

ATTACHMENT 2

A. THE SIEGE OF AN LOC

In early April 1972, North Vietnamese (NVA) forces began a concerted attack on An Loc, a city only 65 miles north of Saigon and situated on Route 13, which provided a path directly to Saigon.¹ The NVA quickly cut off ground access to An Loc from the north. On April 7, the invaders overran an airstrip northeast of An Loc used by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) for helicopter operations. On the same day, the NVA secured control of Route 13, cutting off resupply of An Loc by ground from the south. Within days, the NVA had control of the high ground overlooking An Loc and had positioned spotters and anti-aircraft artillery around the city.

“The NVA had all avenues of approach covered with massive .51-caliber, 23-mm, 37-mm, and 57-mm [AAA] fire. Additionally, they had introduced the SA-7 Strella heat-seeking anti-aircraft missile * * *. Furthermore, a system of early warning spotters enabled the North Vietnamese to identify incoming aircraft so that their gunners would be ready to fire. The result was a devastating pattern of anti-aircraft fire every time an aircraft got close to the city.”²

With only airlift left for supplying An Loc after April 7, ARVN forces used helicopters for resupply missions until helicopter resupply was deemed too dangerous on April 12, 1972, after an ARVN CH-47 was shot down. Three U.S. aircraft had also been damaged by AAA during the air resupply effort through April 12.³

At about the same time helicopter operations were stopped, the NVA began tank and infantry assaults on An Loc itself. These were met by Air Force and Navy tactical aircraft and Army helicopters, which rained ordnance on the NVA forces. In addition, AC-119 and AC-130 gunships were brought into the fight. Shortly thereafter, B-52 “Arc Light” missions began to attack NVA staging areas and troop concentrations around the city. To coordinate the air strikes,

¹ See generally Wilbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Combat Studies Institute at 22ff (1993). Wilbanks was a U.S. Advisor serving in An Loc at the time of the siege in April 1972.

² Wilbanks, at 24. A safe operating altitude in SA-7 threat areas for the slow-flying aircraft for which the SA-7 was the greatest threat was 7000 feet. This made the AC-119 “an immediate casualty to the SA-7 envelope because it was only effective up to 4500 feet (3500 feet optimum) with its miniguns (7.62mm machine guns) and up to 6500 feet with its 20mm cannon.” HQ PACAF, PROJECT CHECO SOUTHEAST ASIA REPORT, *THE BATTLE FOR AN LOC 5 APRIL – 26 JUNE 1972* (31 Dec. 1973) (declassified 31 DEC 1981) [“CHECO 1 Report”] at 48.

³ LaValle, USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, Volume II, Monograph 3, *Airpower and the 1972 Spring Invasion* (Office of Air Force History 1985) [“LaValle”], at 86.

three USAF forward air controllers⁴ flew over An Loc continuously to relay strike requests from ground elements to tactical and bomber aircraft as they approached An Loc.

B. Fixed-wing Resupply at An Loc

After April 12, ARVN fixed-wing aircraft continued to perform resupply using a small drop zone located at the soccer stadium. From April 12 through April 14, ARVN C-123 aircraft flew 27 sorties with 135 tons of supplies to the drop zone. However, only 34 tons reached friendly forces; the rest fell to the enemy.⁵ On the 14th, a C-123 was shot down during a resupply mission. Another was shot down on April 18th or 19th.⁶

The Air Force was tasked to use C-130 aircraft to drop pallets into An Loc using the Container Delivery System (CDS) during daylight drops.⁷ The drop zone was a 200-meter square soccer field in the southern part of An Loc. Five missions were planned, two each on April 15 and 16 and one on April 18. These missions were designed to ingress at high speed and low altitude, with a climb to 600 feet for a low-speed pass over the drop zone.⁸ Flights near the drop zone quickly proved highly dangerous because of the massed AAA.⁹

The first C-130 mission on April 15 dropped its load but was hit by ground fire. Even so, it made it back to base. However, the second –“Spare 617” – was not so lucky. Before it could drop its pallets of ammunition, AAA came through the cockpit, wounded the co-pilot, and killed the engineer. AAA also hit the engines and wing on the left side of the aircraft and fire broke out on the aircraft including in the cargo compartment which still held pallets of live ammunition. The loadmaster, Shaub, was able to put out the fire long enough to release the pallets, which exploded just after leaving the aircraft. Even with serious damage, the aircraft was able to return to its base. For his actions in combat, the pilot was awarded the Air Force Cross. The loadmaster, who was burned while putting out the fire and releasing the pallets, was nominated for the Medal of Honor but was awarded the Air Force Cross.¹⁰

The first mission on April 16 missed the drop zone. Because of weather, the second mission for April 16, Manta 75, was delayed until April 18. On the 18th, Manta 75 flew into massive amounts of AAA and was forced to ditch in a field south of An Loc. Because the flight was too low to allow bailout, the pilots flew away from An Loc until they found a clearing and could execute a crash landing. Miraculously, the ditching was witnessed by Army helicopters

⁴ LaValle at 81.

