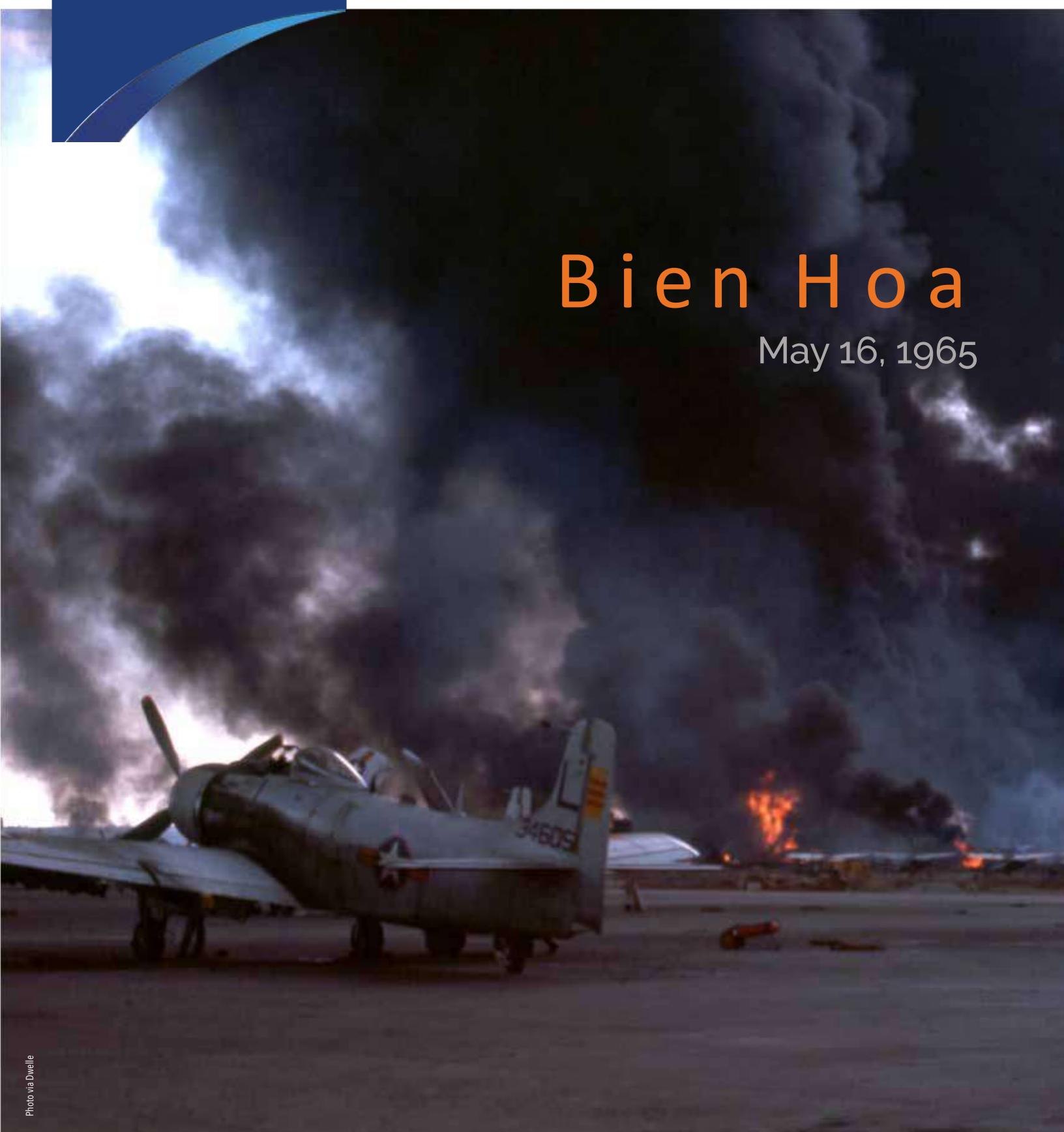


Bien Hoa

May 16, 1965



Stinger Four One

BY BARRY LEVINE AND ALAN ARMITAGE



NMUSAF photo

COURAGE. DEDICATION TO THE MISSION. SELF-SACRIFICE. TEAMWORK. PROFESSIONALISM.

