



May 2026

**2026 REUNION UPDATE
REGISTRATION and RESERVATION DETAILS**

Note: all the same info is on our web at [Upcoming Reunion 2026](#)

REUNION REGISTRATION is online at
<https://www.events.afr-reg.com/e/AC119Gunship26>.

Note: you'll also find a link there to book your Hotel Reservation!

HOTEL RESERVATIONS: we have a great reunion package at the **Phoenix-Mesa Holiday Inn** that includes our Hootch, Friday Meet & Greet Buffet, Saturday Association Meeting & Banquet, & Sunday Farewell Buffet. And yes, Complimentary Hot Breakfast for two is included in the Room Rate! Our Reunion Rates are available Tuesday, October 20 – Monday, October 26, 2026, at \$135 plus taxes (currently 14.27% per night) for a total rate per night of \$154.26. Those rates are also available three days pre & post reunion dates, based on availability. Please reserve your room by 9/28/26. After that, the hotel will accept your reservation at the contracted rate based on room availability. Reserve your room now; you can cancel without charge up to 24 hours prior to your arrival date. If you need a handicapped accessible guestroom, please call the hotel directly for assistance. Scoot Around rents both manual & power wheelchairs by the day & week. Please call 888-441-7575 or visit <https://scootaround.com> for details & to make reservations. Heads Up: if you book other than thru our Reunion Bookings, breakfast & parking are not free ☺.

Register early – most of us want to know who we'll get to SEE one more time!! We'll send updates on "Who Is Coming" via Flash emails to help you decide ☺ & information is also on our Association website & Facebook page. We hope to see you ALL there!

Transportation: American, Southwest, Frontier, Delta, United, & other airlines fly into Phoenix (PHX). Shuttle service is **not** available. The Holiday Inn is a 20-to-30-minute drive that is time-of-day dependent. Self-Parking is Complimentary at the hotel as a reunion guest only.

Special opportunity to meet with Veterans Administration VSO

AT the Phoenix Reunion

DO NOT READ THIS, since you must already have your act totally together with the VA – right? But....., if that's not totally accurate, READ THIS and DO IT!!!! So far, Mike & Andrea Drzyzga, Wayne & Lynette Laessig, and Doug & Karen Wohlgamuth are the only ones smart enough to sign up for this great opportunity! Maybe some of your spouses would like to learn a bit more about what they might expect (or not) from the VA.

The details: VSO Joe Mras (18th SOS - Gunner 71-72) is an Accredited Service Officer(VSO) for Veterans Benefits and has offered his services to fellow gunshippers at the reunion. Details and timing depend on how many may want to meet with him and what they need. He is offering review and claim services, and if you like, also a look into your VA Benefit files to see where there may be opportunities for you. This will show more than you can see at VA.gov.

If you want to meet with Joe at the reunion, you'll need to fill out a form prior to arrival to authorize access to the files. Joe will contact you and get what information he needs to complete the form, then send the form to you for your electronic signature. If you want to do this, please contact Joe directly at post12vso@gmail.com with your name and phone number, and to confirm you will attend the reunion.

NOTE: Attendees!! Please schedule your session with Joe ASAP! The earlier the better so we can schedule around the many events at the reunion.

Who's Coming to the Reunion as of: May 26, 2026

Yes, Brother Ev Sprous will be at our Phoenix Reunion! We've missed him for too many years, but you can join us there to see Ev again!

Roy Davis & Paula Pascoe, Mike & Andrea Drzyzga, Bob & Janet Dydo, John & Penny Forbes, Jim Acquaviva's Daughter Pam Kalbfleisch & Guest, Wayne & Lynette Laessig, Don Luke, Joe Mras, Bill & Karen Petrie, Matt & Annette Robeck Terry & Theresa Sarul, Ev Sprous & his sister Ruth, Bob Safreno & Sandy Paxton with Richard Safreno, Gus Sininger, Wayne & Darcy Taylor, Dave Voisey with Friends Jill & Peter Luu, and Doug Wohlgamuth.