⁵ LTC Len Funk, *The Siege at An Loc: How Air Resupply Helped Save the City* (National Museum of the United States Army (downloaded from armyhistory.org on 4/14/2023) [“Funk”], at 4

⁶ LaValle at 86; CHECO 1 Report at 28.

⁷ LaValle at 87.

⁸ LaValle at 87.

⁹ LaValle at 87.

¹⁰ LaValle at 89

returning from a mission north of An Loc, whose pilots saw the Manta 75 crew crawling out of the wreckage and then landed to provide assistance and call in additional rescue helicopters. All six crew members of Manta 75 were awarded the silver star. The Army helicopter pilots and their aerial gunners who rescued the crew also got Silver Stars, but 45 years later, in 2017.¹¹

The loss of Manta 75 and another ARVN C-123 (with loss of the crew) caused daylight low-level drops to be suspended.¹² No missions were flown until the Air Force modified its standard aerial resupply procedures and gunship operations to reduce the risk to those operations.¹³ The public record has two different accounts of how those operations were changed.

One source states that after April 18, a decision was made to fly low-level C-130 missions only at night to reduce the threat of AAA.¹⁴ Night missions were then flown with limited success on April 24 and 25, when a C-130 flying at night was shot down with the loss of all on board. After a pause, night drops were continued until May 3, when another C-130 flying at night was shot down with loss of the crew.¹⁵ At that point, all low-level operations were terminated.

A second source states that after April 18-19, low-level drops were abandoned in favor of drops from higher altitudes, which were ultimately unsuccessful:

Unwilling to risk C-130 aircraft and crews on low-level missions any longer, the Air Force decided to attempt resupply using the Ground Radar Aerial Delivery System (GRADS). Flying at a relatively "safe" altitude of 6000-9000 feet, the aircraft was vectored to a Computed Aerial Release Point (CARP) by a ground radar station (MSQ-71). Upon arrival, the aircraft accomplished a high-altitude drop with a low opening parachute (HALO) * * *. In eight missions between 19-23 April, the GRADS failed due to parachute malfunctions of every type imaginable. Some bundles smashed into the ground, but most drifted outside the defensive perimeter to succor the enemy.¹⁶

Because GRADS flights had not been successful, low-level daylight CDS drops were reinstated on April 23¹⁷ and continued until another C-130 was shot down on April 25 or 26 with

¹¹ See Thomas Ward, *How 9th Cavalry Hueys Save a Downed Crew at An Loc*, Historynet.com (5/4/2022).

¹² CHECO 1 Report at 28

¹³ CHECO 1 Report at 57.

¹⁴ Funk at 5.

¹⁵ LaValle at 90-91.

¹⁶ CHECO 1 Report at 28-29; LaValle at 89

¹⁷ CHECO 1 Report at 29.

no survivors. Night drops were then attempted but were not effective, with less than 30% of pallets being recovered and many of the rest falling to the enemy.¹⁸ The major problem with the night drops was the inability of the C-130 crews to see the drop zone. For a very short while, AC-130 and AC-119 gunships were used to illuminate the drop zone. “Showing the lights for as little as five seconds vastly improved drop chances [but increased risk] for the gunships to be struck by ground fire and missiles because the light attracted ordnance both literally and figuratively.”¹⁹ Accordingly, use of the gunship lights was quickly discontinued.²⁰

After the loss of another C-130 on May 3, and the first firing of an SA-7 missile by the NVA on April 29,²¹ all low-level missions were stopped and replaced with high-level drops to avoid the massed AAA and the SA-7 threat.

By the time the low-level missions stopped, three C-123 and three C-130 aircraft had been shot down and 38 C-130s, over half the aircraft assigned, had sustained moderate to severe battle damage.²² A PACAF report to the Air Staff summed up the low-level missions flown at An Loc this way:

Until the siege of An Loc, the USAF had found the CDS to be not only workable but very efficient. * * *. To be successful, this system required an element of surprise and a relatively permissive environment, neither of which existed at An Loc. The VC/NVA ground forces were able to predict the path of the incoming aircraft by plotting locations received from ground observers strung throughout the area around An Loc. Surrounding the provincial capital and located on all possible air approaches to the city, heavy small arms, .51 caliber machine gun, and AAA fire were easily directed at the C-130s. Enemy gunfire could be especially effective over the drop zone where all the C-130s had to pass at speeds as slow as 130 knots. Even when FACs coordinated tactical suppression missions along the same track the C-130 was to follow, only reduction – not elimination – of AAA was effected. *The result was entirely predictable: 100 percent of the aircraft employing CDS techniques received battle damage.*²³

¹⁸ CHECO 1 Report at 30.