These words tell the story of Fairchild AC-119 gunship crews who flew combat missions from 1969 to 1973 over Southeast Asia. One mission illustrating all these attributes involved the loss of an AC-119K, call sign Stinger Four One. On May 2, 1972, enemy ground fire near An Loc, South Vietnam, downed Stinger Four One, with the loss of three aviators on board. Thanks to the courage and selflessness of the three, the remaining seven crew members survived.

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

▶ Stinger "business card."

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BACKGROUND

The history leading to the tragedy of Stinger Four One has many components. After World War II, Fairchild Aircraft built C-119s as troop and cargo transport aircraft (known as Flying Boxcars). Boxcars flew unique missions such as air-dropping bridge sections to U.S. troops trapped by communist forces at the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, transporting French paratroopers to drop zones in Indochina, retrieving satellites in mid-air (a joint Air Force-CIA effort) in the early 1960s, and ferrying troops to Florida in response to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

By the mid-1960s, C-119s were being phased out and replaced with the more advanced Lockheed C-130 Hercules. However, by 1968, with the increasing operational tempo in the Vietnam War, Secretary of the Air Force Harold Brown approved converting 26 C-119s into AC-119G gunships (known as Shadows) and an additional 26 into AC-119Ks (known as Stingers). The Shadows had two reciprocating engines and were armed with four 7.62mm multi-barrel miniguns. Stingers added two pylon-mounted jet engines to increase power on takeoffs, and two 20 mm multi-barrel cannon for increased firepower.

Beginning in November 1968, Stingers were deployed for armed reconnaissance, support of American and South Vietnamese troops battling enemy forces, and search and rescue efforts

over Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. They primarily flew night missions when darkness hid these slow, lumbering gunships from anti-aircraft ground fire. The aircraft used electronic technologies to spot targets at night, such as Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) and Night Observation Scopes (NOS). The primary attack mode was a counter-clockwise circular orbit over a target; all guns were mounted on the Stinger's left side.

Three gunship groups saw service — the 71st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), its successor 17th SOS, and the 18th SOS. Crews flew a heavy load of missions, saving countless lives on the ground, while simultaneously destroying enemy supplies, tanks, and trucks. While several AC-119s went down with mechanical problems, none were lost to enemy action until Stinger Four One.

When the AC-119s were in action, American participation in the war was winding down. The conflict was far from over, however. By May 1972, President Nixon's Vietnamization program began removing ground troops while leaving U.S. advisors to support the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). In April 1972, the North Vietnamese launched a series of attacks throughout South Vietnam known as the Easter Offensive. Binh Long Province's capital, An Loc, was one of the primary targets, as part of the North's initiative of capturing Saigon by May 1 —

the birthdate of the international Communist party. Their offensive overwhelmed the ARVN, which only had about 5,000 troops in the area versus the Communists' 30,000. If An Loc fell, North Vietnam had a clear path to Saigon only 60 miles down Highway 13.

To defend this area, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces relied on bombing of enemy positions and air resupply by the U.S. Army and Air Force. Navy and Marine aviation units were also involved in An Loc's defense. This concerted effort was critical to An Loc surviving a 70-day siege — a fight longer than the decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 that led to the French withdrawal from Vietnam. Resupply aircraft were subject to intense enemy ground fire, and several were shot down.

MAY 2, 1972

During the morning, a C-130 transport, dropping ammunition pallets to the besieged troops at An Loc, missed its target, which was easy to do given a very small drop zone and the intense enemy fire. Stinger Four One was assigned to destroy these pallets with its firepower. Crew #13 flew this high-risk daytime mission, taking off from Bien Hoa Air Base, with the following crew on board:

— Capt Terence Courtney, pilot and aircraft commander

— Lt James Barkalow, co-pilot



▲ A-1 pilot 1 Lt Lamar Smith, call sign Sandy Zero Seven, was the commander of the search and rescue operation.

