

HARLEY, LEE DUFFORD

Name: Lee Dufford Harley
Rank/Branch: Major/US Air Force
Unit: 557th Tactical Fighter Squadron
Cam Ranh Bay Airbase, South Vietnam
Date of Birth: 21 January 1940
Home of Record: Danville, VA
Date of Loss: 18 May 1966
Country of Loss: Laos
Loss Coordinates: [171528N 1061054E \(XE256083\)](#)
[Click coordinates to view maps](#)
Status in 1973: Missing in Action
Category: 2
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: [O1E "Bird Dog"](#)
Other Personnel In Incident: Andre R. Guillet (missing)



REMARKS:

SYNOPSIS: The Cessna O1E Bird Dog was used extensively in the early years of the war in Vietnam by Forward Air Controllers (FACs) to provide low, close visual reconnaissance and target marking which enabled armed aircraft or ground troops to close in on a target. The O1E was feared by the enemy because he knew opening fire would expose his location and invite an attack by fighters controlled by the slowly circling Bird Dog. The Vietnamese became bold, however, when they felt their position was compromised and attacked the little aircraft with a vengeance in order to lessen the accuracy of an impending strike by other aircraft.

On 18 May 1966, then Capt. Lee D. Harley, pilot; and A1C Andre R. Guillet, observer, comprised the crew of a 1957 model O1E, call sign "Gombey 19," that departed Nakhom Phanom Airfield (NKP), Thailand and was the lead aircraft in a flight of two. The #2 Bird Dog, call sign "Gombey 25," was flown by Capt. Morris.

Gombey flight was conducting a visual reconnaissance mission in "Steel Tiger, North Cricket area 12" to locate and direct strike aircraft against enemy traffic moving down the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. This "highway" was used by the NVA to transport men and supplies from North Vietnam through neutral Laos, then infiltrate them to various areas of South Vietnam under their control. To the untrained eye, it was frequently seen as little more than a path cut through the jungle. Gombey 19's flight path was to take them from NKP to Route 34 in Laos, then up Route 912 to the North Vietnamese border, and back to NKP. Both Capt. Harley and A1C Guillet were equipped with RT-10 emergency radios and pin flares. Each man was also armed with an M16 rifle and a .38 caliber pistol.

Gombey 19's pilot, Capt. Harley, was a fighter pilot on special assignment as a FAC. After Gombey 19 finished controlling Diamondback Flight, a flight of fighter aircraft, they were beginning their return flight to base. Capt. Harley was in the process of calling in a battle damage assessment (BDA) of Diamondback strike to Cricket Control, the airborne battlefield command and control aircraft, when his voice communication suddenly stopped.

Gombey 25 was notified of the situation and its aircrew immediately initiated a visual search of the area. Shortly thereafter Capt. Morris sighted two columns of smoke issuing from the jungle foliage below. As he

approached the crash site location, he sighted the burning wreckage. As he circled over the area in his search for signs of survivors, heavy enemy anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) weapons fire with tracers began spraying around him. He immediately dove toward the ground and away from the threat area. Once out of range of the enemy guns, Capt. Morris, set up a RESCAP orbit 1 kilometer to the east of the crash site.

Search and rescue (SAR) operations were immediately implemented. Sandy 31 and 32, a flight of A1E Skyraiders, were the first of the search aircraft to arrive on scene. In addition to the standard compliment of rescue aircraft, Black Lyon, a flight of two F4Gs fighters, had been diverted for RESCAP duty. While making a low pass over the area, Black Lyon Lead was struck by AAA fire. Both crewmen ejected safely, and were able to establish communication with the other aircraft. Jolly Green 51 and 56, the rescue helicopters, arrived on station and at roughly 0740 hours and 0800 hours respectively, the helicopters recovered both members of the Black Lyon crew. After that rescue was completed, Sandy 31 and 32 continued to search for Capt. Harley and A1C Guillet.

One strong beeper was heard from the jungle between grid coordinates XE216037 and XE220079. While the beeper was heard, the pilot's of Sandy 31 and 32 were unable to establish visual sight of or voice contact with either Lee Harley or Andre Guillet.

During this time additional fighters were called in to suppress recurring enemy ground fire that was interfering with the SAR operation. As the mission continued, Sandy 31 and 32 were replaced by Sandy 41 and 42. They, in turn, were replaced by Sandy 11 and 12. During the days that followed, other pilots from Gombey flights continued to search the area. According to one of the pilot s who participated in the SAR operation and who later talked with Lee Harley s family, a strong beeper was heard throughout the week emanating from the jungle in the area where the Bird Dog disappeared. After the formal search was terminated, Lee Harley and Andre Guillet were declared Missing in Action.

Lee Harley and Andre Guillet are among nearly 600 Americans who disappeared in Laos. Many of these men were known to be alive on the ground. The Laotians admitted holding "tens of tens" of American Prisoners of War, but these men were never negotiated for either by direct negotiation between our countries or through the Paris Peace Accords which ended the War in Vietnam since Laos was not a party to that agreement.

If Andre Guillet and Lee Harley died in their loss incident, each man has the right to have his remains returned to his family, friends and country. However, if they survived, their fate, like that of other Americans who remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, 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 American Prisoners of War remaining captive throughout Southeast Asia TODAY.

Pilots, aircrews and ground troops were called upon to fly and fight 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.

Lee D. Harley graduated from Virginia Tech in 1961.