston engine past jet to wingtip
- Flames trailing 20–30 feet behind wing
- Inside: "foom, foom!" as explosions rock aircraft
- Fire visible reflecting off interior
- Both right engines lose power
- Sheet metal hanging, whipping in the slipstream

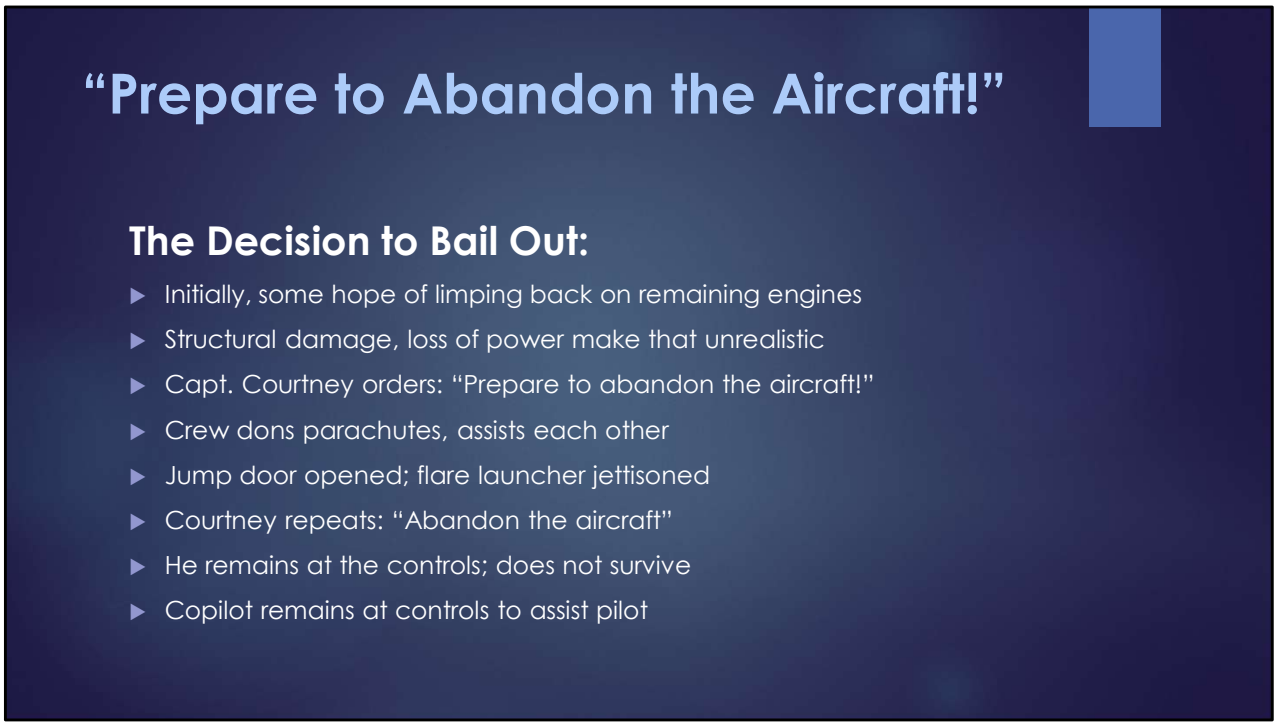


FAC Tom Waskow



FAC Tom Milligan

"An O-2 forward air controller (Lt Gen Tom Waskow), had a clear view. He saw Stinger 41's right wing explode in fire—from the inboard piston engine past the jet engine all the way to the tip.
Inside, the crew hears and feels the blast and sees the flames reflecting off the interior. Both right engines are gone, and suddenly this already slow aircraft becomes barely controllable, with serious structural damage."
Both pilots needed at controls to keep aircraft from crashing



"Some of the crew initially thought they might be able to shut down the right engines and nurse the aircraft back. But the structural damage and fire made that impossible.

At this point, leadership becomes very clear: Capt. Terry Courtney gets on the intercom and orders the crew to prepare to abandon the aircraft, then to abandon it. He stays at the controls to keep the aircraft flyable long enough for others to get out. Without the copilot the aircraft would have crashed immediately.

That decision—and his sticking with it—likely saved seven lives."