▼ Stinger Four One Night Observation Scope operator Lt Larry Barbee with his equipment.



- Capt David Slagle, navigator
- SSgt Allen 'Yogi' Bare, flight engineer
- Lt Col Byron 'Tash' Taschioglou, Forward Looking Infrared operator
- Lt Larry Barbee, Night Observation Scope (NOS) operator
- SSgt Francis 'Ski' Sledzinski, lead gunner
- SSgt Dale Iman, gunner
- A1C Richard "Craig" Corbett, gunner

- SSgt Kenneth Brown, Illuminator operator (IO)

Craig Corbett, as with all AC-119 gunners, did not fire his weapons. Instead, he loaded and maintained the six guns, while the pilots fired up to 29,000 rounds per minute. Reloading involved handling heavy ammunition boxes, all while dealing with violent aircraft movements to avoid anti-aircraft fire. Gunners also served as scanners; sometimes they had to hang outside the aircraft while looking for enemy fire, calling

"break left" or "break right" to the pilot.

"The pre-flight intelligence briefing was like any other," said Corbett. "I remember in particular the intelligence officer briefing us on possible anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) around An Loc and that the best area for immediate bailout was west of the city. The pilot and aircraft commander, Capt Terence Courtney, then gave us his crew briefing. He reminded us again about the AAA threat in the area. He also requested the other two gunners scan for AAA as I was inexperienced, and it was almost impossible to see AAA in daylight.

"On the way to the aircraft everyone was nervous because of the unusual daylight mission. We all knew that other Stingers flying daylight missions over the same area had encountered considerable problems avoiding the AAA. In fact, the last mission flown over that area returned to base with expected battle damage. Ski, Ken, and I were talking about what each of us would do if we were shot down. We all knew that this would not happen though as some Stinger aircraft had been shot up pretty bad and made it home. We also had some whose crews, except the necessary positions: pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer, and illuminator operator, jumped out over the base so that they would not be in danger while the stricken aircraft tried to land, but we had never lost one in combat. Not one single death. We knew we were safe. If it happened, we knew it would happen to the other guy.

"Crew 13 was on board Stinger gunship tail number 826, with a call sign of Stinger Four One. We had a normal takeoff, and immediately flew to an area close by to sight our guns not knowing that those would be the last rounds fired by Stinger Four One. Ken Brown spotted some destroyed trucks on the ground, and we used those to boresight our guns. While there, we were asked to hold our position as other aircraft

► Left to right: Stinger 41 crewmembers Forward Looking Infrared operator Lt Col Byron Taschioglou, Night Observation Scope operator Lt Larry Barbee, and flight engineer SSgt Allen Bare after their rescue.



USAF photo

were over our intended target area. Fighting in the area was extremely heavy, and at the time, An Loc was the most heavily defended city in all of South Vietnam."

Captain Courtney's AC-119K was not the only Stinger over An Loc that day. Gunner Terry Sarul was on an AC-119K flying ahead of Stinger Four One and recalled that evasive action was ineffective against the heavy AAA fire, which they couldn't see in the intense sun.

"As we egressed the target area, I still remember to this day that the navigator was relaying to the next Stinger coming into the target area, replacing us, that the AAA was extremely heavy and close," Sarul stated. "As it turned out, that aircraft replacing us was Capt Terry Courtney's crew on Stinger Four One."

STINGER FOUR ONE

Airman Corbett picks up the narrative. "Once we were cleared into the target area we joined up with an O-2 spotter aircraft that would help us locate our target. We came into the target area at

4,700 feet but the weather forced us down to a dangerously low 3,500 feet. We had made about two orbits when SSgt Brown said, 'I can't see it, but 37mm AAA is popping as it goes by, it's exploding above us.' Captain Courtney ordered a climb to 4,500 feet, and asked Ken to see if he could spot where the AAA was coming from. I ran back to look over Ken's shoulder to see if I could help spot the gun. Anti-aircraft (AAA) fire came up a second time and Ken spotted the location. Courtney then had Lt Larry Barbee run back to have Ken point out the gun position to him. The enemy site opened fire on us a third time while the night observation scope (NOS) operator was giving the location to the pilot and the navigator. The lack of reference points made pinpointing the target difficult. As I was standing looking over Ken's shoulder the persistent North Vietnamese gunner fired on us a fourth time, he was getting closer with each pass we made.