¹⁹ CHECO 1 Report at 33.

²⁰ CHECO 1 Report at 33.

²¹ Funk at 6.

²² Funk at 5.

²³ CHECO 1 Report at 29-30 (emphasis added).

C. The Mission of Stinger 41

By 1972, the Air Force knew well that all of its gunships were very vulnerable to massed AAA.²⁴ This was true of all gunships operating in Southeast Asia, the AC-47, AC-119G, the AC-119K, and the AC-130.²⁵ Indeed, to prevent damage to the aircraft, AC-130s were often accompanied by three F-4 aircraft and a tanker for continuous “flak suppression” by the rotating F-4 aircraft.²⁶ Apparently, without such flak suppression, four AC-47 gunships had been shot down in Laos in 1965-66, in an area of “concentrated automatic weapons and anti-aircraft artillery,” which “precipitated the decision to withdraw the aircraft from Laos in July 1966.”²⁷ It is not at all surprising given this history that the Air Force in early April 1972 wanted to pull the gunships out of An Loc because the surrounding AAA was so fierce, but that desire was countermanded by higher command.²⁸

Nonetheless, the Air Force generally did not choose to task the AC-119 gunship to fly near or over An Loc. And, as noted above, even night operations near An Loc were very dangerous if a gunship became visible even for a few seconds. Accordingly, the Stingers were “forced up and away from the highly defended city.”²⁹ There was, however, one exception, the AC-119K mission on May 2, 1972, called Stinger 41.

²⁴ HQ PACAF, PROJECT CHECO SOUTHEAST ASIA REPORT, *FIXED WING GUNSHIPS IN SEA* (30 Nov. 1971) (declassified 8/15/2006) [“CHECO 2 Report”] at xv; 4 (“the AC-47’s chances for survival were not good in an area of concentrated automatic weapons and anti-aircraft artillery”); 19 (AC-119G could operate in daytime so long as FAC directed them away from high threat areas); 23 (gunship operations in Cambodia were successful where “no dense concentration of enemy AAA”); 30 (The AC-119K was extremely effective as a truck killer, but care had to be taken to avoid areas of heavy AAA concentration. As with other gunships, the AC-119K’s relatively slow speed and predictable attack pattern made it vulnerable to AAA”); 31 (AC-119K forced to fly at 7,000 feet AGL when AAA present); 43 (“Limitations evolving from their relatively slow speeds and the necessity to operate at low altitude dictate that air superiority must exist and areas of heavy automatic weapons and/or anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) fire must be avoided,” *quoting* TACM 55-249, *Aircrew Operational Procedures, AC-119 and AC-130* (30 Jan 70)); 45 (“AC-130s must operate in a permissive environment and this weapon system cannot survive in heavy enemy AAA fire or SAM threat areas,” *quoting* *16th SOS History, January – March 1971*, Annex B).

²⁵ See previous footnote.

²⁶ See CHECO 2 Report, at 43; 46.

²⁷ See CHECO 2 Report at 3-4.

²⁸ CHECO 1 Report at 41, citing Maj Gen James F. Hollingsworth, CG TRAC, to Gen C. Abrams, “Daily Commander’s Evaluation,” 091000H-101000H Apr 72 (C).

²⁹ CHECO 1 Report at 59.

Throughout the period of low-level drops, a persistent problem was supplies falling not only outside the drop zone but outside the defensive perimeter, where the dropped pallets resupplied the enemy. "Ground commanders were concerned that drops were becoming more harmful than helpful to their cause."³⁰ This was particularly true of pallets of ammunition. Thus it was on May 2, 1972, Stinger 41 was sent to search out and destroy a pallet of ammunition that had fallen outside the defensive perimeter at An Loc. Locating such a pallet required a daylight flight. It also required Stinger 41 to fly close to the drop zone, which was the area most heavily defended by AAA, and where 38 C-130s had suffered moderate to severe battle damage, nine airmen had been killed, and three C-123s and two (later three) C-130s had been shot down, one a week earlier with all crew lost. Indeed, a C-130 operating in the same area was shot down with all crew lost the very next day, May 3, after which all low-level resupply was stopped permanently.