Jumping into Hostile Territory

Bailing Out Under Fire

- Order: bail out over enemy-held jungle
- NVA on ground fire at parachutes ("phit, phit, phit")
- Several crew members snag in trees, but only 1–2 feet off the ground
- Training kicks in: visor down, legs together, head turned
- Copilot Barkalow jumps last, at ~300 feet
  - Below normal safe altitude
  - Rips through trees, badly cut but alive
- Aircraft then pitches up, rolls inverted, impacts nose-down as witnessed by Lt Gen Waskow.

"Every survivor described a moment of disbelief at the jump door: 'This is really happening.' They step out into an enemy-infested jungle with people actively shooting at them while under canopy.
Several end up hanging in trees but close to the ground; they cut away or unhook quickly to get moving. Barkalow's jump at about 300 feet below minimum parachute opening altitude. He yanks the cord the instant he clears the aircraft, crashes through branches, and survives.
Moments later, the aircraft goes in almost nose-first. Courtney, Brown, and Slagle never make it out."

Escape and Evasion

Alone in the Triple-Canopy Jungle

- Seven survivors scattered across the jungle
- Training tells them:
  - Move away from landing site
  - Find concealment, stay low
  - Camouflage faces, avoid noise
- Fear, shock, and physical injuries
- Some crawl on hands and knees through dense growth
- Each finds a hiding spot—under dead trees, in thickets, near small clearings

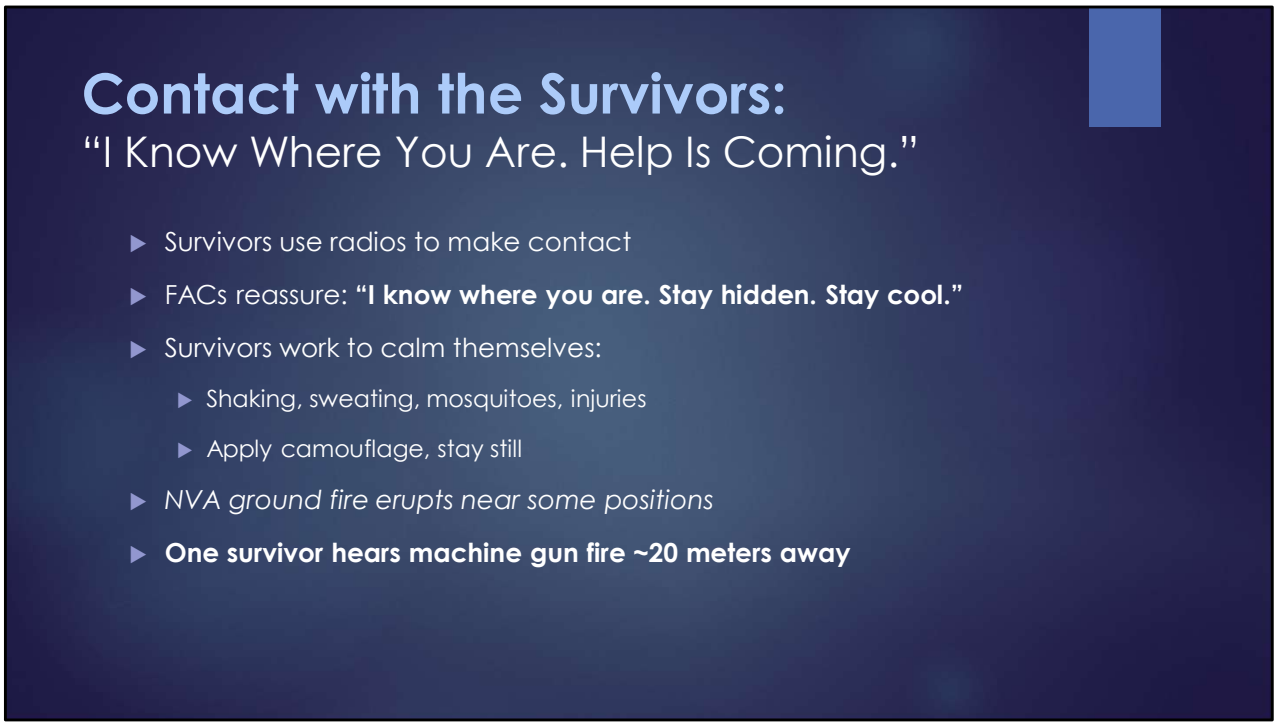
"Now the mission shifts from close air support to survival and evasion. The survivors are injured to varying degrees, alone, in very thick jungle, with enemy forces all around and aware that an aircraft just went down. They fall back on SERE-type training: put distance between themselves and the chute, find concealment, get their heads under control, and prepare for a long wait."