"It was then that I alerted the crew another AAA gun was shooting at us. It was impossible to call any breaks as the tracers from the AAA

were seen too late to react to them. Captain Courtney said he would make one more orbit and if we couldn't find our target we would exit the area. On what was to be our final orbit, the persistent gun finally found its target as we were hit in the right wing by three or four rounds of 37mm AAA. Ken yelled, 'We're hit! We're hit! We're on fire!'"

Night Observation Scope operator Lt Larry Barbee wrote in *The Gunship Chronicles – Stinger 41*, "...the gunner came up on us again. This time three jarring thuds came with the rattling noise of shrapnel. The metal skeleton of the plane transmitted the shivering impacts through the floor to all of us. Someone's voice came calmly over the interphone: 'Okay, we're hit, we're hit.' Yogi Bare, our flight engineer, said, 'Right jet's gone.' 'Right recip's on fire,' a third icy voice chimed in. In the cargo compartment, I felt time suddenly begin to slow to a crawl."

In the cockpit, co-pilot Lt James Barkalow remembered the 'pop pop pop' of 37 mms going off and could see that about a foot of the right wing was gone after being ■

hit. He and Courtney struggled to control the plane as it started losing altitude.

Corbett recalled, "The whole wing, from the right reciprocating engine to the jet engine, was in flames. Flames that were trailing all the way back to the rear crew entrance door, the door we would have to use if we bailed out. The flames were so bright I could see them reflecting off the inside cabin's dark zinc chromate paint finish."

Barbee noted the same thing. "Behind me, an orange glow began to fill the back of the airplane. When I looked toward the aft part of the cargo compartment, I thought we were on fire inside, that perhaps our big flare launcher and its flares were blazing. I grabbed a fire extinguisher, ran as far aft as my interphone cord would stretch and passed the extinguisher to one of the gunners. His expression showed clearly that he believed the old NOS had lost it. Then I realized why. We were not blazing inside the cargo compartment; instead the flames streaming from the right wing extended well beyond the tail of our airplane. Their dancing red reflection filled the plane's interior. The gunner pitched the fire bottle on a seat and I retreated to the NOS position.

"There was absolutely no panic," Barbee wrote. "The cockpit crew went through the emergency procedures as if they were handling an everyday situation." However, Corbett recalled, "In a very short amount of time, we lost quite a bit of altitude as [navigator] Capt David Slagle called MAYDAY and provided a safe bailout heading."

Barbee focused on his own duties. "Because my emergency duty was first aid officer, and it was quickly apparent that no one was injured, I could sit and listen. We called the ground advisor and told him we were leaving. It was probably obvious from the trail of smoke and debris that trailed from our right wing.

"The cockpit conversation was grim. I began to realize that we might not be landing tonight in the same airplane we took off in this afternoon. When we first were hit, my mind did not allow me to accept the seriousness of the situation. Stuff like this only happened in movies, or in worst case, to some other guy. I guess lieutenants are just slow learners. I pulled my parachute off the hook and clipped it on. Mentally saying goodbye to them, I stowed my binoculars by the seat.

"My parachute swung from its hook on the bulkhead within easy reach. I looked outside and was surprised to see how terribly low we were. I knew by the interphone conversation that we were losing altitude, but I hadn't realized how much. Below us, individual trees loomed out of the jungle. I moved the NOS to the stowed position, leaned against the bulkhead by my chute and gazed outside.

"'Illuminator Operator, Pilot. Jettison the flare launcher.' I heard a swoosh as compressed air kicked the flare launcher out the aft paratroop door." Staff Sergeant Sledzinski, the lead gunner, had jettisoned the flare launcher that was blocking the bailout exit. "We would get rid of the flare launcher for two reasons," Barbee recalled thinking, "lighten the aircraft load or prepare an exit for bailout. I hoped that we were only lightening the load.

