**From:** The Honorable F. Whitten Peters

Former Secretary of the Air Force

**Subject: RECONSIDERATION REQUEST-STINGER 41 LOST AWARDS**

**To:** The Honorable Colby Jenkins  
 Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations

**Dear Secretary Jenkins,** August 28, 2025

**BLUF:** The 1972 combat valor awards for nine crew members of the 18th Special Operations Squadron’s AC-119K Gunship Stinger 41 crew were lost. A reconstructed package—endorsed by Senator Mark Kelly and submitted in 2022—was reviewed by a Secretary of the Air Force Decorations Board which failed in process and fairness. Six awards were disapproved, two were downgraded and one was deferred. Their decision was deeply flawed. A 2023 reconsideration request authored by a former Secretary of the Air Force, and endorsed by 24 general officers including four former Chiefs of Staff, was dismissed by the same Board President who oversaw the flawed 2022 process. This denial of justice must be rectified by an independent and impartial review.

* **Original Board (April 2022) - Procedural Failures**

This Decorations Board reviewed the package in just nine days—far below the standard 4–6 months required for thorough adjudication. Critical procedural steps were ignored:

* No advisory input from the Air Force Historical Research Agency
* No comparative analysis with similar war time combat awards
* No full personnel files obtained from the National Personnel Records Center

This rushed and incomplete process invalidates the Board’s conclusions: six decorations denied, two downgraded and one deferred.

* **Reconsideration Board (October 2024) - Facts Ignored**

Contrary to the Board’s assertion that the actions of the Stinger 41 aircrew members “did not meet the criteria” for valor awards, expert analysis confirms otherwise:

* **Mission Risk:** The crew was ordered to fly a rare daylight mission in an aircraft designed to fly at night, and flies at low altitudes, slow airspeeds and in circles. The high value target was in the most heavily defended zone in South Vietnam—where multiple aircraft had already been shot down or severely damaged along with the loss of aircrew members.
* **Voluntary Gallantry:** The entire crew undertook this mission fully aware of the extreme danger.

The danger was so extreme that in April 1972, Air Force attempted to cancel all gunship flights, but was overruled by command.

* **Heroic Sacrifice:** The pilot, copilot and jumpmaster knowingly remained at their posts, risking their lives to maintain control and give others time to escape.
* **Survival Under Fire:** After bailing out, surviving crew members evaded capture in hostile jungle terrain and were rescued within hours due to their discipline and resilience**. Lt Gen Waskow (signee) was on scene, observed the shoot down and participated in the search and rescue. This was one of the largest search and rescue missions of the war.**
* **Unambiguous Endorsement**

Recognition of the aircrew members heroic actions is supported by:

* U.S. Senator Mark Kelly
* Former Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters
* 24 General Officers—including four former Air Force Chiefs of Staff
* Former Air Force Special Operations Command Commander and his Decorations Officer
* Wing and Squadron Commanders with combat oversight

Their message is unified and clear: **The Stinger 41 crew met and exceeded the threshold for valor and gallantry.**

* **Precedent Violations**
* **Manta 75 (1972):** Two weeks before the Stinger 41 mission a C-130, call sign Manta 75, was shot down in the same area. All of the crew survived—and all received the Silver Star (orders available). This directly contradicts the denial of Stinger 41’s awards and sets a precedent that the current Board failed to acknowledge or properly weigh, despite its documentation in both the 2022 and 2023 submissions.
* **Spare 617:** The Board confused this with another aircraft, failing to recognize that two of Spare 617’s crew received the Air Force Cross. This factual inaccuracy further undermines the Board’s credibility.
* **Unequal Valor Recognition**
* Thirty seconds before impact, the pilot of Stinger 41 ordered his copilot to bailout at 300 feet. The copilot obeyed, parachuted into dense, enemy controlled jungle, and survived with serious injuries. The pilot, left alone, could no longer control the aircraft and the aircraft crashed as witnessed by two forward air controllers (one of which was Lt Gen Waskow).
* The **pilot** received the Air Force Cross.
* The **copilot**, who performed identical duties and whose actions helped save seven lives, received **no recognition**.
* In contrast, Manta 75’s copilot received the **Silver Star**.

