

# PETERSON, MARK ALLEN

Name: Mark Allen Peterson  
Rank/Branch: Captain/US Air Force  
Unit: 23rd Tactical Airlift Squadron  
Nakhom Phanom Airbase, Thailand  
Date of Birth: 14 May 1949  
Home of Record: Canton, OH  
Date of Loss: 27 January 1973  
Country of Loss: South Vietnam  
Loss Coordinates: [165145N 1071107E \(YD328655\)](#)  
[Click coordinates to view maps](#)  
Status in 1973: Missing in Action  
Category: 1  
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: [OV10A "Bronco"](#)  
Other Personnel In Incident: George W. Morris (missing)



REMARKS: GOOD CHUTE; POSS VOICE CONTACT

SYNOPSIS: The North American (Rockwell) OV-10 Bronco was designed as the Counter Insurgency (COIN) aircraft of the mid-1960s, at a time when jets were not planned for brushfire wars such as Vietnam. With the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the US no longer voluntarily withheld its jets, and the OV-10 went into combat as the most powerful of the light Forward Air Control (FAC) aircraft. The Bronco was often as capable of destroying a target as it was of marking it.

By mid-January 1973, President Richard M Nixon ordered no more missions to be flown over North Vietnam. Consequently, all American aircraft were assigned targets in South Vietnam. During this same timeframe, several divisions of NVA were massed along the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Shortly before the Paris Peace Accords were to go into effect, those divisions rapidly moved across the DMZ to join VC cadre and to occupy as much territory as possible before midnight on 27 January when the Peace Accords were scheduled to take effect. US and South Vietnamese forces used all air and ground assets available to them in an attempt to halt the massive communist offensive. In the days just prior to the official end of the Vietnam War, carrier-based pilots flew multiple missions in which dozens of sections comprised of 2 to 4 aircraft each flew every day against those divisions.

On 27 January 1973, just 10 hours before the Paris Peace Agreement went into effect, then 1st Lt. Mark A. Peterson, pilot; and Capt. George W. Morris, Jr., co-pilot; comprised the crew of an OV-10A Bronco (aircraft #3806), call sign "Nail 89," that was conducting a Forward Air Control (FAC) mission for a section of F-4J aircraft from the USS Enterprise, call sign "Dakota." Dakota flight's assigned target was the Headquarters area of the VC cadre who were in heavy contact with South Vietnamese Rangers positioned on the south bank of the Cua Viet River. The Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) directing all missions in the region was a C-130E, call sign "King."

Cmdr. Harley H. Hall, pilot; and Lt. Cmdr. Phillip A. Kientzler, radar intercept officer; comprised the crew of the Lead F4J (serial #155768, tail # NK-113), call sign "Taproom 113," in another section of 2 F-4Js from the USS Enterprise that was working targets in the same region. Cmdr. Terry Heath was the pilot of the #2 aircraft in Cmdr. Hall's flight. Taproom was conducting its second strike mission of the day against a 15-truck convoy of North Vietnamese supply and logistic vehicles moving from North Vietnam into

South Vietnam. This section of aircraft was under the operational control of 1st Lt. Adam West, the senior US Air Force FAC who was also flying an OV10A Bronco, call sign "Covey 115."

Prior to returning to Vietnam for another tour, Harley Hall commanded the famed Blue Angels, the US Navy's precision flight team. The pilot flying the slot position behind Cmdr. Hall was Lt. Cmdr. Ernest E. "Ernie" Christensen who was also stationed aboard the USS Enterprise in early 1973. While Harley Hall commanded the Blue Angels, they flew the highly prized Phantom.

When Lt. Cmdr. Christensen, call sign "Dakota Lead," and his section arrived onsite and checked in with King and Nail 89, Capt. Morris radioed, "Hey, this is the last mission, guys. Don't do anything stupid."