Orchestrating Rescue from the Air

- FACs Tom Milligan and Tom Waskow take charge
- Immediate call for search and rescue
- Assets committed:
  - 2 HH-3E "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters
  - 2 A-1 Skyraiders for close air support
  - Additional UH-1 Hueys and medevac
- Milligan uses a small stream as a reference
- Tracks each survivor's landing location on his canopy with grease pencil



"From the air, Milligan and Waskow now have a tough job: find and protect seven downed airmen scattered nearby, coordinate multiple aircraft, and manage a hostile environment full of NVA fire.
Milligan improvises a simple but effective system—using a small stream as a reference line, marking each reported landing spot on his windshield. It's a reminder of how much depended on experience and improvisation, not just technology."



"The radio link between the FACs and the downed crew becomes a lifeline. Several described being physically shaking so much they could barely work their gear.
Milligan's steady voice—'I know where you are… help is coming'—helps keep them from panicking and moving at the wrong time. That calm communication under fire was as important as any weapon that day."

Enemy Fire on the Rescue

Combat Over the Crash Site

- NVA engage helicopters and FACs with small arms and AAA
- A-1 Skyraiders strike enemy positions with guns and rockets
- One Army Huey (Lt Gen Hollinsworth) trying to reach Sledzinski takes hits, pulls away smoking
- Survivors hear heavy firing above and around them
- Helicopters forced to make multiple attempts



"The rescue is anything but clean. Every approach to a pickup point draws fire. Skyraiders roll in to suppress enemy positions; Hueys and Jollies are taking hits. For the men on the ground, they hear the battle swirling right above their heads while trying not to move or give away their positions. It's the classic high-risk combat SAR many of you have seen or supported."

First Extraction: Sledzinski

Rope, Gunfire, and a Medevac Huey

- Sledzinski's first rescue attempt aborted under fire. Lt. General Hollingsworth on board
- Second attempt:
  - Two Skyraiders strafe both sides of his position
  - Medevac Huey follows close behind
- He pops a flare to mark location
- Door gunners open up with M-60s around him
- Thrown a rope, ties in, dangles as the Huey flies him to a firebase



"Sledzinski's rescue shows how aggressive these crews had to be. The first helicopter is driven off by fire. The second run comes in with Skyraiders hammering both sides of his location, M-60s pouring fire around him as he's yanked out on a rope.
That combination of aircrews risking their aircraft and a downed airman keeping his head long enough to properly mark his position made that extraction possible."

Jolly Greens and Jungle Penetrators

Hoisting Survivors Through the Canopy

- HH-3E Jolly Green Giants used jungle penetrators for others
- Hoist lowered through canopy, sometimes inches from survivors
- Static electricity shocks if grabbed too early
- Multiple passes required due to confusion and fire
- Survivors held on so tightly that crews had to pry their hands loose inside



"For the rest of the crew, the Jolly Greens lower jungle penetrators through dense foliage. You only get a brief window to grab on. One survivor described almost crying when the hoist was pulled back up before he could reach it. When they do get picked up, they cling to that penetrator so hard the pararescue or crew has to peel their fingers off once they're inside the helicopter. The emotional load at that moment is enormous—relief, exhaustion, and still the knowledge that others remain below."

All Seven Accounted For

Rescue Complete at Dusk

- By early evening, all seven survivors extracted
- Last pickups occur as darkness falls
- Survivors evacuated to medical care
- All receive Purple Hearts for wounds and injuries
- AC-119s stop flying daylight missions afterward*

***Risk deemed too great against heavy AAA**



"In the end, despite the enemy fire and chaos on the ground, every one of the seven who bailed out is brought home alive that day.
The cost is three airmen killed in the crash and a clear lesson: AC-119s will not be sent into daylight missions like that again. The risk balance has been permanently recalculated."