This inconsistency in recognition is unacceptable.

* **Conclusion and Request**

The Decoration Board’s 2022 and 2024 adjudications:

* Disregarded expert input and historical precedent
* Applied inconsistent and unjust standards
* Failed to recognize demonstrable acts of valor and heroism

**We urgently request that the Department of Defense complete a new, independent and impartial review of the Stinger 41 case.** The courage and sacrifice of these airmen demands recognition befitting their gallantry.

Respectfully, **4 Attachments**

1. General Officer Endorsers

[signed] 2. Decoration Board Results

3. Executive Summary

4. [Last Flight Stinger 41 Video](https://vimeo.com/1088770209?share=copy#t=0)

F. **Whitten Peters**

Former Secretary of the Air Force

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[signed]

**Thomas C. Waskow, Lt Gen (Ret), USAF**  
AC-119 Gunship Association Awards Committee

Sundog 40 Forward Air Controller (eye witness)

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[signed]

**Roy A. Davis, Col (Ret), USAF**  
Chairman, AC-119 Gunship Association Awards Committee

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(253)549-2044

**GENERAL OFFICER ENDORSERS**

Retired general officers, all with combat experience, who have read and concur with the requests for corrections of awards (sorted by rank, then date of rank).

|  |
| --- |
| GEN RONALD R. FOGLEMAN |
| GEN MICHAEL E. RYAN |
| GEN JOHN P. JUMPER |
| GEN CHARLES T. "TONY" ROBERTSON JR. |
| GEN CHARLES R. HOLLAND |
| GEN NORTON A. SCHWARTZ |
| GEN LANCE L. SMITH |
| LT GEN JOHN S. FAIRFIELD |
| LT GEN JOHN H. CAMPBELL |
| LT GEN TIMOTHY A. KINNAN |
| LT GEN TOME H. WALTERS JR. |
| LT GEN RICHARD E. "TEX" BROWN III |
| LT GEN THOMAS C. WASKOW |
| LT GEN BRUCE A. WRIGHT |
| LT GEN STEPHEN G. WOOD |
| LT GEN DONALD C. WURSTER |
| LT GEN ERIC E. FIEL |
| LT GEN BRADLEY A. HEITHOLD |
| LT GEN THOMAS J. TRASK |
| LT GEN MARSHALL B. "BRAD" WEBB |
| MAJ GEN RICHARD C. MARR |
| MAJ GEN DOUGLAS S. METCALF |
| MAJ GEN MICHAEL J. KINGSLEY |
| BRIG GEN DALE E. STOVALL |

Attachment 1

**DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE**

**HEADQUARTERS AIR FORCE PERSONNEL CENTER JOINT BASE SAN ANTONIO-RANDOLPH TEXAS**

Air Force Personnel Center

550 C Street West

JBSA Randolph TX 78150-4703

The Honorable Mark Kelly

United States Senate

1661 N. Swan Rd, Suite 238

Tucson, AZ 85712

Dear Senator Kelly: February 28, 2025

This is in reply to your inquiry on behalf of retired Colonel Roy Davis, regarding his desire for award of the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) to Airman First Class Richard C. Corbett.

As previously noted, officials at the Air Force Personnel Center forwarded the nomination package for Airman First Class Corbett to the Secretary of the Air Force (SecAF) Personnel Council (SAF/PC) for consideration by the SecAF Decorations Board. The Board convened on April 25, 2024, and again on October 8, 2024, to consider the award of the DFC request for Airman First Class Corbett, as well as reconsideration for awards for the entire Stinger 41 crew. The nomination packages that were submitted included reconstructed recommendations, which were supported by proposed citations, eyewitness statements from three members of the Stinger 41 crew, four other affidavits, limited excerpts of military personnel records, copies of photographs, and links to video testimonials of some members of the crew. When the Board considered the original submission for the Stinger 41 crew, it was precluded from obtaining the customary written advisory from the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA) due to the proponent’s emphatic request for rapid adjudication in time for the 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the events under review.

