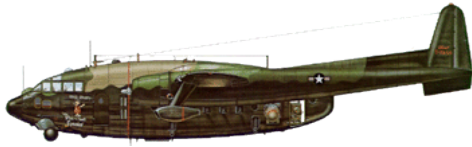


## AC-119K Stinger



### [18th SOS & Stinger Chronology](#)

### Vengeance by Night!

#### Motto of the famed Hunter/Killers of the Ho Chi Minh Trail

**A history of the AC-119K Stinger gunship.** As mentioned in the AC-119G Shadow pages, a very common fallacy regarding gunships is the one that the C-119 Flying Boxcar series was the follow-on aircraft to the AC-47. Actually, the AC-130 was the next step in the program. One of the main causes of this fallacy is the fact that the AC-119 did take over the duties of the AC-47 in Vietnam. But the fact remains that the AC-130 was Project Gunship II, & the AC-119 was Project Gunship III.

In 1967, Air Force & ground commanders throughout Vietnam were clamoring for more gunships. The Air Force wanted more AC-130s for use against the supply routes, but the need for cargo-carrying C-130s took precedent over the gunships. Air Force did not want to go back to the AC-47, since that aircraft did not meet the new gunship requirements calling for more speed, greater payload capacity, & longer range. Another aircraft had to be found for the gunship program. Air Force also wanted to equip some of the new gunships for the truck-hunting role, which meant heavier weapons & advanced electronic warfare equipment. The answer lay with the venerable, old Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcar.

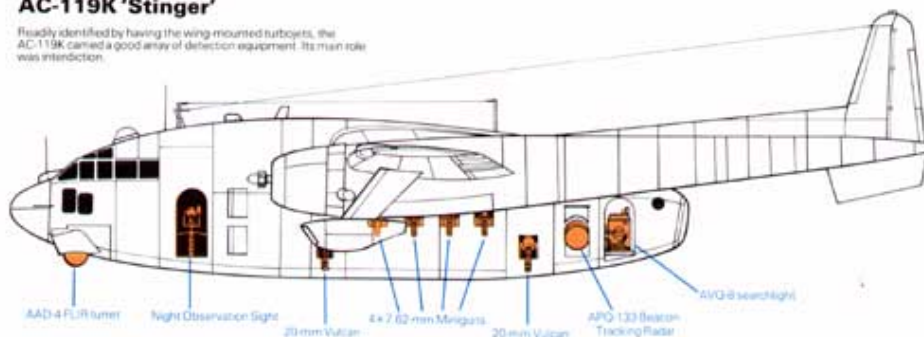
The C-119 Flying Boxcar had the increased performance that the new requirement called for & was much larger internally than the C-47. Best of all, it was readily available since they equipped many squadrons within the Air Force Reserve. It was a natural choice. A letter contract was awarded to Fairchild-Hiller Corp. on February 17, 1968 to modify twenty-six C-119 airframes into AC-119G Gunships; & twenty-six more C-119 airframes into advanced AC-119K gunships for the truck-hunting role. All modifications were to be done at the Fairchild-Hiller facility in St. Augustine, Florida.

Starting life as a C-119G, the Fairchild-Hiller people added all the equipment needed to bring the aircraft to C-119K standard. Then the gunship modifications began. The aircraft were brought to AC-119G standards then had the following equipment added specifically for the truck-hunting role:

In addition to the two J-85 jet engines, the K model bolstered the four-minigun armament of the G with 31,000 rounds of ammunition plus two M61A1 20mm multibarrel Gatling cannons & 4,500 rounds of 20 mm ammunition. Stinger also carried the G-model NOD/NOS. The FLIR was noticeable improvement over the seldom use NOD on the 17th SOS gunships because the FLIR did not require starlight or moonlight. Although Stinger NOS/Navigator used it quite extensively. The K models were also equipped with a state-of-the-art Texas Instruments AN/AAD-4 Forward looking infrared (FLIR) system; AN/APN-147 Doppler radar; Motorola AN/APQ-133 Sidelooking beacon tracking radar, & Texas Instruments AN/APQ-136 search radar. In addition to the G model flare equipment, both gunships were also equipped with a door-mounted 20-kilowatt (KW) 'white light' illuminator. Its 1.5-million candlepower variable beam could light up a football stadium with superb clarity on the darkest nights. Of course, it also told the bad guys below exactly where to point their weapons, a drawback that discouraged the gunship crews from using the illuminator whenever possible. The illuminator on the K model also had an infrared mode, (I'm not sure about the G model.) but this was no guarantee the enemy gunners couldn't follow the beam back to the aircraft.