Immediate Recognition

Initial Awards and Oversights

- Capt. Terry Courtney: awarded Air Force Cross posthumously
- Air Force Cross: second only to Medal of Honor
- Rest of crew:
  - Purple Hearts for injuries
  - No valor decorations at the time
- 18th Special Operations Squadron deactivated in Dec 1972
- Original award recommendations: never processed, or lost



"Capt. Courtney's actions—staying at the controls long enough to get most of his crew out—are recognized with the Air Force Cross. That part the system got right.

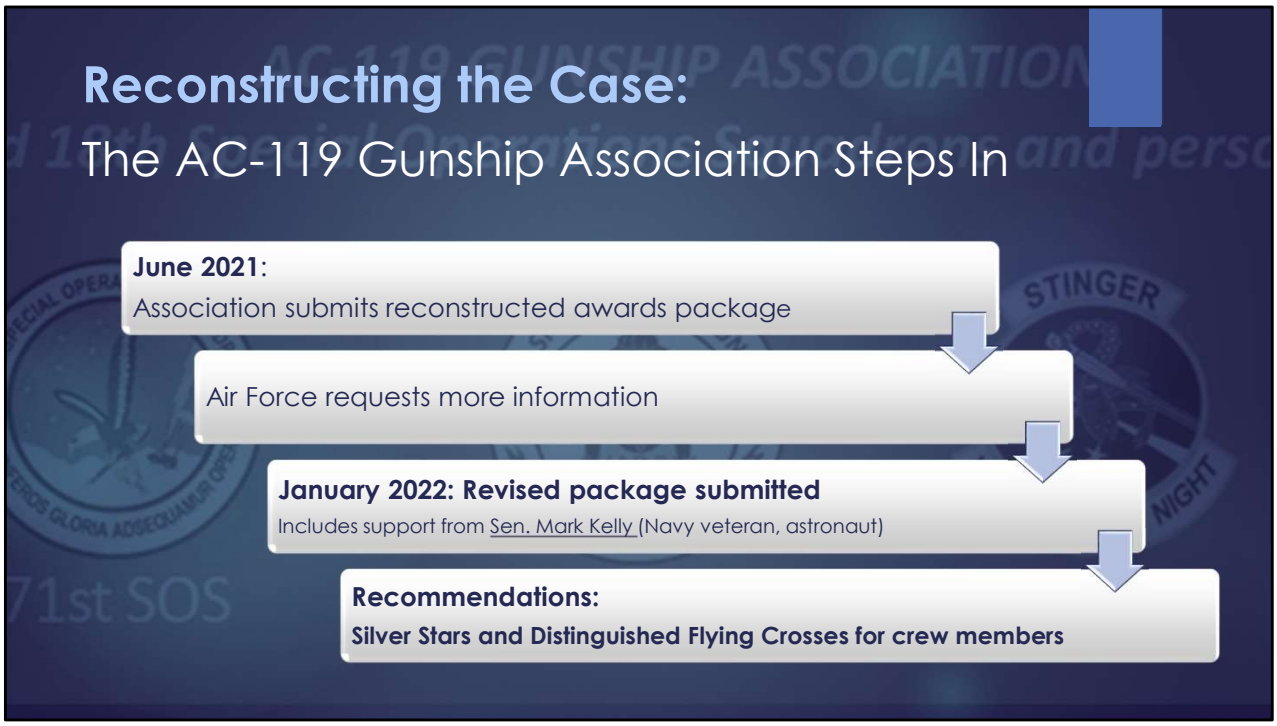
But the rest of the crew, whose actions under fire and during survival/rescue were also worthy of recognition, receive only their Purple Hearts. As the squadron and the larger war wind down, their award packages disappear into what one officer would later call 'the fog of war.'"

The Lost Awards

"Fog of War" and Missing Paperwork

- Lt. Col. Charles Pollock (18th SOS operations and awards officer) later submits affidavit
  - States he wrote valor awards for entire crew in 1972
  - Says squadron and wing commanders approved them
  - Believes they were lost as combat operations closed out
- **9 Airmen's awards never formally processed beyond Courtney's AFC**
- For decades, survivors and families lack full official recognition

"Years later, Lt. Col. Charles Pollock, operations officer, who also handled awards and decorations for the squadron, signs a sworn statement: he wrote valor awards for the entire crew, they were approved up through wing level, and then vanished somewhere higher up as units redeployed and stood down. Many of you know how chaotic drawdowns can be—paperwork lost, records incomplete. But when it's valor awards, the effects are personal and long-lasting."



