A1C John Levitow, badly wounded, threw himself on the burning flare and dragged it to the cargo door—saving the entire crew of Spooky 71.

20 Seconds Over Long Binh

By John T. Correll

Night was approaching as Spooky 71, an AC-47 gunship, took off from Bien Hoa Air Base, a few miles northwest of Saigon. It was Feb. 24, 1969, and the second day of the Tet counteroffensive.

The Tet lunar new year of 1968—the one history remembers—had seen large-scale coordinated attacks on cities, provincial capitals, and bases all over South Vietnam. Militarily, it was a failure for the North Vietnamese, but it undercut the confidence of the American public and it was a turning point in the war.

The Tet 1969 offensive was carried out mostly by Viet Cong irregulars. It concentrated on US military installations, especially in the III Corps area around Saigon.

The rocket and mortar attacks on the bases picked up when darkness fell. Nothing was more effective than a gunship in breaking up such attacks.

For the next six hours, Spooky 71 would fly a combat air patrol circuit over the Saigon/Tan Son Nhut area, ready to respond wherever its fire support was needed. It would be relieved by another gunship for the midnight-to-dawn shift.

The loadmaster on Spooky 71 was A1C John L. Levitow, 23, from Glastonbury, Conn. It was his 180th combat mission, but he had never flown with this crew before. He was filling in for a loadmaster who had taken his place when he was sick.

Before the night was over, Levitow would perform an act of astounding bravery for which he would ultimately be awarded the Medal of Honor.

Levitow had joined the Air Force in June 1966, some 20 days ahead of being drafted into the Army. At first, he was a power line specialist with the civil engineering squadron at McGuire AFB, N.J.

He decided to try a different specialty after an experience in which "the power was not turned off when I thought it was turned off," so he cross trained as a loadmaster. He

Photo courtesy Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute/Enlisted Heritage Hall

Levitow, sporting sunglasses, joins buddies, l-r, Dan Andrysiak, Jim Miller, and Mike Mayfield. The photo was taken at McGuire AFB, N.J., in July 1966, just a few weeks after Levitow joined the Air Force.

flew as a crewman on C-130s for a short tour, then went to Vietnam to fly on AC-47s.

He reported to the 3rd Special Operations Squadron at Nha Trang in July 1968 and was assigned to the squadron's forward operating location at Bien Hoa.

Guns and Flares

The AC-47 was the first of the Air Force's side-firing gunships. It had been flying in Vietnam since 1964, first with the air commandos and after that with the special operations squadrons. It led the way for the more powerful AC-119 and AC-130 gunships that came later.

It was modified from the C-47 transport aircraft, plenty of which were available. It was originally called the FC-47D (for fighter cargo) but subsequently changed to AC-47 (attack cargo) in response to objections from fighter pilots.

It was also called "Dragonship" and "Puff the Magic Dragon" (after a song, then popular, by Peter, Paul, and Mary) but went mostly by "Spooky," the call sign with which it flew its missions. Spooky's operators had successfully resisted pressure to change the call sign. Seventh Air Force, among others, expressed concern that transmissions might be intercepted and give warning of the gunship's approach to the enemy.

When attacking, Spooky rolled into a level 30-degree bank turn, flying at an airspeed of almost 140 mph. It could lay down an awesome field of fire, with each of its three 7.62 mm Gatling "miniguns" shooting up to 6,000 rounds per minute. At that rate, a three-second burst placed a shot every square foot in an area the size of a football field.

The three guns were mounted in window ports, just forward of the open cargo door. (On earlier AC-47s, one of the guns had been mounted in the door.) The pilot fired the guns, using a sight at the left side of the cockpit. The gunners kept the guns loaded and working during the flight.

"Each one of the guns could fire two speeds," Levitow said. "Slow fire was 3,000 rounds a minute each, or fast fire which was 6,000 rounds a minute each. ... Very seldom did we ever fire fast rounds at 18,000 rounds a minute because it had a tendency to turn the airplane. ... [Three] thousand rounds a minute was more than sufficient."

The gunship carried about 150,000 rounds of ammunition on each flight, Levitow said. Also—and central to the story of Spooky 71—it carried about 50 magnesium flares to illuminate targets on the ground. Flares took away the cover of darkness, on which the Viet Cong depended for their style of warfare.