ABANDON THE AIRCRAFT

Then Barbee heard Courtney announce, "'Crew, pilot. We can't maintain altitude. Prepare to abandon the aircraft.'"

"Terry was still in control, still calm, struggling to keep the wings level," Barbee wrote. "The aircraft was trying to roll over in the direction of the damaged wing. It took both pilots, full left rudder and full yoke deflection to the left to maintain a semblance of level flight. If that pressure was released, the right

wing would dip, the left wing would come up and that airplane would slow-roll like a sea gull diving for lunch. The only crewmembers lucky enough to get out and use their parachutes would be the ones hurled out by centrifugal force. The recip and jet on the left wing were going full blast and all that power was trying to pull the left wing up and over into that right roll. But without that full power, we would only glide down to the trees below. We had no more altitude to lose."

Corbett remembered, "I put on my parachute preparing for the worst... Then the pilot yelled the words no one wanted to hear 'Abandon aircraft! Abandon aircraft!' I remember looking aft and seeing Ken Brown acting as jump master checking everyone over. It was his job to ensure everyone was properly cinched up in their chute as they abandoned the aircraft. His crew position is normally the last, along with the pilot, to exit the aircraft."

Barbee remembered Courtney's call, "'Crew, Pilot. Abandon the aircraft! ABANDON THE AIRCRAFT!' Well, there it was. I would never have believed the number of thoughts that can go through your mind at a time like that. They raced by like little horseflies, zip, zip, zip, one after another: 'Is this real? Naw, can't be. Well, maybe it really is real. Whoops, there goes the first guy, right on out the ole door. Wow, there goes the next one, right behind him.'"

Sledzinski was the first man out of the Stinger. He recalled that once the pilot directed "abandon the aircraft," he was out the door. He turned to look back and saw no other parachutes — was it possible the pilot said "don't abandon the aircraft?" After he jumped, groundfire shot holes through his parachute.

Corbett was second to jump. "Ski was already outside of the plane. It was then that I realized this whole



Levine

▲ The day after. The survivors of Stinger Four One flanked by two of their rescuers. Left to right: Standing - Lamar Smith, Allen Bare, Larry Barbee, Francis Sledzinski, Byron Taschioglou, Dennis Morgan (Smith's wingman). Front row - Craig Corbett, Dale Iman, James Barkalow.

ugly situation was happening to me and it was deadly serious. As I made my way to the door I said to myself, 'Don't stop at the door, and don't look down.'

"The next thing I knew I was outside the aircraft, in midair, and on my back looking up at nothing but blue sky. I pulled the ripcord and saw the parachute blossom above me. Looking around I could see Ski in front of me, and I decided to make a turn toward the aircraft. Unknown to me at the time, turning was the smart thing to do, because Ski was being shot at as he came down in his parachute. After my turn, I saw Lt Barbee, who had exited the aircraft

after me, below and in front of me. Further in front of me I saw [gunner] Dale Iman in his chute, and beyond him, the aircraft which was losing altitude quickly. I then looked down and prepared to meet the ground."

Aboard Stinger Four One, 30 seconds prior to impact, Courtney told his copilot Barkalow to 'get out.' Barkalow jumped and immediately pulled the D-ring at about 300 feet (below the recommended minimum altitude).

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Seven airmen made it off the plane that day, leading to one of the biggest search and rescue

(SAR) efforts of the Vietnam War. Accounts testify to the dedication of all SAR personnel, citing the crew's teamwork, fast and accurate communications, and courage.

Forward Air Controller (FAC) Capt Tom Milligan, call sign Sundog Two Nine, was flying near Stinger Four One, looking for the pallets and ground fire, when the AC-111K was hit. Flying a Cessna O-2 Skymaster, Milligan saw the crew bail out. He pinpointed the survivors on the ground for rescue forces, using a small creek as a reference point, and marked their location with a grease pencil on his windshield. He was submitted for a Silver Star.

but was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with a combat "V" for heroism.