"Veterans of the AC-119 community decide to fix what they see as an old injustice. They gather after-action reports, statements, affidavits, and personal accounts to rebuild the awards package from scratch.
They even secure the endorsement of Senator Mark Kelly, himself a combat aviator. The goal is not to inflate anything, but to ensure that the original intent of commanders in 1972 is finally carried through."

Decorations Board Decisions
Downgrades and Denials

- **April 2022 Air Force Decorations Board decision:**
  - **Brown (KIA):** Silver Star request downgraded to DFC with "V"
  - **Slagle (KIA)**: DFC request downgraded to Air Medal
  - **Barkalow (copilot):** All recognition denied
  - **Six surviving crew:** All recognition denied
- **Board questions whether awards were really "lost" in 1972**
  - *Suggests crew was likely "duly considered" at that time*

"The Decorations Board partially accepts that some recognition is due, but not at the level recommended. They downgrade the proposed awards for the two additional KIA crew members and deny valor awards for the survivors.
They also express skepticism that the original 1972 awards were truly 'lost,' implying that maybe the crew just didn't meet the criteria then. That conclusion directly contradicts the sworn statement of the officer who wrote those awards."

Appeals and Higher-Level Support

Pushing Back: Generals and a Former SECAF

- **Retired Col. Roy Davis** and others keep fighting the case
- Support gained from:
  - **F. Whitten "Whit" Peters**, former Secretary of the Air Force
  - (Four of whom were Chiefs of Staff), all with combat experience
    24 retired Air Force generals
- May 2023: formal request for reconsideration
- Oct 2024: board reviews case "anew," upholds prior decision

"This isn't just a few old gunship guys writing letters. They're backed by a former Secretary of the Air Force and two dozen retired generals who know combat and understand awards standards.
Even with that backing, the board takes another look and doubles down: no upgrades, no new awards. The message is essentially that the original denial stands."

Taking It Above the Air Force
Calls for Independent Review

Peters writes to Colby Jenkins, ASD (SO/LIC): Requests independent, impartial review of Stinger 41

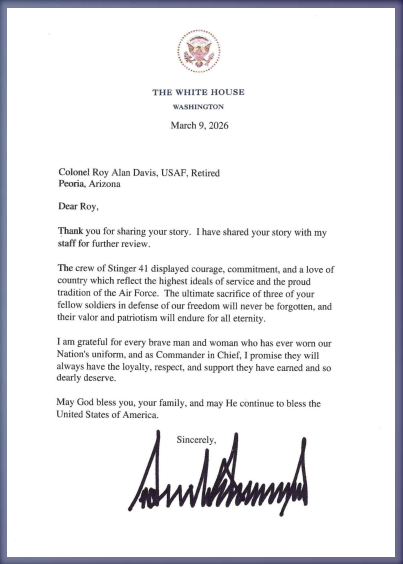
- Argues the board failed in "process and fairness"

Col Davis writes to President Trump: Asks for "personal interest" to "restore justice"

- April 2026, Davis receives a letter from President Trump
- "I have shared your story with my staff for further review."

As of the article's publication:

- No public response from Jenkins, or Air Force



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 9, 2026

Colonel Roy Alan Davis, USAF, Retired
Peoria, Arizona

Dear Roy,

Thank you for sharing your story. I have shared your story with my staff for further review.