The Mk 24 flare was a metal tube, just over three feet long and about five inches in diameter. It weighed 27 pounds. It was thrown out of the aircraft and floated to the ground on a parachute, burning for as long as three minutes with an intensity of two million candlepower and making daylight over a square mile or so.

The flare was armed just before it was thrown out the door, with timers set to give it some distance from the airplane before the parachute deployed and the flare was triggered.

"It would light up, oh, about half a mile, a good area, quite brightly," Levitow said.

Diversion to Long Binh

Spooky 71 flew with a crew of eight. The pilot, copilot, and navi-

Flying over Vietnam in 1968 or 1969, Levitow stands in the cargo door of an AC-47. He reported to 3rd Special Operations Squadron in July 1968 and went to its forward operating location at Bien Hoa.

Photos courtesy Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute/Enlisted Heritage Hall

gator were in the forward cabin, and the flight engineer, two gunners, and the loadmaster were in the cargo bay in back. There was also a Vietnamese liaison officer. Partway through the mission he had come forward and was talking to the flight crew when the action unfolded that night. The pilot was Maj. Kenneth B. Carpenter, flying his first combat mission as aircraft commander.

About 11:30 p.m., the gunship was diverted from patrol over the village of Lai Kai, north of Long Binh. The Long Binh Army post, adjacent to Spooky's home base at Bien Hoa, was under mortar attack.

Upon arrival, "we observed a large battle going on in the south and east perimeters of the base," Carpenter said. "On the second firing pass, the mortars firing on Long Binh were silenced."

The attack lifted momentarily, and the gunship began dropping flares to provide illumination requested by a nearby ground unit.

Shortly, another mortar battery began firing. The Spooky 71 crew could see mortar tube flashes about one mile south of the area of the earlier attack. Carpenter rolled the gunship wings level and began his run on the mortar positions. Small-arms fire opened up in his path. Spooky was flying at about 3,500 feet.

Then there was a blinding flash and the aircraft was rocked from nose to tail by a violent explosion. It was an unlucky hit. The gunship had flown into the path of an 82 mm mortar round, which struck the top of the right wing.

Levitow's heroics saved Spooky 71, but it was shot to pieces. At top, a sheet-metal repair crew patches some of its 3,500 bullet holes. Above, the gunship's right wing shows where it was hit by a Chinese mortar round.

"The resultant damage was a hole two feet in diameter through the wing and over 3,500 shrapnel holes riddling the fuselage," said Lt. Col. Robert A. Davidson, commander of the AC-47 forward operating location at Bien Hoa. "The occupants were helplessly slammed against the floor and fuselage like so many rag dolls."

"At that moment, a loud explosion was heard and a bright flash filled the aircraft," said Maj. William P. Platt, the navigator. "Even in the navigation compartment the flash lit up the inside of the aircraft like daylight. The aircraft veered sharply to the right and down."

Shrapnel and jagged shards of metal ricocheted through the cargo bay, and a shock wave from the explosion swept the interior of the airplane.

"I felt as if someone had taken a two-by-four and squarely hit me against the whole right-hand side of my body," Levitow said later. "All ... of the enlisted got wounded and the officers did not. I think it was a very discriminatory flight."

Levitow and one of the gunners, Sgt. Ellis C. Owen, had been working as a team in dropping the flares. Levitow set the timers—allowing 10 seconds after the safety pin was pulled before a minor explosion deployed the parachute and another 10 seconds before the flare ignited—then handed the flare to Owen, who attached a lanyard, which created a little extra distance before the pin was pulled after Owen tossed the flare from the aircraft.

"Airman Levitow was setting [the ejection and ignition dials] and handing me the flares," Owen said. "I had the lanyard on the flare hooked up and my finger through the safety pin ring. When we were hit, all ... of us [Owen, Levitow, Sgt. Thomas Baer, the other gunner, and SSgt. Edward Fuzie, the flight engineer] were knocked to the floor and the flare was knocked out of my hands. Since my finger was through the safety pin ring the safety pin was pulled."

Hot Flare

The flare was armed and rolling loose in the aircraft. At most, there

would be 20 seconds before it exploded. As Levitow dragged one of the other airmen toward the center of the cabin, he saw the flare between No. 1 minigun and a jumble of spilled ammunition.