#### AC-119K 'Stinger'

Readily identified by having the wing-mounted turbojets, the AC-119K carried a good array of detection equipment. Its main role was interdiction.



The added equipment, plus the time needed to test it, added about ten months to delivery time. It was November 3, 1969 when the first AC-119K was delivered to the 18th SOSq at Nha Trang Air Base. Later they flew their first mission when C Flight flew a TIC support mission for a firebase near Da Nang. The AC-119K had been in combat evaluation almost a month when it received a new call sign & thus a new nickname. The 18th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) reviewed a list of available calls including Gun Shy, Poor Boy, & Charlie Brown. The men of the squadron dejectedly picked Charlie Brown as the 'least of these evils' but strongly asserted they deserved better. It turned out later the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing at Da Nang had an unusual tactical voice call sign-Stinger. The 18th SOS, backed by the 14th Special Operations Wing, put in a claim for it. The 18th saw Stinger as slightly off the gunship tradition but a satisfactory compromise, a sign around which unit pride could be built & a continuation of the 'S' alliteration of gunship call signs. The Seventh Air Force approved the call-sign transfer & the AC-119K became Stinger on December 1, 1969. Stinger now joined Spectre in armed reconnaissance of enemy supply lines in Laos & Shadow in a variety of missions in South Vietnam. Spooky was still around, carrying the flag of allied nations. All of the AC-119s were assigned to the 14th Special Operations Wing headquartered at Nha Trang. The G models were assigned to the 17th SOSq, while the K models went to the 18th. The 14th SOW thus became the most unique unit in Southeast Asia with its one of a kind squadrons. They had the only AC-47 units in the 3rd & 4th SOS; the only two psywar units in the 5th & 9th SOS; the 20th SOS was the only armed helicopter unit in the Air Force; plus the only two AC-119 units. At one time in 1968, crews of the 14th SOW were flying eight different aircraft types from ten different bases throughout Vietnam. The 14th SOWq had been known as the 14th Air Commando Wing prior to August 1, 1968. The motto of the 14th was 'Day or night, Peace & War'. They flew an average of 175 missions per day, flying the 200,000th mission in March 1970.

As mentioned earlier, AC-119s had two completely different missions. The G models were strictly for TIC (Troops in Contact) support & airbase defense. The K models were used almost strictly in the truck-hunting role. A couple of books have mentioned that the twin 20mm guns could destroy most of the Soviet truck types, but were ineffective against even the lightest of tanks. Unknown to those authors was a mission this web site author flew on February 28, 1971, where a Stinger gunship was pitted against North Vietnamese tanks as the Stingers shouldered heavy support commitments growing out of the South Vietnamese offensive into Laos (Lam Son 719). The Stinger destroyed eight Russian PT-76 tanks on one mission. For more on the [8-tank mission](#) visit the stories & sorties page. The AC-119Ks compiled their superb interdiction record despite bad weather early in the hunting season & diversions for emergency support of Lima Sites & troops in contact with the enemy. Late in the war, some of the K models eliminated all the 7.62 armament in favor of increased ammo supply for the 20mm. As the Stingers fast became the nightmare of North Vietnamese truckers on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, a new tactic was tried where the gunship crews & Army pilots flying their sophisticated OV-1 Mohawk surveillance plane formed into ad hoc hunter-killer teams. The hunter-killer-team concept brought together the best of the sensor capabilities mounted on both the OV-1s & the AC-119Ks, the forces met to find enemy trucks coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the latter to acquire & destroy specific targets. As both aircraft were flying over the same territory looking for the same target why not blend the two capabilities? With neither the Air Force nor the Army officially sanctioning the concept, both services allowed their aircrews to participate in a month-long test program from April to May 1970. Teaming up a total of 14 times during this period, the OV-1/AC-119 hunter-killer teams destroyed or damaged 60 of 70 trucks attacked.' While the field reports indicate not all truck kills stemmed from OV-1 sightings, the overall 'trucks destroyed/damaged' totals surged an astonishing 60 percent over those achieved when the gunships operated alone.' More impressive still, this result was achieved with only the briefest & crudest coordination between the aircrews themselves. It seemed a promising start with an even more promising future. Alas, the hunter-killer-team concept was not destined to last. What cooperation the aircrews could accomplish in the field was not repeated by their respective headquarters. The Seventh Air Force was loathe to put its aircraft in a subordinate command relationship with Army aircrews, while the Army was equally loathe to watch the Air Force getting all the credit for increased truck kills. The ad hoc effort continued for a few months longer before dying quietly from lack of support.

