

HARTNESS, GREGG

Name: Gregg Hartness
Rank/Branch: Lieutenant Colonel/US Air Force
Unit: 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron
DaNang Airbase, South Vietnam
Date of Birth: 18 April 1937 (Detroit, MI)
Home of Record: Dallas, TX
Date of Loss: 26 November 1968
Country of Loss: Laos
Loss Coordinates: [160129N 1064201E \(XC819723\)](#)
[Click coordinates to view maps](#)
Status in 1973: Missing in Action
Category: 2
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: [O2A "Skymaster"](#)
Other Personnel In Incident: Allen S. Sheppard III (rescued)



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 Birdog, 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.

Oscar Eight was the code name given to a sector of eastern Laos located in rugged jungle covered mountains approximately 25 miles northwest of the infamous A Shau Valley, Saravane Province, Laos. The area encompassed the junction of Highway 92, which was a primary north-south artery of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and Highway 922, which branched off and ran directly east where it crossed into South Vietnam at a strategic point near the northern edge of the A Shau Valley. Oscar Eight was also located at the southeastern end of a large and narrow jungle covered valley that had two primary roads running through it, one on each side of the valley. Highway 92 ran along the west side and Highway 919 along the east. A power line ran parallel to Highway 92 and sometimes crossed it. In addition to the roads and power line, the Hoi An River also flowed through the valley passing the road junction roughly 1 mile west of it.

More American aircraft were downed in this sector than any other place in Laos. This was because burrowed deep in the hills of Oscar Eight was North Vietnamese General Vo Bam's 559th Transportation Group's forward headquarters. It was also the Ho Chi Minh Trail's control center and contained the largest NVA storage facility outside of North Vietnam. Oscar Eight was defended by consecutive belts of anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) guns of all sizes that were not only stationed on the ground, but also mounted on platforms in the trees and were expertly camouflaged. Oscar Eight also favored the enemy because the only suitable landing zones were located in a wide bowl surrounded by jungle covered high ground containing AAA guns and bunkered infantry.

On 26 November 1968, then Capt. Gregg Hartness, pilot; and 1st Lt. Allen S. Sheppard III, observer; comprised the crew of an O2A (serial #67-214119), call sign "Covey 265," conducting a pre-dawn visual reconnaissance/FAC mission against NVA activity in and around the vicinity of Highways 922, 919 and

92. The mission identifier was "Steel Tiger." The briefed flight path was from DaNang Airbase to the target and back to DaNang. Weather conditions were clear sky with visibility of 15 plus miles and the terrain was steep and hilly covered in large sections of elephant grass and bamboo interspersed with heavily forested tall trees.

Covey 265 departed DaNang Airbase at 0300 hours and proceeded to the target area without incident. Once on-site, Capt. Hartness established radio contact with the airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC), and was immediately directed to initiate their mission.

At 0413 hours, the first indication of trouble was a heavy jolting thud in the rear of the aircraft at which time the Skymaster broke to the left in a descending attitude. Capt. Hartness successfully leveled the aircraft's wings. At the same time, 1st Lt. Sheppard looked across the cockpit and observed that the fire warning light was on. Shortly thereafter, a second thud occurred followed by a loss of aircraft control. According to Allen Sheppard, Gregg Hartness ordered, "Bailout!" and was "pushing on me as I started out (of the Skymaster). I contacted the rocket pod, which I pushed off from. I was at approximately 6,000 feet MSL."

He continued, "During my freefall, I saw the aircraft in an inverted attitude going straight down. After my chute opened, I did not see the aircraft or its impact. During my descent, I noted the time to be 0415 local. I then called 'Mayday' on the survival radio, then listened for any acknowledgement of my radio call and for Capt. Hartness' beeper. I heard no beeper and was not able to contact anyone on the radio. After landing, I again attempted to contact Capt. Hartness or anyone. I heard nothing."

1st Lt. Sheppard continued, "Throughout the rest of the night I heard sporadic small arms fire. (After first light) I transmitted the E&E (escape and evasion) code letter for the month and Crown 1 (the control aircraft directing all aspects of the SAR operation) responded." At approximately 0700 hours, I apprised the ABCCC of the situation and Crown 1 immediately called in the rescue aircraft. Shortly thereafter the SAR force, which included Jolly Green 32 and 34, arrived in the loss area.

SAR personnel rapidly pinpointed Allen Sheppard with his assistance through voice communication in vectoring them to his location. Because of the heavy jungle growth on the steep hillside where 1st Lt. Sheppard was hidden, his recovery operation was both tricky and dangerous. At roughly 0830 hours, Jolly Green 34 successfully effected his rescue.

Smoke was seen rising from the trees approximately 200 meters from Allen Sheppard's recovery point. As Jolly Green 32 continued to search for Capt. Hartness, it hovered over the smoldering wreckage. The SAR aircrew noted the cockpit area was completely burned out and there was no sign of Gregg Hartness in or around the crash site. During the search operation, no emergency radio beeper or voice contact could be established with the downed pilot. Because of the intense hostile environment in which the loss was located, the search effort was terminated shortly after rescuing Allen Sheppard. At that time Gregg Hartness was declared Missing in Action.

In 1992, a National Security Agency (NSA) correlation study of all communist radio intercepts pertaining to missing Americans, which was presented to the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs in a classified format, was finally declassified and made public. According to this document, at least 1 North Vietnamese radio message was intercepted and correlated to this incident. The NSA synopsis states: "On 27 November 1968, one L-19 propeller driven US aircraft was downed by rifle fire in Muong Phon District, Savannakhet (Province), Laos. Two crewmen, including one American, were killed and the equipment in the aircraft seized.' Probably (the enemy) misidentified the O-2A for an L-19."

Capt. Gregg Hartness was among nearly 600 Americans who disappeared in Laos. Many of these men were known to be alive on the ground. The Lao 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 the Paris Peace Accords since Laos was not a party to that agreement.

If Gregg Hartness died in the crash of his aircraft, he has every right to have his remains returned to his family, friends and country. However, if he survived, he most certainly could have been captured and his fate, like that of other Americans who remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia, could be quite different.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, 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 and aircrews in Vietnam and Laos were called upon to fly in many dangerous circumstances, and 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.