The Board thoroughly reviewed the recommendations, and all supporting evidence submitted. The Board also reviewed relevant excerpts of the available official military personnel records of the nominees, relevant case files from previous SecAF Decorations Board decisions, as well as the criteria in effect at the time for the Silver Star Medal, DFC, and Air Medal (AM).

The analysis focused on the three primary affidavits, which could corroborate the actions of the individual crew members described in the recommendations. Unfortunately, the affidavits mostly describe the nominees’ own accounts of their individual actions with very little corroboration or attribution of the actions of other members of the crew. The Board concluded that these actions did not meet the criteria for the Silver Star Medal, DFC, or AM.

Former Secretary of the Air Force, the Honorable F. Whitten Peters, requested reconsideration of the original award nomination package for the Stinger 41 crew, which included the DFC recommendation for Airman First Class Corbett. In addition to the matters originally submitted by the proponents, the reconsideration request included an unofficial 7-page summary [unknown author] of An Loc operations, the Stinger 41 mission at An Loc, and an overview public record information about decorations awarded at An Loc. No other new direct evidence was provided which could shed any light on the actions of the individual crew members. While the new submission did include the noted unofficial historical overview, due diligence required the Board Staff to request an official AFHRA advisory opinion. At the same time, the Board Staff also secured complete copies of all military personnel records (including those of Airman First Class Corbett) from the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC).

The Board thoroughly considered the entire submission anew, carefully reviewing the complete evidence of record related to its original decision, the request for reconsideration and accompanying materials, the newly acquired AFHRA advisory opinion, and the military personnel records of all nine crew members under consideration. The Board considered the arguments of the proponents who believe the DFC recommendations were lost due to the fog of war and decommissioning of the 18th Special Operations Squadron. time However, the Board determined that the military personnel records of the nominees and the information detailed in the AFHRA advisory opinion indicate it is more likely than not the entire crew of Stinger 41 was duly considered for recognition in real. Specifically, military personnel records indicate six members of the crew received AMs, where the award period included the events of May 2, 1972. Two crew members were each awarded the DFC, one for a mission on April 30, 1972, the other for a mission on May 1, 1972. Additionally, all ten Stinger 41 crewmembers were awarded Purple Hearts for injuries sustained on the May 2, 1972, mission. Finally, references to this mission were included in various performance reports.

After concluding it was unlikely the recommendations were lost and despite the lack of independent affidavits or evidence, the Board compared the stated acts with Silver Star Medal and DFC awards made during the Vietnam conflict to determine if there had been clear error or injustice in considering the awards. Even in the light most favorable to the members under consideration, the acts did not meet the requirements for award of these decorations.

The Board also considered the contention (raised in the historical overview) that the Board’s previous decision is not consistent with the awards given to crew members in similar circumstances.

Specifically, proponents argue the crew of Stinger 41 is similarly situated to the crews of Manta 75 (April 18, 1972) or Spare 612 (date not specified) which proponents indicate were downed near An Loc and were awarded various valor decorations. However, the only evidence provided supporting this notion is a footnote referring to a history.net article describing the Army’s decision to award DFCs to members of a helicopter crew for rescuing the Manta 75 crew after it crashed. Because the submission lacked any substantiating documentation relating to the decorations bestowed to these members (e.g., excerpts of personnel records, copies of decoration citations, etc.), the Board determined the evidence was not sufficient to conclude that the crew of Stinger 41 was not fairly considered (in real time or by this Board in 2022) for recognition when compared to purportedly similarly situated members.