For a short time attention was diverted from 'target rich' Laos, as the relative lull in enemy activity in South Vietnam terminated abruptly in May, with large-scale attacks against isolated government militia camps at Dak Pek & Dak Seang. Flying 147 sorties in 7 weeks, the AC-119Gs & Ks expended over two million rounds of minigun ammunition & nearly 22,000 20mm cannon rounds defending the camps. When the smoke cleared, the camps still held.

Problems with the AC-119s were not overwhelming. Most were due to organizational foul-ups or service rivalries. For instance, the AC-119s were almost always a tenant at any base they served on. Therefore they came under the organizational maintenance of the host unit. This meant they had to beg, borrow, or steal what they needed to keep the birds flying; workshops, ground equipment, etc, all belonged to the host unit. Support priorities were always with the host unit, the gunship tenants coming last. This was due to both a lack of gunship support personnel & an above average rivalry between the types of aircraft. Fighter jocks simply did not like armed cargo planes doing their job, & doing it better!

Another problem arose with the K models when 7th Air Force based them too far from their target areas to be effective. The K flights were based at DaNang, Phu Cat & Phan Rang. From DaNang, the K crews had 1 3/4 hours over the Trail; from Phu Cat - 1 hour; & from Phan Rang the Trail was unreachable! A flight based at Ubon was the most logical place for the K models since it was very close to the Trail & the AC-119K support could come from the 16th SOS, which was based at Ubon also. This was never to come about. However, after a short fight between the interdiction folks & the TIC support people, two flights of the K force were moved - first to Udorn, then to Nakhon Phanom. From both bases a Stinger could roam the Trail at will but not without consequences.

The heavy demand for AC-119K support of ground operations & interdiction of the enemy's dry-season supply effort contributed to some early losses. The first occurred on February 19, 1970, when a Stinger crashed short of the Da Nang runway while returning from a combat mission. The final approach had gone normally until the landing gear & flaps went down about two miles out at 500-600 -foot altitude. A sudden power loss in the jet & reciprocating engines on the left side, apparently due to fuel starvation, prevented the pilot from maintaining either directional control or altitude. The crash demolished the aircraft but the crewmembers escaped with only minor injuries. Another Ac-119K was nearly lost when a 37mm round shattered the nose section as the aircraft worked a few miles north of Ban Bak, Laos.

Concern about AC-119K vulnerability to anti-aircraft fire, especially to fire encountered over the Laotian road & trail system, led to the use of fighter escorts as developed on AC-130 operations. F-4 Phantoms from the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing at Da Nang flew constant escort & anti-aircraft suppression for all Stinger armed reconnaissance flights. At the height of the truck-hunting season the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) averaged six escort sorties per night.

The 18th Special Operations Squadron lost a second aircraft on the night of June 6, 1970. Shortly after the plane took off from Da Nang, its left-engine propeller went out of control. The pilot tried to head back to base but the situation deteriorated & the crew bailed out over the South China Sea just east of Da Nang. The empty aircraft kept on seaward, creating a momentary flurry of excitement since it seemed headed for China's Hainan Island. The Stinger crashed at an undetermined spot. All crewmembers but one were safely recovered.

The night of May 8, 1970 witnessed an extraordinary display of airmanship when a Stinger crew *Stinger 21* operating over Ban Ban, Laos, brought back a gunship despite extensive anti-aircraft artillery (triple-A) damage. Captain Alan D. Milacek & his nine-man crew had been reconnoitering a heavily defended road section near Ban Ban, Laos, when they discovered, attacked & destroyed two trucks. Captain James A. Russell & Captain 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 triple-A fire. The copilot, Captain Brent C. O'Brien, cleared the fighter escort for attack & the gunship circled as the F-4's worked to suppress the triple-A fire. Amid the heavy enemy fire Captain Milacek resumed the attack & killed another truck. At 0100, just about 2 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 & Milacek called 'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, we're going in.' He shouted orders to SSgt Adolpho Lopez, Jr., the IO (Illuminator Operator), to jettison the flare launcher. Captain Milacek directed the entire crew to get ready for instant bailout. As the gunship dropped about 1,000 feet within a few seconds, Captains Milacek & O'Brien pooled their strength to pull the aircraft out of its dive. By using full-left rudder, full-left aileron, & maximum power on the two right engines, they regained stabilized flight. The full-engine power fueled 2 to 3 foot flames-torchlights for enemy gunners as the crippled Stinger desperately headed for friendly territory. The navigator, Captain Roger E. Clancy, gave the correct heading but warned they were too low to clear a range of mountains towering between them & safety. What's more, the crew discovered that the fuel consumption would likely mean dry tanks before reaching base.

