The Saving of SPOOKY 71

A1C John Levitow had only seconds to save the lives of eight crewmen aboard the battle-damaged gunship.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

HEROISM knows neither age nor rank. During World War II and Vietnam, five airmen earned the Medal of Honor. Junior among them was twenty-three-year-old Airman First Class John L. Levitow, loadmaster on an AC-47 gunship, *Spooky 71*, that on the night of February 24, 1969, went to the aid of besieged troops at Long Binh Army Base a few miles northeast of Saigon. It was John Levitow's 181st combat sortie.

On operational missions, Loadmaster Levitow was responsible, among other duties, for setting the ejection and ignition controls of the Mark-24 magnesium flares carried by USAF gunships in Southeast Asia. The flares provided illumination for troops on the ground, for the gunship's pilot to aim his three side-firing 7.62-mm Miniguns, and for fighters that might be called in to help suppress enemy fire.

Once the controls were set, the Mark-24, packed in a three-foot-long metal tube weighing about twenty-seven pounds, was passed to a gunner who triggered the arming mechanism and who tossed the tube out the plane's cargo door. Ten seconds after release, an explosive charge opened the flare's parachute, and in another ten seconds the magnesium ignited, generating a light of 2,000,000 candlepower. At 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit, the flare could burn through metal. The Mark-24 was not to be treated casually. Improperly handled, it could be painfully lethal.

On that February night, *Spooky 71* had been in the air for four and a half hours when Maj. Kenneth Car-

penter, the aircraft commander, was directed to an area south of the Army base where enemy mortars were laying down a heavy barrage. As the plane arrived at its target area, Levitow handed a flare to Amn. Ellis Owen, whose finger was through the safety pin ring preparatory to tossing the flare through the door at Major Carpenter's command.

Suddenly *Spooky 71* was rocked by a tremendous blast. An 82-mm mortar shell had exploded inside the gunship's right wing, showering the cargo compartment with shrapnel. All five crew members in the rear of the plane were hurled to the floor, bleeding from shrapnel wounds. *Spooky 71* fell into a steep, descending turn to the right, momentarily out of control. The flare, torn from Owen's hands by the blast, rolled around the aircraft floor fully armed amidst several thousand rounds of live ammunition for the Miniguns.

Through a haze of pain and shock, John Levitow, with forty shrapnel wounds in his legs, side, and back, saw one of the crew lying perilously close to the open cargo door. As he dragged the wounded man to safety, Levitow spied the armed, smoking flare rolling erratically around the cargo compartment. How long had it been since the safety pin was pulled inadvertently—five seconds? Fifteen seconds?

Levitow had no way of knowing. He did know that the timing mechanism could have been damaged, which might result in premature ignition. In a matter of seconds the flare would ignite, its intense heat turning the stricken gunship into an inferno.

Weakened from loss of blood and partially paralyzed by his wounds, Levitow tried vainly to pick up the flare as it skidded around the floor. The plane was still in a thirty-degree bank. Seconds ticked by. Finally, in desperation, he threw himself on the flare, dragged it to the open

door, a trail of blood marking his path, and pushed it out just as it ignited in a white-hot blaze. John Levitow then lapsed into unconsciousness.

Major Carpenter managed to regain control of the gunship, its wings and fuselage riddled by 3,500 shrapnel holes, one of them three feet in diameter. Ambulances and a medical evacuation helicopter were waiting on the flight line at Bien Hoa, *Spooky 71's* home base, when the battered plane landed with its five injured crewmen—two of them, including John Levitow, seriously wounded. Levitow was flown to a hospital in Japan. After he recovered, he flew twenty more combat missions before returning to the States to complete his enlistment as a C-141 loadmaster at Norton AFB, Calif.

On Armed Forces Day, May 14, 1970, President Nixon presented the Medal of Honor to John Levitow in a ceremony at the White House. The young airman's heroism in the night sky over Vietnam had added another chapter to the saga of valor that is a vital element of the Air Force heritage. ■

A1C John L. Levitow, loadmaster on an AC-47 gunship: heroism in the night sky over Vietnam.