The Board originally concluded there was sufficient evidence to support the award of the DFC to Staff Sergeant Brown and AM to Captain Slagel of the Stinger 41 crew, but concluded the evidence was insufficient to bestow any additional recognition, to include award of the DFC to Airman First Class Corbett. After a thorough review of the complete evidence of record available in this case, to include the newly available AFHRA opinion and complete copies of the nominees’ military personnel records, the Board determined there was no basis to disturb the original decision. Therefore, award of the DFC to Airman First Class Corbett is not approved. This decision in no way diminishes the Board’s sincere gratitude for the Stinger 41 crew’s service to the Nation.

We trust this information is helpful.

Sincerely

//signed//

STEVEN N. HARRIS, GS-13, DAF Director of Complaints Resolution

Attachment 2

**STINGER 41 LOST AWARDS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On May 2, 1972, the crew of Stinger 41 departed from Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam, on what would become one of the most perilous AC-119 gunship missions of the Vietnam War. This rare daylight operation—conducted over the most heavily defended city in South Vietnam—was especially hazardous for the Stinger gunship, which was built for nighttime missions. Painted black and designed to fly low and slow in circular patterns, the aircraft was particularly vulnerable in daylight.

Despite knowing the extreme risks, the ten-man crew accepted the mission to destroy a mis-dropped pallet of ammunition—a highly critical target. As they entered the target area and attempted to establish a firing orbit, they encountered intense 37mm anti-aircraft fire. Repeated efforts to engage the target were met with heavy resistance. On their final approach, the aircraft sustained direct hits to its right wing, destroying both engines on that side. The landing gear deployed involuntarily, and flames streamed beyond the aircraft’s tail. With only partial control, both pilots fought to keep the aircraft aloft while the rear crew prepared for evacuation.

The pilot issued the order to abandon the aircraft. Seven crew members parachuted into hostile jungle territory. Thirty seconds before impact, and at just 300 feet above ground, the pilot ordered the copilot to evacuate. The copilot exited through the troop door, deployed his parachute, and—despite injuries requiring 50 stitches—survived after falling through the dense 200-foot-high jungle canopy. As soon as the copilot left the controls, the aircraft then rolled to the right and crashed, killing three crew members. Seven survived.

Stranded in enemy controlled jungle with just four hours of daylight remaining, the survivors understood that their lives depended on being rescued before nightfall. Their training, resilience, and courage—already proven in flight—were now tested on the ground. Drawing upon their survival skills and with assistance from two forward air controllers and a combat search and rescue team, they were extracted at dusk in what is believed to be one of the largest such rescue operations of the war.

Soon after their return to base, both the squadron and wing commanders recommended the pilot for the Medal of Honor. On May 22, 1972, he was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross—the service’s second-highest decoration. Award recommendations were also submitted for the surviving crew, but were lost amidst the deactivation of their squadron and the winding down of U.S. air operations in Vietnam.

Those commanders, familiar with the crew’s gallantry and professionalism, expected the awards to be approved. Had the recommendations not been lost, it is likely that a wartime combat awards board would have recognized the heroism displayed and approved the honors accordingly.

In January 2022, the AC-119 Gunship Association submitted a reconstructed awards package to the Air Force, with the support of Sen Kelly (AZ). In April 2022, the Commander of Air Force Special Operations Command agreed to formally present the long overdue decorations to the surviving crew and family members of those who passed away and were killed in action. The ceremony was scheduled for May 2, 2022, marking the 50th anniversary of the incident. Despite all preparations being in place, a call was received just four days prior stating that the Department of the Air Force Decorations Board had disapproved six of the nine awards, downgraded two, and deferred one. This was devastating news and as a result, the ceremony was cancelled.

In May 2023, with the help of the Honorable F. Whitten Peters, former Secretary of the Air Force, a comprehensive appeal package, endorsed by twenty-four general officers (including four Chiefs of Staff), was submitted to the current Secretary of the Air Force. Unfortunately, in February 2024, the response affirmed the original decisions of the Decorations Board.

Our fight is not over. We remain committed to securing the recognition these airmen rightfully deserve for their extraordinary courage—both in the skies and on the ground.

Attachment 3