

When Wayne Laessig called me just the other night and asked me to say some words at the dedication of this monument I was a bit overwhelmed. Overwhelmed because I had a lot going on. I was within a day of flying down here, and I just didn't feel I had enough time to prepare any comments. Then, over dinner with my wife, I stopped to ponder about this feeling and the word, *overwhelmed!*

I know Gus Sininger and others in Fort Walton Beach and other hurricane stricken areas certainly felt overwhelmed when they had back-to-back storms to clean up after. I know Gus felt overwhelmed with hurricane cleanup *along* with coordinating and making this monument a reality in time for the reunion. I sometimes think it is that overwhelming feeling that enables and inspires people to rise up and come through tough times. I know I can speak for all of us when I say we are thankful for the remarkable job he has done getting this monument ready for today. I'm overwhelmed.

I think it's obvious by now the word "overwhelmed" was playing in my head. Recently I was Overwhelmed when I saw a photo of the WWII monument with the 4,000 gold stars, each representing just one star to commemorate the more than 400,000 Americans who lost their lives in WW II.

I was Overwhelmed when I realized, had it not been for the gunships, how many more names could, and would, have been added to the more than 58,000 names on the Vietnam Wall.

A couple of years ago someone asked me how many gunships returned after the war. I was Overwhelmed at the realization, that for one reason or another, not one AC-119 Gunship made it home from the Vietnam War. That overwhelming feeling prompted me to write this poem... I'd like to share it with you.....

#### Our lady of Night

A lone she sits on ramps now bare,  
Our lady of night, but who knows where?

Like a Phoenix she arose and was given new light,  
From cargo to troops, a 119 that could fight.

A twin-tailed dragon she was cursed and mated,  
With cannons and guns, a beast to be hated.

Ground troops below with a cry on their lips,  
Please, God, over, send me a gunship.

From the dark she would come with a growl to the fight,  
And the dragon would breathe and scream into the night.

Like a banshee she wailed at the enemy's might,  
To those on the ground she was a terrible fright

Her breath deadly hot as she boldly caressed,  
The souls of men obscenely obsessed.

Scarred and tattered, bruised and battered,  
Love for her crews were all that mattered.

One hell of a lady, though ugly as sin,  
Like a lover scorned we left her again.

Alone she sits on ramps now bare  
Our lady of night, but who knows where?

It's no wonder I felt a little Overwhelmed at the realization that this Air Commando Airpark had no representation of the aircraft that served us so well in combat, a plane that helped save so many lives.

I'm overwhelmed standing before you trying to say the right words for this dedication. I look to our special guests and I'm Overwhelmed knowing the ultimate sacrifices they have made. And after four tours in Vietnam myself, today, I feel I'm still trying to comprehend and understand my feelings of losing friends in battle... a part of me always remains missing.

Knowing our gunship never came home from the war left many of us with the feeling that part of us was still missing. This Stinger monument represents a virtual homecoming of not only a missing airplane, but also a spiritual coming home of those we lost.

It stands for the maintenance men who tended to her, and to the aircrews who rode her into battle. This monument is an opportunity we are not often afforded, a chance to replace something that was missing.

We can remember training here at Hurlburt, Lockbourne, and other bases learning to fly, crew, and maintain these quirky machines that became a part of our very beings.

We will fondly remember her as we unveil the monument, and our memories, and re-live the sounds of battle, the drone of the gunship as she struggled to break the bonds of the earth, the adrenaline-pump as we dodged enemy anti-aircraft gunfire from below, or enemy mortar and rocket rounds showering into our bases, the staccato punctuation of the rounds and shrapnel as they pierced our airplanes, We will recall the mechanical voices, discovered to be our own, heard on the radios as those well-controlled voices masked the surges of our energy, and our daring to stay alive.

As we stand before our monument we will listen once again to the silent but thundering sounds of our own hearts as our missions unfolded.

But what does this monument really symbolize?

This monument stands as a testament to a worthy airship, a fierce airship, a 119 gunship. It stands for the sacrifices made along the way and It brings our history to this place of memories.

It also serves as a reminder that to those who were overwhelmed by enemy forces and saved by her fury and brave crews. To them the gunship and her crews will never be forgotten. Let me read you this letter to the Stingers...

(Insert letter from Lt. Col. Cher Pao Mua)

Someone wrote in a newspaper advertisement: "Together, they fought for freedom. Together, they prevailed. Together, they inspired us all." That memory of courage, commitment and dedication of those we served with, coupled with the dedication of those who serve this Association, created this monument and enabled us to bring home our gunship. Together we have brought her full circle, to this park, where many of us, as young men, once trained as Air Commandos.

In future days, come to this lovely park. Visit this monument. And as you let your fingertips touch the black granite be overwhelmed as you recall the past and remember your friends, and know that with the Stinger gunship you served with honor.

Together, on this day..., we honor the maintenance, aircrews, brothers and loved ones lost. We dedicate this monument to them and to our lovely "Lady of the Night" the AC-119K Stinger Gunship.

Together, we will remember them. Always.