

HOLMES, LESTER EVAN

Name: Lester Evan Holmes
Rank/Branch: Colonel/US Air Force
Unit: 20th Tactical Airlift Squadron
DaNang Airfield, South
Vietnam
Date of Birth: 24 July 1919
Home of Record: Plainfield, IA
Date of Loss: 22 May 1967
Country of Loss: North Vietnam
Loss Coordinates: [170500N 1065000E \(XD940888\)](#)
[Click coordinates to view maps](#)
Status in 1973: Missing in Action
Category: 2
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: [O-1E Bird Dog](#)
Other Personnel In Incident: (none missing)



REMARKS:

SYNOPSIS: The low, slow and vulnerable Cessna O1 Bird Dog Forward Air Control (FAC) aircraft were inherited by the Air Force from the Army when the Army lost command of this fix-wing observation fleet during 1965. The aircraft itself usually only carried white phosphorous target marker rockets that were mounted beneath the wings. The aircrews, however, carried their own personal weapons, which added a limited degree of armament to this daring little aircraft. The Bird Dog was not only vulnerable to enemy ground fire, it was also at risk of being accidentally hit by friendly fire because its shape and speed helped it blend into its surroundings. Later in the war the Bird Dog's upper wing was painted white or orange to emphasize the slow-moving FAC's position to friendly strike aircraft.

The North Vietnamese railroad system consisted of nine segments, the most important parts of which were north of the 20th parallel. Almost 80% of the major targets were in this area laced together by the rail system. The most important contribution of the system was to move the main fighting weapons from China to redistribution centers at Kep, Hanoi, Haiphong, Nam Dinh, Thanh Hoa, Vinh and Dong Hoi. These supplies were further distributed by trucks and boats to designated collection points where porters carried the weapons, food and ammunition on their final leg into the acknowledged war zone.

On 22 May 1967, then Lt. Col. Lester E. Holmes was the pilot of the #2 O-1E Bird Dog in a flight of two, conducting an afternoon Forward Air Controller (FAC) mission north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam. The mission identifier was "Talley Ho," a sector of North Vietnam that covered the area from 30 miles north of the DMZ to the DMZ and from the coastline on the east to the North Vietnamese/Lao border on the west, Quang Binh Province, North Vietnam.

The FACs were directing multiple flights of aircraft against several lucrative enemy targets located within the forested region of Tally Ho between the coastal plain on the east and the rugged jungle covered mountains to the west. These targets included a portion of the North Vietnamese railway system, storage facilities, a network of primary and secondary roads, as well as the convoys transporting troops and supplies along them.

At 1628 hours, enemy gunners opened fire on the two Bird Dogs striking Lt. Col. Holmes aircraft in the wing and fuselage. At the same time, the pilot of the lead aircraft was able to successfully take evasive action. In the chaos of battle, he did not see if Lester Holmes was able to bail out of his crippled aircraft. Likewise, he did not see it impact the ground. Approaching darkness prevented search and rescue (SAR) operations. Lester Holmes was immediately listed Missing in Action.

The area in which the Bird Dog's wreckage was located was heavily forested on the southwest slope of Nui Thi Ve Mountain. The entire region was heavily populated with enemy troops and laced with roads, trails and footpaths of all sizes. The area of loss was located approximately 1 mile northeast of Highway 193, 3 miles southwest of Route 101 and 6 miles west of a single-track railroad line. It was also 8 miles north of the DMZ, 12 miles west-northwest of Vinh Linh and 29 miles south-southeast of the major port city of Dong Hoi.

If Lester Holmes died in the loss of his aircraft, he has a 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. Either way, there is no doubt the Vietnamese know what happened to him and could return him or his remains any time they had the desire to do so.

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 in Vietnam were called upon to 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.