

To Whom It May Concern

AC-119 Stinger 41

May 2, 1972

The following is a narrative of events of that day as written by Thomas J. Milligan, Lt.Col. (Ret.) USAF. On May 2, 1972, I was a Forward Air Controller (FAC), callsign SUND OG 29, assigned to the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, Sundog FACs, at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Saigon, South Vietnam. An Air Force captain, I was a highly experienced FAC and was the unit's assistant operations officer for training. I had a team of FAC instructors working with me and we evaluated and trained every new Fac coming into our unit. In addition, we often briefed new units flying in the region because as FACs we were the most qualified to provide new units information about enemy disposition and ground to air threats. I had just a week earlier flown to Bien Hoa Air Base and briefed and flown with the newly assigned HH-3 Jolly Green unit about threats in the area around An Loc.

The morning of May 2 was very typical. I went into the squadron at about 0800 and began my preparations for the day's flight and to complete some routine office paperwork. I knew that I was flying a FAC mission to support air strikes in and around the city of An Loc. The city was under siege by a determined large force of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong. In fact, there were three enemy divisions (5th, 7th 9th) of about 35,000 total surrounding the city. An Loc was situated on Route 13 which was the key to taking Saigon. At that time, the city was being supplied only by air. There were about 7,500 South Vietnamese troops in An Loc and a small number of American advisors. The North Vietnamese were focused on taking the city which would have opened the way to Saigon. To stop the dropping of supplies into the city, the NVA had built up and very formidable anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) force which made flying over and around An Loc very dangerous.

When I visited our intelligence section to get my pre-mission briefing on the situation at An Loc, I was informed that I would be supporting another mission. An AC-119 Gunship, callsign Stinger 41, was going to fly out of Bien Hoa to An Loc with a mission to destroy supplies, including munitions that had been air dropped but had fallen near or behind the enemy lines. I was assigned to help the AC-119 find the target and to point out any AAA. My first thoughts were that this was going to be a very dangerous mission, especially for the slow-moving AC-119 Gunship. Gunships were big targets and so they most often flew at night. To put this slow-moving gunship over An loc, one of the most dangerous places for aircraft in South Vietnam, during the day must mean that the target was of high importance. The AC-119 was almost as slow as my slow-moving O-2A Skymaster FAC Aircraft and it was much, much larger.

I took off from Tan Son Nhut at about noon and flew to a rendezvous with Stinger 41. After we checked in, I took a position wide and in trail behind his right wing and we proceeded to An loc. The first couple of orbits over An Loc were uneventful. Neither of us could find the dropped supplies, which may have already been taken by the NVA troops. It wasn't very long before the first rounds of 37mm AAA started flying up from gun positions somewhere on the west side of town. The first rounds were not well-aimed and they were well behind, above and out right from the circling AC-119. I informed the flight crew but they already knew they were being shot at. The fact that the rounds were behind the AC-119 meant that they were close to me and I adjusted my position. Another circle of the AC-119 brought more rounds up from the ground and the AC-119 changed altitude about a 1,000 ft as the rounds better found his altitude and position. I informed the crew that the rounds were getting closer. Another circle and the 37mm was coming very close to the circling gunship. I suggested to the pilot that it might be good to move away as the enemy gunners were getting smarter each time the AC-119 came around. He

informed me that his gunners were working hard to find the enemy AAA positions but that he would only fly one more circle and then move off. (The rounds coming up at the AC-119 and exploding around it reminded me of the movies taken of our B-17s flying over Germany in WWII. The sky was filled with exploding 37mm rounds.)

As the AC-119 came around for the last time, another volley of 37MM came up and several rounds struck Stinger as it was turning toward the west in its circle. The right wing immediately was almost totally enveloped in bright orange and red flames which reached back to the rear of the fuselage. I gave a heading to the pilot to fly and informed my controller that Stinger 41 had been hit hard and that SAR forces should be launched ASAP. At the same time, the AC-119 pilot leveled his wings and fought to control the burning aircraft as it lost altitude and headed toward the WSW.

I watched the AC-119 heading west and tried to keep up with it as it continued to lose altitude. I called the pilot and suggested that he might start thinking about getting out of the aircraft because the fires were getting worse and the aircraft continued a slow decent toward the jungle. I don't even know if he heard me as he had many things to worry about. When the aircraft was clear of the city and out over the jungle, I saw the first parachutes coming out as the crew began to leave the stricken aircraft.

As each chute deployed and I saw the crewmember floating toward the jungle, it occurred to me that I would have a very difficult time trying to find the survivors as they floated into the jungle. From above I could see a small stream running near where the crewmembers were landing. With a grease pencil I marked the path of the stream on my forward windscreen and then put an "X" near the route of the stream as each parachute disappeared into the jungle. I only counted 7 chutes.

I was informed by my controller that a Sandy flight of A-1s and a flight of Jolly Green helicopters were both on their way. I descended lower as I was away from the primary threats around An Loc and started to call the crewmembers on their survival radios. As I made contact with each one, I informed them that help was on its way. They should stay under cover, drink some water and remain calm. **Each survivor responded and followed my instructions in a most professional manner.** (Later the rescued crewmembers told me that they could hear the sound of the Skymaster as it flew over their positions.) Within 30 or so minutes I was contacted by Sandy and he took over control of the Search and Rescue (SAR) but not until I had pointed out each of the downed crewmembers by rocking my wings as I passed over their locations. I watched as helicopters came in and picked up six of the remaining survivors as one (the first to bail out) he been extracted by an Army helicopter flying near-by.

I stayed in the area of the crash long after the helicopters had departed just in case another crewmember was alive. After about an hour, I started my return to Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Once I had debriefed with my squadron, I went to the hospital where I had the privilege of meeting the surviving members of the crew of Sting 41.

Thomas J. Milligan

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Tom Milligan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lt. Col. (RET) USAF

INDIVIDUAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT

State/Commonwealth of AZ

County of Maricopa

} ss.

On this the 20th day of May, 2021, before me,
Day Month Year

Jacob Carlson, the undersigned Notary Public,
Name of Notary Public

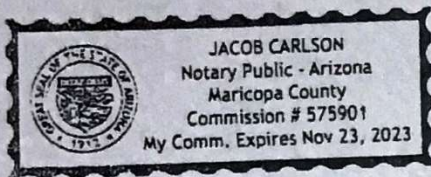
personally appeared Thomas Joseph Milligan,
Name(s) of Signer(s)

☐ personally known to me – OR –

☒ proved to me on the basis of satisfactory evidence

to be the person(s) whose name(s) is/are subscribed to the within instrument, and acknowledged to me that he/she/they executed the same for the purposes therein stated.

WITNESS my hand and official seal.



Jacob Carlson
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