

## AIR FORCE SGT. JOHN LEVITOW

### THE LOWEST RANKING US AIRMAN TO RECEIVE THE MEDAL OF HONOR

**438**



*Photo Credit: . USAF / National Museum of the U.S. Air Force*



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John Levitow came from humble beginnings, but achieved great things. By the time he retired from his career with the US Air Force, he was the lowest-ranking airman to be awarded the Medal of Honor. This is the story of his career and heroics in the face of imminent danger.

#### ENLISTMENT IN THE US AIR FORCE

Born and raised in Hartford, Connecticut, John L. Levitow enlisted in the Air Force in June 1966. He'd originally intended on joining the US Navy, but changed his mind at the last minute.



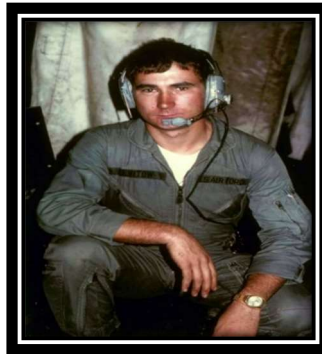
*A US Air Force loadmaster moving a Humvee onto a military aircraft*

His first duty within the service was as a civil engineer. At the time, **he also cross-trained as a loadmaster**, which came in handy during the later years of his service. Loadmasters are responsible for weighing and getting cargo onto an airplane, as well as calculating the weight and seating locations of passengers. It's their responsibility to ensure the aircraft maintains its permissible center of gravity.

## THE INCIDENT IN SOUTH VIETNAM



On February 24, 1969, **John Levitow was asked to fill in as loadmaster on an armed Douglas AC-47 gunship, call sign Spooky 71**. The aircraft, which was part of 3d Special Operations Squadron, had been tasked with flying a night mission over Southern Vietnam. It was Levitow's job to set ejection and ignition timer controls on Mark 24 magnesium flares, before handing them to the gunner for deployment.



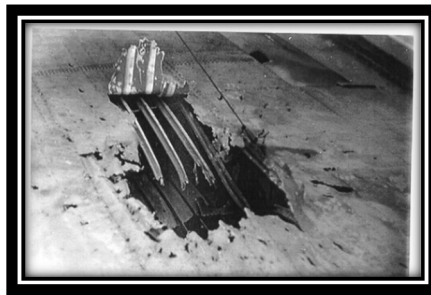
During the mission, the AC-47's pilot, Major Kenneth Carpenter, noticed muzzle flashes near Long Binh Army Base, prompting him to engage with the Viet Cong near Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Levitow and the gunner were deploying flares from the cargo door when the aircraft was hit by a North Vietnamese mortar shell.



Everyone was injured in the blast. Levitow suffered a concussion and more than 40 shrapnel wounds to his back and legs. The explosion also caused an ignited flare to fly from the gunner's hands, putting the entire aircraft at risk. If the munitions onboard the AC-47 were to ignite, everyone would perish.



Despite extraordinary pain and wooziness, Levitow crawled over to where the flare sat **and laid his body over it, before throwing it out the cargo door**. Right after, it ignited. Despite suffering heavy damage - more than 3,500 holes were noted in the fuselage and wings - the AC-47 was able to fly safely back to base.



#### **PRESENTED WITH THE MEDAL OF HONOR FOR EXCEPTIONAL HEROISM**

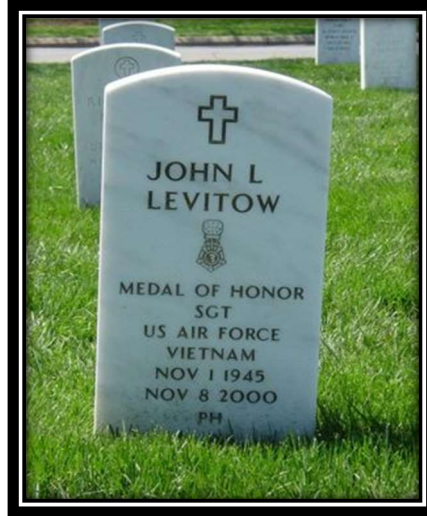
John Levitow was awarded the **Medal of Honor** for exceptional heroism during wartime, making him the lowest-ranking airman to receive the US military's highest honor. **It was presented to him by President Richard Nixon in May 1970.**



Among his other decorations were the Purple Heart, the Air Medal with silver and two bronze oak leaf clusters, and the National Defense Service Medal.

#### **JOHN LEVITOW'S LEGACY**

John Levitow died of cancer in November 2000, at the age of 55. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. In his honor, the Air Force created the John Levitow Award, which is presented to a graduate of the Air Force Enlisted Professional Military Education. The winner of the annual award must finish in the top one percent of their class.



His honors didn't stop there. In 1998, he was inducted into the Airlift/Tanker Association Hall of Fame, and a Boeing C-17 Globemaster III - named *The Spirit of John L. Levitow* - was delivered to the 437th and 315th airlift wings at Charleston Air Force Base, South Carolina. The aircraft was later transferred to the 105th Airlift Wing, New York Air National Guard.



#### CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE MEDAL OF HONOR PRESENTATION

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Sgt. Levitow (then A1C), U.S. Air Force, distinguished himself by exceptional heroism while assigned as a loadmaster aboard an AC-47 aircraft flying a night mission in support of Long Binh Army post. Sgt. Levitow's aircraft was struck by a hostile mortar round. The resulting explosion ripped a hole 2 feet in diameter through the wing and fragments made over 3,500 holes in the fuselage. All occupants of the cargo compartment were wounded and helplessly slammed against the floor and fuselage.

The explosion tore an activated flare from the grasp of a crewmember who had been launching flares to provide illumination for Army ground troops engaged in combat. Sgt. Levitow, though stunned by the concussion of the blast and suffering from over 40 fragment wounds in the back and legs, staggered to his feet and turned to assist the man nearest to him who had been knocked down and was bleeding heavily. As he was moving his wounded comrade forward and away from the opened cargo compartment door, he saw the smoking flare ahead of him in the aisle. Realizing the danger involved and completely disregarding his own wounds, Sgt. Levitow started toward the burning flare. The aircraft was partially out of control and the flare was rolling wildly from side to side. Sgt. Levitow struggled forward despite the loss of blood from his many wounds and the partial loss of feeling in his right leg. 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. Sgt. Levitow, by his selfless and heroic actions, saved the aircraft and its entire crew from certain death and destruction. Sgt. Levitow's gallantry, his profound concern for his fellowmen, at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Air Force and reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of his country.