The crew tossed out every possible item to lighten the load & the aircraft slowly climbed to 10,000 feet. TSgt Albert A. Nash, the flight engineer, reported the fuel-consumption rate had fallen. Capt. Milacek elected to land the damaged plane & when he approached the base area he ran a careful check of the controls. He found that almost full-left rudder & aileron would allow him to keep control. With uncertain flap damage, Milacek chose a no-flap landing approach at 150 knots (normally 117 knots). Utilizing every bit of pilot skill he landed the plane. Upon leaving the Stinger, the crew saw about one-third of the right wing (a 14-foot section & aileron) had been torn off. The Air Force Chief of Staff later presented Captain Milacek & crew with the 1970 Mackay Trophy 'for the most meritorious flight of the year.'

Fortunately, aircraft & crewmember losses in the AC-119 gunship program were few. A fact directly attributed to the superb airmanship of the gunship aircrews & fighter escort. The AC-119s were every bit as versatile as the AC-130, just not as heavily armed. They operated in every normal gunship role; night TIC support, day TIC support, base defense, night FAC, night-armed reconnaissance, flareship, etc. But another era had come to an end.

On September 30, 1971, the 14th SOW was deactivated, & by late 1972, the war was winding down for the Shadow/Stinger squadrons. The AC-130s were coming on line in growing numbers & except for the few AC-119Gs, & fewer AC-119Ks, turned over to the VNAF, the AC-119 gunship would fight no more. They had been a very effective fighting force for the short time they were involved in the war. The 18th SOS had some 2206 disabled trucks to their credit by September of 1970 alone.

As Colonel Michael Haas pointed out in his book, *Apollo's Warriors*: 'The thing about Air Commandos is that you don't need them very often. But when you do, you tend to need them very badly.' The hunting prowess of the AC-119K & her crews, even while barraged by heavy anti-aircraft artillery, was evident in the hundreds of burned-out Soviet-built trucks littered across Indochina's landscape & the thousands of allied lives saved by the AC-119K Stinger gunship crews who were always there when needed the most.

Tremendous advances in technology from those pioneering efforts with the AC-47 more than 30 years ago made possible the United States Air Force's successful AC-119 gunship program. Continued advancements have led to the USAF's present day, ultrasophisticated AC-130 gunship fleet. For all these unquestionable improvements, however, technical advances can never replace the qualitative link that binds today's gunship crews with the Dragonships that once roared as they spat streams of fire from the night skies over Indochina.

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#### ADDITIONAL NOTES

Type: AC-119K Stinger, fixed wing gunship Number Built/Converted: 26 Remarks: Improved the AC-119G  
Serial/Tail Numbers: 52-5864, 52-5889, 52-5910, 52-5911, 52-55926, 52-5935, 52-5940, 52-5945, 52-9982, 53-3154, 53-3156, 53-3187, 53-3197, 53-3211, 53-7826, 53-7830, 53-7831, 53-7839, 53-7850, 53-7854, 53-7877, 53-7879, 53-7883, 53-8121, 53-8145, 53-8148

#### SPECIFICATIONS

Span: 109 ft. 3 1/4 in. Length: 86 ft. 5 3/4 in. Height: 26 ft. 7 3/4 in. Weight: 80,400 lbs.

Max. Armament: Four SUU-11A 7.62 mm 'miniguns' with 21,500 rounds of ammunition. Two M61-A1 20 mm vulcan cannons with 3,000 rounds of ammunition. 24 MK 24 flares & an LAU-74/A flare launcher. Later, the SUU-11A's were replaced by General Electric MXU-470/A gun modules. The AC-119K was equipped with a computerized fire control system (FCS) with fully auto, semi-auto, manual & offset firing capabilities. The Stinger also had a 1.5 million candlepower illuminator with a variable beam, APQ-136 forward looking radar, AAD-4 forward looking infrared radar (FLIR), APR-25/26 electronic countermeasures (ECM) warning device, and AN/APQ-133 Beacon Tracking Radar (removed in December 1970).

Engines: Two Wright R-3350s of 3,500 hp. ea. & two General Electric J85-GE-17 turbojets of 2850 lbs. thrust each  
Crew: Ten - pilot, copilot, navigator, night observation sight (NOS) operator, radar/FLIR operator, flight engineer, illuminator operator, three gunners.

PERFORMANCE Combat speed: 180 knots

Duration: approximately 5 hours (plus 30 minutes reserve)

Attack altitude: Approximately 3,500ft. above ground level (AGL) for close air support; 5,500ft AGL for ground attack in areas without AAA & 7,000ft AGL in areas with AAA.

(Excerpts from [Apollo's Warriors](#) by Col. Michael E. Haas, USAF, Ret., & [Gunships: A pictorial History of Spooky](#) by Larry Davis, & [Fixed-Wing Gunships](#) by Jack S. Ballard.)