

CORNELIUS, JOHNNIE CLAYTON

Name: Johnnie Clayton Cornelius
Rank/Branch: Captain/US Air Force
Unit: 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron
DaNang Airbase, South Vietnam
Date of Birth: 22 May 1941 (Texas)
Home of Record: Williams AFB, AZ
Date of Loss: 26 June 68
Country of Loss: North Vietnam
Loss Coordinates: [170152N 1063254E \(XD649837\)](#)
[Click coordinates to view maps](#)
Status in 1973: Killed/Body Not Recovered
Category: 2
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: [O2A "Skymaster"](#)
Other Personnel In Incident: Robert F. Woods (missing)

NO
Picture
Available

REMARKS:

SYNOPSIS: The Cessna O2 Skymaster was the military version of the civilian Model 335 Skymaster. The twin-engine, twin-tailboom O2 had greater endurance and a little more speed than the more familiar O1 Bird Dog, but still remained essentially unarmed carrying only smoke rockets. Like its predecessor, the low flying, slow moving Skymaster was used primarily as a Forward Air Control (FAC) aircraft to mark targets for both attack aircraft and ground troops.

Capt. Johnnie C. Cornelius arrived in DaNang, South Vietnam on 21 May 1968, and Major Robert F. Woods arrived in-country only three months earlier. Both men were assigned to the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron whose main function was to fly forward air control (FAC) missions guiding other aircraft in support of air strikes, search and rescue, supply drops, medivac missions, etc. in support of American and Allied troops.

On 26 June 1968, Capt. Johnnie C. Cornelius, pilot, and Major Robert F. Woods, instructor pilot, comprised the crew of a Cessna O2A Skymaster aircraft acting as the Forward Air Control (FAC) on a visual reconnaissance mission. Their area of operation included the extremely rugged jungle covered mountains dotted with small clearings in the southwest quadrant of North Vietnam known as "Tally Ho." Because Major Woods was manifested as an instructor pilot on this mission, it is believed a secondary purpose of this mission was to orient Capt. Cornelius to this operational area. This would allow Johnnie Cornelius to gain more experience as a FAC directing flights of strike aircraft with an experienced pilot on hand to assist him if need be.

The FAC located enemy activity in the dense jungle and rolled in to mark the target for the strike aircraft. As Capt. Cornelius and Major Woods pressed in closer to mark the NVA's position, other pilots saw the Skymaster suddenly go into a steep bank, crash into trees and explode on impact. The location of the loss was in very rugged mountains covered by a closed-canopy forest and sparsely populated. However, while few civilians inhabited the area, a sizable number of NVA troops preparing to infiltrate into South Vietnam were known to operate frequently in it.

The crash site was located approximately 3 miles north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), 9 miles east of the North Vietnamese/Lao border and 28 miles south-southwest of the major port city of Dong Hoi, Quang

Binh Province, North Vietnam. This location was also 33 miles north-northwest of the major US base of Khe Sanh, South Vietnam.

Other pilots in the area of loss saw no one exit the aircraft prior to the crash. Likewise, no parachutes were seen and no emergency beepers were heard emanating from the dense jungle. An immediate visual examination of the crash site was unsuccessful in locating any signs of life in or around the wreckage. Shortly thereafter search and rescue (SAR) aircraft arrived onsite to conduct an electronic and visual search operation. They also failed to detect any trace of survivors in and around the Skymaster's wreckage. Because of the heavy enemy presence in the area, no ground search was possible. At the time the formal search was terminated, Johnnie Cornelius and Robert Woods were listed Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered.

Although it appears highly unlikely that Johnnie Cornelius and Robert Woods could have survived their loss incident, each man has a right to have his remains returned to his family, friends and country. However, for other Americans who remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, their fate could be quite different.

Since the end of the Vietnam War well over 21,000 reports of American prisoners, missing and otherwise unaccounted for have been received by our government. Many of these reports document LIVE America Prisoners of War remaining captive throughout Southeast Asia TODAY.

Pilots were called upon to fly in many dangerous circumstances, and they were prepared to be wounded, killed or captured. It probably never occurred to them that they could be abandoned by the country they so proudly served.