Also flying above the scene was another FAC O-2, Sundog Four Zero. The pilot, 1Lt Tom Waskow (who retired from the Air Force as a three-star general), quickly noticed the intensity of the AAA fire and saw Stinger Four One get hit with the right-wing catching fire. He counted six parachutes but didn't see the seventh (co-pilot Barkalow, who bailed out low to the ground).

Like Milligan, Waskow circled the area and helped coordinate the helicopter rescue of the seven crew members. He then flew over the crash site, looking for any sign of life. There was none. Killed in the shootdown were pilot and aircraft commander Capt Terence Courtney, navigator Capt David Slagle, and Illuminator operator SSgt Kenneth Brown.

After the mission, Waskow and Milligan went to the field hospital where the injured survivors were being treated. They introduced themselves and had "quite a reunion."

Search and Rescue commander 1Lt Lamar Smith flew a Douglas A-1 Skyraider, call sign Sandy Zero Seven. He, along with the other A-1 on the scene, provided covering fire and coordinated the overall effort.

The work of the A-1 and O-2 teams enabled two Sikorsky HH-3E Jolly Green Giant helicopters to pick up the downed airmen. Newspaper stories identified the helicopter pilots as Majors Joe Ballinger and John McGuire, with copilots Maj Larry McLaughlin and Capt Gary Ashcroft. Years later, Lt Gen Waskow said it was "incredible the way the team came together to get the seven out."

AIRMEN ON THE GROUND

Rescuing the seven was a difficult, high-risk proposition.

Shortly after Sledzinski hit the ground, a helicopter (which Lieutenant Waskow had contacted) attempted but failed to complete the rescue because it was not equipped with a sling or similar equipment. On board this helicopter was Maj Gen James Hollingsworth, commander of the Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC), whose career included serving in the Second Armored Division under Major General George Patton in World War II.

The helicopter aborted the rescue attempt when it was hit by ground fire, with the crew radioing Sledzinski that "we will send help." Waskow called for a dust off (medevac helicopter) to rescue the Airman, while also requesting a nearby Cobra helicopter [Army Bell AH-1 Cobra] to provide covering fire. Once the side door of the hovering medevac helicopter opened, Sledzinski saw beaded crew members with peace signs on their helmets. They tossed him a rope, told him to hold on, and then rose out of the jungle with Sledzinski banging into the trees on

the way up. He was towed through the air beneath the helicopter to a fire support base, where he was placed on the ground, had the rope tossed to him, and once again received the radio message "we will send help."

Forty uniformed Vietnamese soldiers came toward him from concealed bunkers. It was unclear whether they were friend or foe, until their offer of a warm Coke put Sledzinski's mind at ease. Soon another helicopter arrived, and Sledzinski was grabbed by the parachute harness and yanked aboard. Upon landing, he was led to the command tent and was greeted by General Hollingsworth. The general asked Sledzinski how he was doing, commented on the fireworks during the attempted rescue, and arranged to have him returned to Bien Hoa.

Corbett's experience was markedly different.

"Jettisoning the parachute, I started to escape and evade noticing that every sound I made seemed to be amplified 200 times. The area we landed in was flat and sparse, not at all like the jungle we had trained in. I heard several helicopters overhead and thought that maybe we would be getting out of there quickly. Finding a hiding place, I turned on my survival radio and heard the pilot of the O-2, whose call sign was Sundog, talking to one of our guys on the ground. [Editor's Note: This Sundog was Milligan.] Waiting a few seconds after they finished, I too made contact with Sundog who said, 'sit back, relax, Sandy is on its way.' Sandy is the call sign of the rescue forces. Taking his advice and noticing how much I was shaking, I got out some water and began drinking. I told myself all would be okay.

"Suddenly, a helicopter flew over firing rockets and mini-guns at something or someone close behind me. I decided I must be in the wrong place and began running toward the direction of his pass. I

▼ Staff Sgt Harry R. Watters, AC-119 gunner, loads 1,500 rounds into a 7.62mm minigun.