THE STORY OF THE PHOENIX BIRD

In the spirit of the mythical phoenix, the legacy of the Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcar lives on through generations of transformation and renewal. Rising in 1949 as the silver-winged C-119, the aircraft served proudly for nearly twenty-five years before fading from active service in 1974. Yet from those same Flying Boxcars, fifty-two aircraft rose again in 1968 to become the legendary AC-119 Shadows and Stingers—gunships forged for combat and remembered for courage. Though the Shadows and Stingers passed into history in 1975, the spirit endured. In 1988, one Shadow rose once more, preserved as a permanent memorial at Hurlburt Field Air Park, standing as a tribute to the aircrews, maintainers, and warriors who carried the mission into history. Now, at the 26th AC-119 Gunship Reunion in Phoenix, the phoenix rises again—symbolizing remembrance, brotherhood, and the enduring spirit of Shadows and Stingers.

To order t-shirts, click on the link at the bottom of the page.



T-SHIRT DESIGN

REUNION T-SHIRT

LAST DAY TO ORDER IS JUNE 15, 2026



[REUNION T-SHIRT ORDER FORM](#)

REUNION EXHIBIT

“THEN AND NOW”

Dear AC-119 Family and Friends,

Every year we strive to make each reunion better than the previous one. This year we are trying a “new thing”. Something I think will bring smiles and laughter to us all. It will be a display of photographs called, “Then and Now.”

Anyone interested in submitting photographs of themselves in the “Then and Now,” format for display at the reunion please do so. We would love to “see” you.

Email your images as a jpeg directly to Clement E. Hill at cehill44@gmail.com. If you cannot create a jpeg file, you can mail COPIES of your images directly to:

Mike Drzyzga
37 Pecan Lane
Oak Ridge, NJ 07438

DO NOT MAIL ORIGINALS!! **DO NOT MAIL ORIGINALS!!**

HERITAGE/LEGACY?

“Heritage” vs. “Legacy” — What Does It Mean to Us?

If you’ve been around this Association for any length of time, you’ve probably heard the words *heritage* and *legacy* tossed around. They sound similar, but for those of us connected to the AC-119, they carry a special meaning.

Back in our day, we were the 71st and 17th Special Operations Squadrons (SOS) *Shadows*, and the 18th SOS *Stingers*. When the Vietnam War wound down, those units were stood down as well. But as we’ve all seen over the years, in the Air Force, nothing ever really disappears for good. The names, the numbers, the call signs—they have a way of coming back. And when they do, that’s where we come in.

Our Association has done a remarkable job staying connected with today’s units that carry those historic designations. Whether it’s the 71st, 17th, or 18th, or the *Shadow* and *Stinger* call signs, simply put, **we are their heritage—and they are our legacy.**

You can see that connection in real, tangible ways. At bases like [Cannon Air Force Base](#), [Hurlburt Field](#), and [Kirtland Air Force Base](#), our story is being told every day. Walk into one of their heritage rooms and you’ll find pieces of *our* history... photos, lithographs, coins, models, books, all helping today’s Airmen understand where they came from.

Just like in our time, units still stand down, and their designations go into a sort of holding pattern, waiting until they’re needed again. And when they reappear, sometimes things can get a little... confusing. Take one example. Many of you will remember Don Craig, a former *Shadow* pilot who served as our point of contact with the 17th SOS at Kadena, flying the MC-130P *Combat Shadow*.

That unit was doing critical work in the Pacific. Fast forward to 2018, when the AC-130J *Ghostrider* officially entered service. A new squadron stood up at Hurlburt—but instead of becoming the 17th, they were designated the 73rd SOS *Shadows*. Why? Because the 17th already existed in the Pacific.

At one point, we had multiple “family ties” going at once—a Shadow presence at Hurlburt and a 17th SOS “Jakals” unit at Cannon. (Some of you might remember when they flew the AC-130J into Dulles for our Washington, D.C. reunion.) The name *Jakal*? That came about because the *Shadow* name was already in use. Then came a tough stretch. The Shadows at Hurlburt stood down, with some of their assets absorbed into the 4th SOS. Not long after, the 17th “Jakals” at Cannon were folded into the 16th SOS *Spectres*. For a while there, it felt like we had lost both of our legacy connections.

