

In the annals of aviation history, the fixed-wing gunship was a great developmental and operational success. The basic gunship concept is quite simple: an aircraft flying in a level turn around a point on the ground (as if tethered to a pylon, hence called a “pylon turn”) delivered accurate firepower from guns firing perpendicular to the line of flight.

From late 1969 until 1973, the *Stingers* of the 18<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron (SOS) unleashed torrents of deadly minigun and cannon fire upon the enemy below. For *Stingers* that meant selecting to fire either 3,000 or 6,000 rounds per minute from each of the four 7.62mm miniguns for a total of 12,000 or 24,000 rounds; along with 2,500 rounds per minute from each of the two 20mm Vulcan cannons for a total of 5,000 rounds of 20mm cannon fire. Much like its sister gunship, the AC-119G *Shadow*, the *Stinger* defended hamlets; flew close air support by providing fire support for ground troops in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam; and escorted convoys.

However, the primary *Stinger* mission was to cut off enemy supplies coming down the heavily fortified Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. The *K* model *Stinger*, with the addition of its two J85 jet engines, heavier armament, improved fire control system, and forward looking infrared radar (FLIR) became known as one of the most feared truck hunters of the Vietnam War.

Undaunted by heavy anti-aircraft and small arms fire, the AC-119K *Stinger* gunships, and her brave crews, proved invaluable during the Vietnam War, and fortunately suffered few losses. That fact is directly attributed to the superb airmanship of the gunship aircrews, fighter escorts, their maintenance and support personnel, and the tough old bird itself.

By 1973 the war wound down for the men of the 18<sup>th</sup> SOS and the 14<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing, and their gunships were turned over to the South Vietnamese 821<sup>st</sup> Attack Squadron. Their Vietnamese counterparts continued the fight until the bitter end. One day before South Vietnam ceased to exist as a country, a lone South Vietnamese AC-119K continuously strafed the Advancing NVA and Viet Cong as best they could until their fate was sealed by a shoulder-fired SA-7 Strella missile. The missile severed one of the tail booms causing the aircraft to burst into flames and crash, killing its entire crew. The Vietnamese airman, like their American counterparts, did more than their duty and paid the highest price.

In the short time they were involved in the Vietnam War the *Stingers* proved to be a formidable fighting force saving countless lives. Although no AC-119K returned to the United States, you can rest assured that there will always be a qualitative link binding today's gunship crews, and maintenance personnel, with those of the *Stinger* gunships that once roared as they spat streams of fire from the night skies over Indochina.