USAF photo



▲ This map, provided by Lt Gen Waskow, is typical of maps FACs used in Vietnam. The arrow points to the location of Stinger Four One's shoot down.

figured that his next pass could be shorter, he didn't know where I was, he must be shooting at the bad guys, and I need to put some distance between us.

Once in my new hiding place, I used my radio to start talking Sundog over to my position. This was difficult, as the noise level made it seem like the whole U.S. Air Force was on the scene. Every time I picked out the sound of the O-2, an AC-130 Spectre gunship would fly over and its noise would drown the O-2 out. I finally got him over me and he now had my position. About then I heard some rustling and saw someone running through the area. I drew my weapon and quickly realized that was a stupid thing to do.

"Just then, the Sandy arrived! I was elated to say the least. Sundog showed him each of our positions and Sandy made some low and slow passes to draw fire. They laid down some smoke and asked for Stinger Four One Delta and India

to flash them with mirrors. Each crewmember used the aircraft call sign and a letter of the alphabet to distinguish themselves from the other crewmembers. Being Stinger Four One India, I was getting my mirror out when I heard Delta, Lieutenant Colonel 'Tash' [Taschioglou] say the sun was too low and the light too poor to use mirrors. I knew then that time was getting short if we were to get out today.

"Sandy then asked Stinger Four One Alpha to come up. When Alpha didn't come up Sandy asked for the Stinger closest to the wreckage to come up. I guess nobody knew who was the closest, as the radio remained silent. Sandy confirmed that no one was coming up on the frequency and that any Stinger should come up. Chaos ensued as several Stingers came up simultaneously on the radio. Sandy reverted to the alphabet and called for Bravo to 'pop smoke' which Lieutenant Barkalow did. All calls after that were for the next closest

man to 'pop smoke' until it was finally my turn." It was three hours after he bailed out that Barkalow was picked up by a Jolly Green Giant helicopter."

Corbett had to wait even longer. "It took four and a half hours from the time we were hit till I was picked up," he recalled. "I was the last crewmember picked up alive. The two Jolly Greens that hoisted us from the grip of the enemy flew us to Tan Son Nhut Air Base where they held us 'captive' in the hospital for the night. I wish we could have had a chance to thank the Jolly Green guys for coming to our rescue.

"The rest of the surviving crew seemed to have made it through the ordeal with only a few injuries. However, at first appearance, you would have thought they had been put through a meat grinder. Yogi Bare cut his head on tree branches while coming up on the jungle penetrator. By the time he was pulled into the helicopter he was covered in blood to his chest. ■



Bechtler photos

◀ Larry Barbee (Night Observation Scope (NOS) operator), Francis 'Ski' Sledzinski (lead gunner), and A1C Richard "Craig" Corbett (gunner), at an AC-119 Association reunion.

Lieutenant Barkalow's face was also a bloody mess. I helped clean him up, and when cleaned, his face was a mass of scratches. Apparently, he was the last to exit the aircraft alive as his parachute was opening as he crashed through the trees. As he smashed through the 200-foot-high jungle canopy, the tree limbs snapped off so furiously that he thought he was being shot at. Lieutenant Colonel Tash, as we all called him, straddled a tree branch as he descended leaving a gouge with some meat sticking out on the inside of his thigh...which he said didn't hurt until he saw it. Dale [gunner SSgt Dale Iman] and I had a bunch of scratches and burns from the parachute risers. We later found out that Ski, who was being shot at on his way down, was picked up almost immediately by an Army chopper who flew with him dangling from a rope to a nearby fire base."

Later that night, Barkalow asked for a beer in the base hospital, but the Army nurses said no — alcohol was against regulations, notwithstanding that he had survived a harrowing shootdown. Interviewed 50 years after the ordeal, his daughter Jennifer Barkalow recalled that her father never talked about those events; she learned some of the details from her mom and AC-119 reunion attendees.