Therefore, when Stinger 41 took off from Bien Hoa Air Base, everyone understood that it was being tasked to fly in daylight into the thick of extremely dangerous AAA. The Stinger was not designed for daylight work or to fly in an AAA environment. The aircraft was painted black and flew low and slow in circles, which in daylight made it an easy target. The Stinger gunship crews were specifically trained only to fly night combat missions. The crew of ten accepted this mission, even though they knew it would be very dangerous.

Once in the target area, they attempted to set up a firing circle but were driven off by accurate 37-mm AAA. They made several additional attempts to acquire the target, and on their final try, intense AAA hit their right wing. Both engines on the right side were destroyed, the landing gear dropped down and fire trailed beyond the tail of the aircraft. It took both pilots at the controls to keep the aircraft in the air long enough to enable the crew to bail out. The jumpmaster assumed his aircraft emergency duty at the rear door to ensure all aircrew parachutes were properly attached. At that point, both pilots and the jumpmaster knew they would most likely have to go down with the aircraft in order to save their fellow crew members.

The pilot announced "ABANDON THE AIRCRAFT" and seven crew members bailed out into the hostile enemy jungle below. One was shot at on the way down, with bullets piercing his parachute. Thirty seconds before impact, 300 feet above the ground, the pilot directed the copilot to abandon the aircraft. The copilot ran to the rear of the aircraft and dove out the troop door. He pulled his "D" ring, his chute opened almost immediately, and he hit the tops of the 200-foot-high jungle canopy. His chute collapsed and he fell through the foliage and miraculously survived. His injuries required over 50 stitches. With the copilot no longer at the controls and assisting the pilot, the aircraft rolled over to the right and crashed. Three crew members were KIA and seven survived.

The seven survivors were now in the dense enemy-controlled jungle. They had four hours to be rescued before nightfall or they would not survive the night. Their heroism and skill were demonstrated by their professionalism in the aircraft and now they had to match that to survive on the ground. All of the jungle survival skills they had trained for paid off. With the help of two forward air controllers (one of which is now Lt Gen (RET) Tom Waskow) and a

³⁰ CHECO 1 Report at 34.

combat search and rescue team, they made it out of the jungle at dusk. This was one of the largest group rescues of the war.

Stinger 41 thus became the only AC-119K to be shot down in the war in Vietnam.

Shortly after the survivors were rescued, their wartime squadron and wing commanders recommended the pilot for the Medal of Honor, and the other crew members for awards ranging from the Silver Star to the Distinguished Flying Cross w/Valor to recognize their heroism. The pilot subsequently was awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously. The awards for the other nine crew members appear to have been lost, as no actions were ever taken on them.

D. AWARD PRECEDENCE

There is no public information about decorations awarded to aircrew on aircraft that were damaged or crashed in the defense of An Loc other than Spare 617 and Manta 75.

The second supply mission over An Loc was Spare 617, a mission on which the co-pilot was wounded and the navigator killed by an initial burst of AAA. For saving the crippled aircraft and getting it back to base, the pilot was awarded the Air Force Cross. The senior loadmaster, who was burned while putting out fire in the cargo area and releasing the pallets of ammunition before they exploded, was nominated for the Medal of Honor but was also awarded the Air Force Cross. There is no public record of any decorations being awarded to the navigator (KIA), the wounded co-pilot, the engineer, or a second loadmaster.

Manta 75 was shot down on April 18, 1972, at low level with all six crew aboard, all of whom survived a crash landing and were rescued. The wartime Decorations Board in 1972 awarded each of the six crewmembers the Silver Star. The two Army helicopter pilots and two enlisted aerial gunners who assisted in the rescue also ultimately received Silver Stars, albeit not until decades later when their records were reviewed.³¹

In 2022, through the efforts of the AC-119 Gunship Association, the lost decorations recommendations for the nine crew members who had received no contemporaneous award were reconstructed for those lost in 1972 and submitted with Congressional endorsement to the Secretary of the Air Force. The co-pilot, who performed exactly the same duties as the pilot who had received the Air Force Cross, and who also was willing to sacrifice his life to save his fellow crew members, was nominated for the Silver Star – the same award given to the co-pilot of Manta 75 -- but the 2022 Decorations Board disapproved that recommendation and awarded nothing. In total, six of the nine crew member award recommendations were disapproved, two were downgraded and one was deferred. These award determinations are not consistent with the awards given to the Manta 75 crew members who served in similar positions.

³¹ See Thomas Ward, *How 9th Cavalry Hueys Save a Downed Crew at An Loc*, Historynet.com (5/4/2022).