

Chugging along at 180 knots, its insides gutted of all but the essential equipment to turn it into a fighter plane, the Fairchild AC-119 was a heavy old ship that wasn't really suited to the demanding gunship task. Too many people got involved in its development, and it was delivered later than expected – but Stinger and Shadow crews got the job done.

## EYE WITNESS

by those who fought

# Mayday over Laos

The night of 8 May 1970 witnessed an extraordinary display of airmanship when a Stinger from Udorn was heavily damaged by anti-aircraft fire.

Captain Alan D. Milacek and his nine-man crew had been reconnoitring a heavily defended road section near Ban Ban, Laos, when they discovered, attacked and destroyed two trucks. Captains James A. Russell and Ronald C. Jones, the sensor operators, located three more trucks. As the aircraft banked into attack orbit, six enemy positions opened up with a barrage of AA fire. The co-pilot, Captain Brent C. O'Brien, cleared the fighter escort for attack and the gunship circled as the F-4s worked to suppress the AA fire.

### Another truck killed

Amid the heavy enemy fire, Captain Milacek resumed the attack and killed another truck. At 0100, just about two hours into the mission, "the whole cargo compartment lit up" as enemy rounds tore into the Stinger's right wing. A "sickening right dive of the aircraft" ensued and Milacek called "Mayday, Mayday, we're going in." He shouted orders to SSgt Adolfo Lopez, Jr, the IO (illuminator operator), to jettison the flare launcher.

### Ready to jump for it

Captain Milacek directed the entire crew to get ready for instant bailout. As the gunship dropped about 1,000ft within a few seconds, Captains Milacek and O'Brien pooled their strength to pull the aircraft out of its dive.

By using full-left rudder, full-left aileron, and maximum power on the two right engines, they regained stabilised flight.

The full-engine power fuelled two/three foot flames – torchlights for enemy gunners as the crippled Stinger desperately headed for friendly territory. Navigator Captain Roger E. Clancy gave the correct heading but warned they were too low to clear a range of mountains towering between them and safety.

### Fuel running out

What's more, the crew discovered that fuel consumption would likely mean dry tanks before reaching base.

The crew tossed out every possible item to lighten the load and the aircraft slowly climbed to 10,000ft. TSgt Albert A. Nash, the flight engineer, reported the fuel-consumption rate had fallen.

### No-flap landing at 150 knots

Captain Milacek elected to land the damaged plane and when he approached the base area he ran a careful check of controls. He found that almost full-left rudder and aileron would allow him to keep control. With uncertain flap damage, Milacek chose a no-flap landing approach at 150 knots (normally 117 knots). Utilising every bit of pilot skill he landed the plane. Upon leaving the Stinger, the crew saw about one-third of the right wing had been torn off.

Below: Devastation like this, caused by the VC against a friendly village in South Vietnam, could be prevented if gunships were in the area and in contact with friendly troops.