AFTERMATH

In the aftermath, Captain Courtney was posthumously submitted to receive a Medal of Honor. He did receive an Air Force Cross, with the citation reading, "As a result of Captain Courtney's conscious and deliberate decision to sacrifice his own life by remaining at the controls of his doomed aircraft, seven of his crew were recovered with only minor injuries. His courage, gallantry, intrepidity, and sense of responsibility toward his fellow men overrode any desire or instinctive reaction for his own self-preservation. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of the enemy, and in the dedication of his service to his country, Captain Courtney reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force."

Terry Sarul, the gunner on the AC-119K that preceded Stinger Four One to An Loc, shared his reflections on the events of May 2, 1972. "To this day, I will never forget that mission, and I remember it like it happened yesterday. I'll never be able to explain why WE were not the aircraft that was shot down on that day. Perhaps a bit of luck or the grace of God. All daylight missions after Stinger Four One

were canceled. I guess the higher ups figured we were flying out of our element. I would say that was a bit of an understatement. Big black airplane ... bright blue sky ... low and slow with no way of seeing the AAA coming up at you and making a defensive break maneuver...yeah, I would say so. My feeling still is that the gunner on the ground used us as a boresight...to the point when Stinger Four One arrived in the target area, they did not have much of a chance."

The following is a sample of comments posted recently on social media about the three aviators who lost their lives that day:

Terry Courtney: "Terry and I trained together and spent our year in Vietnam together. His friendship will always be remembered along with the extraordinary courage he demonstrated. He is a constant reminder of what great men do for one another during times of war."

Ken Brown: "Ken Brown and I were classmates at Las Cruces High School in 1965. Until recently I knew nothing of Ken's sacrifice for the United States of America. Knowing that his efforts in the air made the enemy pay dearly for messing with our troops makes me feel very proud to have known him."

David Slagle: "A REAL HERO, an Officer, Gentleman, and crew mate. You and what you did for Stinger Crew 13 will never be forgotten. I shall always remember!"

THE PRESENT

In late 2021, the AC-119 Gunship Association created a committee to reconstruct Stinger Four One's proposed awards as the original award nominations were lost for the nine airmen. They are: 1Lt Jim R. Barkalow, Copilot (Deceased)—Recommended for the Silver Star; Capt David R. Slagle, Navigator (KIA)—Recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross w/Valor; SSgt Allen W. Bare, Flight Engineer (Deceased)—Recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross w/Valor; Lt Col Byron J. Taschioglou, Navigator/FLIR (Deceased)—Recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross w/Valor; 1Lt Larry D. Barbee, Navigator/NOS—Recommended

for the Distinguished Flying Cross w/Valor; SSgt Francis J. Sledzinski, Lead Gunner—Recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross w/Valor; SSgt Delanor E. Iman, Gunner—Recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross w/Valor; A1C Richard C. Corbett, Gunner—Recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross w/Valor; SSgt Kenneth R. Brown, Illuminator Operator (KIA)—Recommended for the Silver Star. Two of the nine awards were downgraded and the other seven were disapproved. 

Note: In 2023 a reconsideration package was submitted by a former Secretary of Defense and was endorsed by 24 general officers (including four Chiefs of Staff). On February 28, 2025, we received the results of the Secretary of the Air Force review of our reconsideration package. Unfortunately, the Decorations Board made no changes to the downgraded and disapproved awards. The Board

disagreed with the recommendations of Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), a former Secretary of the Air Force, twenty-four retired Air Force general officers (including four former Air Force Chiefs of Staff), a former Commander of the Air Force Special Operations Command and his Awards and Decorations Office, and the wartime Squadron and Wing Commanders. We will continue to work toward seeking the to recognize Air Force's approval the heroism and gallantry demonstrated by the crew of Stinger 41.

Editor's Note: Most of the credit for this story goes to Barry Levine who conducted the research and interviews and provided me with all the pieces. Special thanks go to those who were there and shared their memories so we could bring the pieces together to tell this story: Tom Waskow, Francis Sledzinski, Larry Barbee, Tom Milligan, Lamar Smith, and Craig Corbett. I am grateful to you all for sharing your personal stories, and thank you for your service.