"I then looked back to see a flare that had slid up against the cans of 19,000 rounds of ammunition," Platt said. "Levitow was struggling toward the flare despite the violent maneuvering of the aircraft. ... Dense blue smoke was pouring out of the burning flare fuze."

The flare posed a deadly danger in several ways.

If it ignited, it would quickly fill the aircraft with toxic smoke, incapacitating the entire crew. Furthermore, the flare would be burning at a temperature of 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The spilled ammunition—19,000 rounds of it by Platt's estimate—would start "cooking off" in seconds. The intense heat of the flare would burn rapidly through the aluminum floor of the cargo bay and drop on the empennage control cables, destroying them and causing the aircraft to go out of control.

"They tell me that I had 40 pieces of shrapnel in me at the time," Levitow said. "I couldn't walk. I crawled to the location of the flare. I had a real tough time grabbing hold of it with two hands because of the pain in my leg and everything. They tell me I ended up jumping on it, finally getting control and dragging myself and the flare back to the rear cargo door which was open and just managed to push it outside the door as it ejected and ignited simultaneously."

Later, the citation to accompany the Medal of Honor put it this way: "Unable to grasp the rolling flare with his hands, he threw himself bodily upon the burning flare. Hugging the deadly device to his body, he dragged himself back to the rear of the aircraft and hurled the flare through the open cargo door. At that instant the flare separated and ignited in the air, but clear of the aircraft."

"I had the aircraft in a 30-degree bank and how Levitow ever managed to get to the flare and throw it out, I'll never know," Carpenter said.

Despite his wounds, Levitow helped secure the airplane on the way back. "So here I was, wounds and all, finally managed to stand up and I'm lifting 140-pound ammo cans and stuffing them between the guns [so they would not] go flying all around and really hurt somebody," Levitow said.

It took considerable effort to get Spooky 71 back to base. "I consider the fact that the aircraft was able to fly at all a miracle," Carpenter said.

Shot up and near stalling, Spooky approached Bien Hoa in the dark. Between the town of Bien Hoa and the base was an old French minefield, never cleared and fenced by barbed wire. Landing short would have been a disaster.

The airplane made it over the minefield and onto the overrun, just barely. Carpenter set it down in a full shuddering stall. The right tire was flat, having been cut by shrapnel, and it was all Carpenter could do, standing on the left brake, to keep control until he brought the airplane to a stop.

Aviation gas was leaking from the fuel lines on the right side, and that wasn't all. Back in the States, the aircraft had been fitted with a tank inside the fuselage to hold isopropyl alcohol. For reasons unknown, it had not been emptied when the AC-47 went to Vietnam. It was full until ruptured in the battle. Thus, Spooky 71 was leaking two highly inflammable substances.

Carpenter waved off taxi instructions from the tower and the crew got out fast. Spooky 71 had gone as far as it was going.

Medal of Honor

Inbound, Carpenter had called for an ambulance and a medevac helicopter to meet them on the ramp. Levitow declined to board the helicopter until he was finally ordered to do so by Carpenter.

The medics cut away the dead and contaminated flesh to prevent infection, and Levitow was flown to the big Air Force hospital at Tachikawa, Japan, where 40 pieces of shrapnel were removed between his knee and his hip. He spent almost two months recuperating in Japan before returning to Vietnam in April.

He flew two more AC-47 combat missions and showed up at the flight line for a third when the squadron commander told him he was grounded. He had been nominated for the Medal of Honor—at Carpenter's urging, Gen. George S. Brown, the 7th Air Force commander, had marked the recommendation up from an Air Force Cross—and he was no longer allowed to fly in combat.

The nomination package included statements from Carpenter and most of the crew. "Others were there, others were wounded, but Levitow being the furthest removed from the flare, recognized the danger, took action when seconds counted, and saved the lives of the entire crew," Carpenter wrote. "Levitow's progress was clearly marked with his own blood on the floor of the aircraft."

At the end of his tour in Vietnam,

At a White House ceremony, President Nixon presents the Medal of Honor to now-Sergeant Levitow on May 14, 1970—Armed Forces Day. The young airman "took action when seconds counted and saved the lives of the entire crew."

