

AC-119 Gunship *Stinger 41* Lost Awards

January 2026 Update

On May 2, 1972, AC-119 gunship *Stinger 41* **launched on a mission that never should have been launched and should never be forgotten**—and must no longer be ignored. It was a rare daylight combat mission over the most heavily defended city in South Vietnam. The aircraft was painted black, flown at low altitude, on a mission where they had to orbit in full view of enemy air defenses. This was a mission from which survival was unlikely.

Shortly after takeoff, *Stinger 41* was shot down. It remains the **only AC-119 gunship ever lost to enemy fire**.

As the aircraft became unflyable, three crew members, the pilot, copilot and jumpmaster, made a conscious, deliberate decision to stay with the aircraft—knowing with certainty that doing so could cost them their lives. They gave seven crew members the time and altitude required to escape. The aircraft crashed, killing three. The survivors parachuted into enemy-infested jungle and lived only because rescue forces reached them in time. Without that rescue, one of the largest in South Vietnam, none would have survived the night.

This was unmistakable, incontrovertible heroism.

In 1972, the aircraft commander was recommended for the Medal of Honor and awarded the Air Force Cross. Award packages for the remaining nine crew members were properly initiated at the time. Those packages were later lost by the Air Force—not through neglect or failure by the unit, but as a direct result of the widespread administrative collapse that accompanied unit deactivations and the end of the Vietnam War. This fact is neither novel nor disputed.

Fifty years later, the Air Force was given the opportunity—and the obligation—to correct that historical failure. The award packages were reconstructed with extraordinary rigor. They were authored by a former Secretary of the Air Force and endorsed by a United States Senator, twenty-four general officers—including four Chiefs of Staff—a MAJCOM commander, and the wartime wing and squadron commanders. This level of senior-leader consensus is exceedingly rare and reflects the unquestioned merit of the recommendations.

Despite this, the Air Force Decorations Board disregarded the overwhelmingly supported recommendations made by the highest levels of military and combat leaders.

Two awards were downgraded. **Seven crew members—who flew into the most lethal airspace of the war, survived a shootdown, and lived only through the sacrifice of their fellow airmen—were denied any recognition at all.**

This outcome is indefensible.

The Board's Memorandum of Results contains multiple factual inaccuracies that grossly exacerbated this injustice. These errors materially affected the adjudication. Decisions based on false or incomplete facts are not judgments—they are failures of process and accountability.

This is not a matter of interpretation. It is not a difference of opinion. It is a breakdown of the military awards system and a disservice to airmen who demonstrated extraordinary heroism under fire.

Valor does not expire. Sacrifice does not diminish with time. And bureaucratic error—whether in 1972 or fifty years later—does not erase heroism.

The remedy is clear and requires no further study, delay, or deflection: **approve the decorations as recommended, two silver stars (for those who were willing to sacrifice their lives for others) and seven distinguished flying crosses.** Anything less perpetuates an injustice already allowed to stand for more than half a century.

Justice delayed for fifty years is justice denied. The Air Force must ensure that this failure is corrected.

There is a current campaign to raise public awareness regarding the injustice faced by the aircrew of *Stinger 41*. Since going live on December 5th, the [Stinger 41 website](#) has received over 2,280 views, including 1,746 visits to our “Call to Action” page—a letter addressed to the Secretary of the Air Force. The campaign also published 12 [short videos](#) (~1 min) on social media (Facebook), resulting in over 660,000 views. [Lt Gen \(Ret\) Waskow's](#) YouTube video received over 23,000 views. **There is huge interest in *Stinger 41*.**

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