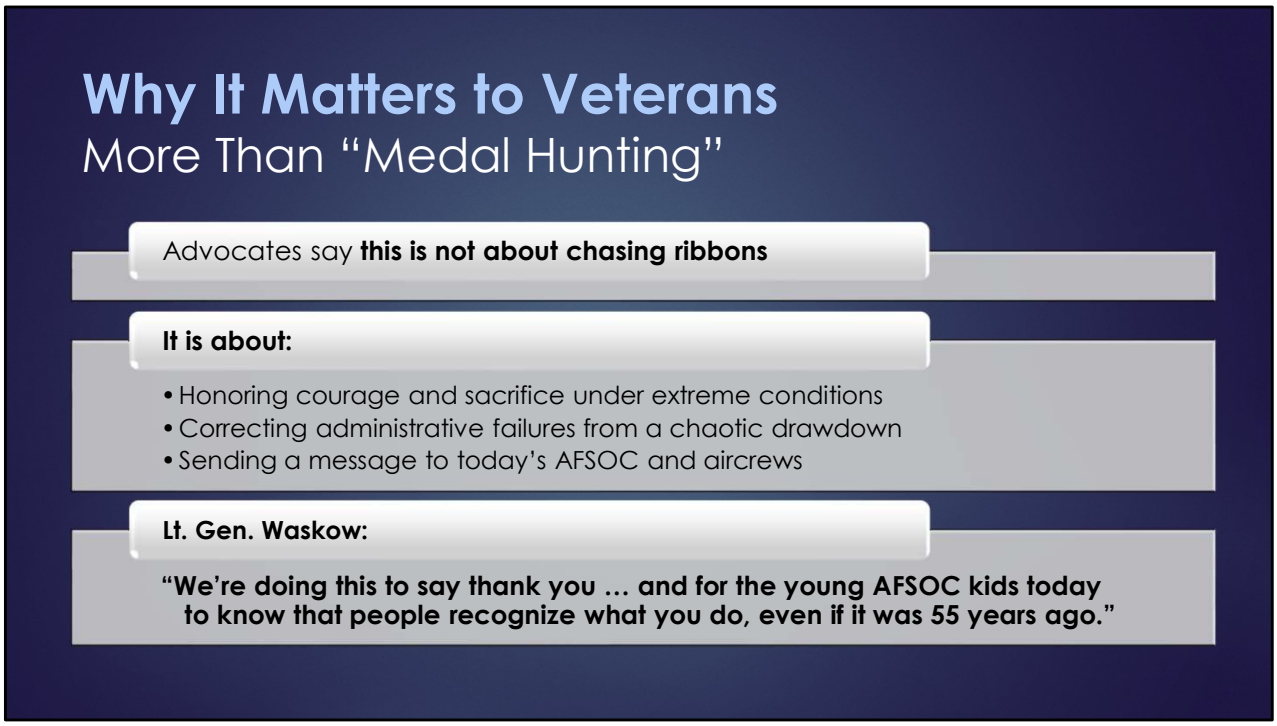
The crew of Stinger 41 displayed courage, commitment, and a love of country which reflect the highest ideals of service and the proud tradition of the Air Force. The ultimate sacrifice of three of your fellow soldiers in defense of our freedom will never be forgotten, and their valor and patriotism will endure for all eternity.

I am grateful for every brave man and woman who has ever worn our Nation's uniform, and as Commander in Chief, I promise they will always have the loyalty, respect, and support they have earned and so dearly deserve.

May God bless you, your family, and may He continue to bless the United States of America.

Sincerely,

"At this point, the case moves beyond the normal Air Force channels. The advocates argue that when the system can't or won't correct itself, civilian leadership should step in.
Whether you agree or not, it raises important questions many veterans care about: How do we handle old cases where records are incomplete, but credible testimony suggests that valor went under-recognized?"



"For those pushing this case, it's about more than metal and ribbon. It's about the institution keeping faith with its people, even decades later.
For today's young Airmen and Special Ops crews, seeing older cases revisited tells them: 'If something goes wrong in the record, the community will stand up for you—even 50 years from now.' That matters."



"Stinger 41 is a microcosm of a lot of what you've seen in your own service: Leadership that costs someone their life but saves others;
joint operations where one service's survival depends on another's courage; and the reality that wars don't end cleanly—some battles, like the fight for recognition, go on for decades.
For veterans, it invites us to think about how we want our institutions to handle those unfinished stories."

Discussion & Questions

What resonates most from the Stinger 41 story?

How should DoD handle late or reconstructed valor cases?

Are there parallels with your own experiences?

“This is a good place to hear from you.
Which part of this story hits home?
How do you think the services should deal with old cases where paperwork is missing but eyewitness accounts are strong?
And if any of you flew in Southeast Asia—or in later conflicts doing SAR, CAS, or gunship operations—your perspective on this kind of mission would add a lot to the room.”