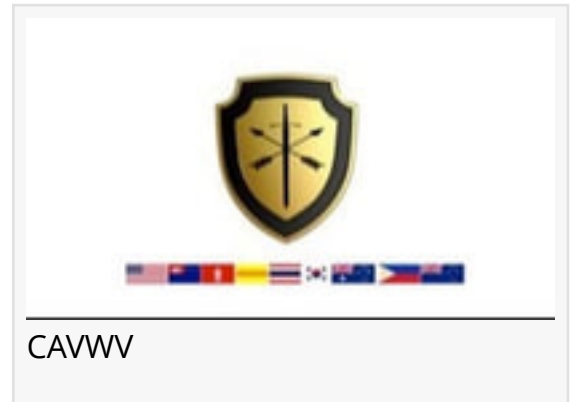


CAVWV Releases Complete Valor Suppression Record for 56th Special Operations Wing and Secret Air War Airmen

A complete accounting of valor recognition - and suppression - for the 56th Special Operations Wing and the covert air forces of America's Secret War in Laos.

ST. PAUL, MN, UNITED STATES, May 16, 2026
/EINPresswire.com/ -- THE MOST OPERATIONALLY DIVERSE SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCE THE AIR FORCE EVER PUT IN ONE PLACE - AND THE MOST SYSTEMATICALLY FORGOTTEN



A complete accounting of valor recognition and suppression, for the [56th Special Operations Wing](#) and the covert air forces of America's Secret War in Laos

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The men of the 56th Special Operations Wing flew the covert air war in Laos for twelve years. They deserve an accounting commensurate with what they gave.”

*Thomas Leo Briggs, President,
CAVWV*

From Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, the 56th Special Operations Wing assembled the most operationally diverse special operations force the Air Force ever concentrated in one place — Ravens, Sandys, Hobos, Knives, Nimrods, Green Hornets, Spookys, Stingers, and Spectres — flying covert missions into Laos that the United States officially denied were happening.

Every one of those men flew missions that the United States officially denied were happening. When they were killed, their families were sometimes told they died in accidents. When they were decorated, the citations handed

to them had the country's name removed before presentation. The word "Laos" was, in the words of one 56th Air Commando Wing officer who described a medal ceremony at Nakhon Phanom, "expunged" from every citation before it was read aloud.

The Coalition of Allied Afghan & Vietnam War Veterans (CAVWV) has now completed the most comprehensive public accounting of valor recognition and suppression for this community. The findings, documented at www.cavwv.org/forgotten-warriors.html, establish a pattern that is

systemic, documented, and in multiple cases directly traceable to specific political decisions made at the highest levels of the executive branch.

The documented record includes:

Chief Master Sergeant Richard L. Etchberger, Lima Site 85, Laos, March 11, 1968. Held off a North Vietnamese assault while evacuating his wounded crew. Medal of Honor, presented in 2010, forty-two years after he earned it. His sons were told he died in a helicopter accident.

[Colonel Philip J. Conran](#), 21st SOS, 56th SOW, Moung Phine, Laos, October 6, 1969. Crash-landed under fire, organized the crash site defense while wounded, and held the perimeter for six hours until all fifty-four survivors — eight American airmen and forty-six Lao allies — were safely extracted. The largest successful rescue of the Secret War. His commanding officer recommended him for the Medal of Honor. The Vice Commander of Pacific Air Forces downgraded it personally: President Nixon had publicly stated no American military operations were ongoing in Laos. His citation reads "classified location in Southeast Asia."

First Lieutenant Charles "Chuck" Engle, Raven 26, 56th SOW, Laos, June 20, 1970. Ground fire severed his fuel line, drenching him and his O-1 in aviation fuel. He continued directing air strikes and placed his fuel-soaked aircraft between an enemy gun position and a rescue helicopter to draw fire onto himself and allow the pickup to complete. Air Force Cross, posthumous. Vietnam's most decorated Raven. Killed February 22, 1971. His citation reads "Southeast Asia."

Captain Jackson L. Hudson, 602nd SOS, 56th SOW, Moung Phine, Laos, October 6, 1969. Directed the air campaign that extracted all fifty-four survivors alongside Col. Conran. Air Force Cross. His citation reads "Southeast Asia."

Captain John E. Lackey, 1st SOS, 56th SOW, Laos, March 1972. Air Force Cross, multi-day search and rescue mission over Laos. His citation reads "Southeast Asia."

Major James C. Harding, 1st SOS, 56th SOW, Tchepone, Laos, April 1972. Air Force Cross, extraordinary heroism near Tchepone, Laos — one of the few citations in the 56th SOW record that actually names the country. His record also includes five Distinguished Flying Crosses whose citations read "Southeast Asia" for missions flown over the same terrain in the same period. The



Thomas Leo Briggs, President, CAVWV - CIA Paramilitary Case Officer, Pakse, Laos, 1970-1972

inconsistency within a single man's file in a single year is documented in full at cavww.org/forgotten-warriors.html.

Major John Leonard Carroll, Raven 20, 56th SOW, Xiangkhoang Province, Laos, November 7, 1972. Shot down over the Plain of Jars, fought two North Vietnamese companies on foot with a rifle, a revolver, and hand grenades. Air Force Cross, posthumous. Missing in action for thirty-five years. His citation is one of the very few Raven valor citations to name Laos explicitly.

And beyond the individual cases, the twenty-two Ravens killed in action out of 161 who served. The twelve Americans killed at Lima Site 85, the largest single ground combat loss the Air Force sustained in the entire war, in a country the United States officially was not in. The seven Raven FACs captured by the Pathet Lao, from whom not a single American prisoner was ever released. The hundreds of airmen of the 56th SOW, whose citations were handed to them with the country's name removed.

The full evidentiary record of what these men did exists in sealed files at the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base. It was not destroyed. It was sealed. The Etchberger upgrade proved that political classification, not merit, drove the original downgrade decisions. That precedent applies to every case in this accounting.

Colonel Craig Duehring (Raven 27, former Assistant Secretary of the Air Force) has reviewed and validated the research. Sergeant Major Justin D. LeHew, Past National Commander of the Legion of Valor, has endorsed the campaign.

"The men of the 56th Special Operations Wing flew the covert air war in Laos for twelve years. They flew under call signs their country did not know, in aircraft bearing no national markings, with citations that did not say where they had been. They were among the finest aviators the Air Force ever produced. They deserve an accounting commensurate with what they gave." - Thomas Leo Briggs, CAVWV President, CIA paramilitary case officer, Pakse, Laos, 1970–1972

Full research documentation, unit histories, valor award records, and media resources: www.cavww.org/forgotten-warriors.html. Interview requests for Col. Conran, Col. Duehring, and CAVWV leadership: Tom Briggs, cavww.president@gmail.com.

About CAVWV

Trim to one sentence: "CAVWV is a veteran advocacy organization dedicated to recognition of American veterans and the Southeast Asian allies who fought alongside them. cavww.org
Media Contact: Thomas Leo Briggs — cavww.president@gmail.com

Thomas Leo Briggs

Coalition of Allied Afghan & Vietnam War Veterans (CAVWV)

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