But as we’ve learned time and again, these stories don’t end. They just pause. Today, both lines are alive again, just in new and unexpected places. Some of the 73rd SOS *Shadows* are now at [Kirtland Air Force Base](#) under Air Education and Training Command, where they’re training the next generation of AC-130J crews... the only place doing so.

And the 17th SOS? They’re back as well, this time at [Will Rogers Air National Guard Base](#), flying the new OA-1K *Skyraider II* under the call sign *Jakal*. While they’re located on an Air National Guard base, they’re an active-duty unit assigned to the 492nd Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field.

We’re fortunate to have Mike Drzyzga serving as our point of contact with both units. Through him, we’re staying connected with Lt. Col. Jessie Ziegler of the 17th and Lt. Col. Joshua Martin of the 73rd. By all accounts, the OA-1K is exceeding expectations, with thousands of hours already logged in testing, and its mission still evolving. Meanwhile, plans are underway to establish a new heritage area at Kirtland—and we’re looking forward to contributing pieces of our story there as well. So yes— *heritage* and *legacy* can get a little tangled at times. Units stand down, stand up, change names, and shift missions. But the important part never changes.

The story continues—and we’re still a part of it.

Below are five images—past and present. Take a close look at the unit nose art, a tradition that is no longer carried forward on today’s aircraft. The current 73rd Shadows have “Ghostrider” art.



AC-130J Ghost Rider, Dulles Airport, 17th SOS
Jakal from Cannon AFB, NM, at our reunion
XXIII



AC-130J Ghost Rider, Hurlburt AFB, 73rd SOS
Shadow Stand-up ceremony, Feb. 20, 2018



OA-1K SkyRaider II, 17th SOS Jakal testing at
Eglin AFB, FL



Another view of the SkyRaider II.



Current 73rd SOS **Shadows** Stand-up ceremony at Kirkland AFB.

Association Organizational Structure Change

The Association Board decided to eliminate the Association's Awards & Decorations position and Committee. We simply don't have the capability or capacity to be a "go to" for VA help. If an Association project does include an A&D component, the Project Manager will work it as part of their project.

A Veterans Service Officer (VSO) can help you obtain information and assistance regarding Agent Orange Registry, PACT Act, Correcting/Obtaining DD214s or any other VA related issue. To contact your local VSO, see the Firing Circle VSO contact entry below.

We do have some information on Awards the 71st, 17th, 18th SOS were awarded, and why the USAF Combat Action Medal does not apply to us. See the links below to access that information.

1. [**Awards AC-119 Squadrons Were Awarded**](#)
2. [**USAF Combat Action Medal not for AC-119ers**](#)

Veterans Service Officer (VSO) Contact Information

To obtain information regarding contacting your local VSO click the link below -

[**Search for a VA-accredited representative**](#)

Final Flight

Brothers who made their Final Flight. Please remember their families in your prayers. R.I.P. Brothers.

Larry Abernathy	18 th SOS	Maint.	May 17, 2024
Roger Bon Sr.	18 th SOS	I/O	May 7, 2024
Mark E. Brunton Sr.	71 st SOS	Maint.	November 18, 2023
Bill Crow	18 th SOS	Maint.	February 26, 2019
Richard Hugh Davis	18 th SOS	Gunner	February 18, 2026
Frederick J. Dietsch	18 th SOS	Gunner	June 4, 2024
Douglas "Doug" Fisher	17 th & 18 th SOS	Gunner	January 22, 2026
Lloyd A. Froelich	18 th SOS	Nav.	February 5, 2026
Victor Hernandez	17 th SOS	Maint.	January 23, 2022
Johnny Mack Higgins	18 th SOS	Maint.	May 2, 2026
Peter Larson	18 th SOS	Maint.	August 5, 2020
Lloyd W, Palmer	18 th SOS	Maint.	November 24, 2025
Alfred M. Teixeira	18 th SOS	Maint.	December 18, 1997
Johnny B. Tennyson Jr.	18 th SOS	Gunner	March 27, 2023
James C. Worthy	18 th SOS	Gunner	April 17, 2024

We also lost Mae Rucker, mother of KIA Stinger Crew Chief, John "O'Neal" Rucker. The Rucker matriarch, she was 98, and we join the Rucker family in mourning the loss of Mae.