Photo courtesy Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute/Enlisted Heritage Hall

This 1970 photo shows Levitow on duty at Norton AFB, Calif., where he served as a C-141 loadmaster. Levitow held himself to a high standard of personal behavior, hoping to live up to the honor bestowed on him.

Levitow was assigned to Norton AFB, Calif., as a loadmaster on C-141s. He was the center of much attention but also the victim of bureaucracy. The paperwork for advancement in skill level (from three to five) in his original specialty had been lost. He did not yet have a five-level as a loadmaster, and without a five-level, he could not be promoted, and if not promoted, he could not re-enlist. Instructions to promote Levitow to sergeant without regard to skill level had not been followed. To the Air Force's embarrassment, a hero was not eligible to re-enlist.

"The next day, I was promoted to E-4, retroactive nine months with pay," Levitow said, but by then, he had decided to take an early out.

Back home in Connecticut, he learned that his Medal of Honor had been approved. The Air Force sent a C-54 to Hartford to pick up him, his wife, and his parents and take them to Washington.

The Medal of Honor was presented to John L. Levitow at the White House by President Nixon on May 14, 1970.

Veterans Advocate

After Levitow left the Air Force, he worked in veterans affairs for more than 22 years. "I spent nine years working for Congressional Liaison between the Veterans Administration and members of the Congress," he said. "I hated it." More to his liking, he went home to Connecticut and became a medical administration officer in the VA hospital system and special assistant to the chief of Medical Administration Service in New England.

"I'm very careful what I do," he said in an oral history interview in 1986. "I realize that what I say will be represented not only as a Vietnam veteran but as a Medal of Honor recipient, and the media will have a field day. I try to control what I say, although for the most part, I'm very quiet. I stay away from publicity and things like that. ... If I got stopped drinking and driving, it's going to say, 'Medal of Honor Drunk.' I realize that. I'm not going to bring shame on either the medal or myself, so I do watch it very carefully."

Over the years, there were numerous other recognitions. Top graduates of Air Force Airman Leadership Schools receive the Levitow Honor Graduate Award. The training group headquarters building at Lackland AFB, Tex., is named for him. In 1998, Air Mobility Command named a C-17 Globemaster, *The Spirit of Sgt. John L. Levitow.* He is remembered at the Walk of Fame at Hurlburt Field, Fla.

Levitow died Nov. 8, 2000, at his home in Connecticut after a lengthy battle with cancer. He was 55. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, Nov. 17, 2000. More than 500 airmen attended the funeral, and most of them followed the caisson to the grave site.

At the ceremonies, his son, John L. Levitow Jr., said: "I have only one apology to make. Dad wanted to be buried standing up. He was a man that was proud to stand tall. Sorry, Dad, I couldn't make that happen."

Levitow's hometown, Glastonbury, dedicated a memorial to him on the town green May 31, 2004. Among the family members present were his son and grandson, John L. Levitow III.

The Gunter Connection

Nowhere, however, is Levitow's memory recalled more vividly than at the Enlisted Heritage Research Institute at the Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Maxwell AFB, Gunter Annex, Ala.

Levitow willed his Medal of Honor to the Enlisted Heritage Hall there. It was presented in ceremonies in February 2002 by his son to CMSgt. David L. Hamel, director of the institute. Levitow also gave Enlisted Heritage Hall his father's uniform and ribbons, the original Medal of Honor citation signed by President Nixon, photos, and other memorabilia.

Among those present was Carpenter, the commander of Spooky 71, now retired and living in Marshall, Tex. He delivered the keynote address.

Levitow's Medal of Honor is prominently displayed at Enlisted Heritage Hall. The award-winning exhibit, designed by curator William I. Chivalette, includes a lifelike mannequin of Levitow, paintings, photographs, uniform items, and artifacts. Visitors can also watch a videotape of Carpenter and John Levitow Jr. talking about the Medal of Honor mission.

More recently, Enlisted Heritage Hall obtained a surplus C-47 and converted it to a mock-up of an AC-47, with the colors and markings that Spooky 71 bore in February 1969. Inside the aircraft is a mannequin of Levitow, struggling to get the flare to the door. The gunship, situated on the lawn of the museum, was dedicated in October 2004.

Thirty-four years after it happened, the story of John L. Levitow has lost none of its power to excite and inspire. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force *Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, "Rolling Thunder," appeared in the March issue.*