Weather conditions throughout the region included partly cloudy to broken cloud cover with bases ranging from approximately 9,000 to 11,000 feet MSL. A thin layer of cloud cover, commonly referred to as scud, later developed at 2,000 feet making it difficult to visually acquire objects located below. In addition to the weather, the Americans had to contend with heavy ground fire from enemy 23mm, 37mm and 57mm anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) gun batteries located south of the DMZ and 85mm AAA batteries located just north of it. Shoulder-fired SA-7 surface-to-air missiles (SAM) were also being employed against American aircraft by communist forces.

For roughly 4 hours and from an altitude of 9,500 feet, 1st Lt. West dodged in and out of the clouds for protection as he worked several flights of aircraft against the growing number of NVA and VC targets. At approximately 1700 hours, he spotted an enemy 15-truck convoy traveling on Highway 1 south of Thon Bai An. Covey 115 immediately radioed for air support and was sent Taproom flight. Each aircraft was armed with 12 MK-82 500 pound bombs and 20mm cannons. Adam West briefed the flight on the location of the convoy, the heavy AAA fire and the locations of gun emplacements along with the information about the SA-7s. He also provided the fighter crew with current data about the designated bailout area, which was due east of the area in which they were working and over water where search and rescue (SAR) aircraft were already orbiting in case their services were needed. The fighters were directed to make their run-in-to-target from the south to the north with their MK-82s so that any hung or tossed bombs would be no threat to friendly forces located roughly 14 miles to the south.

Cmdr. Hall made the first attack pass dropping 6 MK-82s and hitting one or two of the trucks. Cmdr. Heath were cleared in next. He also dropped 6 bombs destroying more of the trucks. Both crews reported receiving heavy AAA fire as they pulled up and away from the target. Harley Hall entered his second run-in, but because the clouds obstructed his view of the convoy, no bombs were dropped. Next Terry Heath made his second pass dropping the last of his bombs, but missed due to the jinking the crew had to take to avoid the AAA on approach. At 1720 hours, Cmdr. Hall made his third bomb run on the burning convoy. As the Phantom pulled off target and climbed for altitude, he radioed that they had been hit several times and were heading feet wet.

As he did so, Lt. Cmdr. Christensen was attacking the Headquarters area of the VC cadre who were in heavy contact with South Vietnamese Rangers positioned on the south bank of the Cua Viet River. Ernie Christensen had just finished his second attack pass on an enemy position when he observed SA-7 fire and then saw Harley Hall's Phantom pass in front of him. Taproom 113 was on fire from the trailing edge of the port wing aft along the fuselage. At the same time Cmdr. Heath radioed, "Get feet wet!" In response, Harley Hall transmitted, "We're trying, Terry, we're trying."

1st Lt. Mark Peterson and Capt. George Morris, the aircrew of Nail 89, also observed the burning Phantom as it circled from east to west in the vicinity of Dong Ha and then back to the east toward the South China Sea. Within 5 seconds the aircraft began to roll to the right, and after 60 to 90 degrees of roll, the crew ejected at an altitude of 4,000 feet. Other aircrews saw both men eject, and some were able to visually follow the two men in their parachutes to the ground.

1st Lt. West saw both parachutes fully deploy, made a Mayday call and began circling the nearest one. He was able to establish voice contact with Lt. Cmdr. Kientzler on his survival radio during his descent. Phillip Kientzler reported that he was alright and could see Cmdr. Hall in his parachute. He also reported that they were taking ground fire, Cmdr. Hall had been hit by it and was "hanging limp in his chute" followed by "I think he's dead. I've been hit, too." Harley Hall and Phillip Kientzler were seen to land 100 feet apart near a village on an island in the area where the Dam Cho Chua and Cua Viet Rivers join in the populated coastal plain approximately 1 mile south of the Cua Viet River and 5 miles southwest of the coastline. The Phantom continued to roll an additional 120 to 150 degrees before crashing in a near vertical attitude and exploding on impact.

While Lt. Cmdr. Kientzler believed Cmdr. Hall had been killed, Cmdr. Heath watched Harley Hall as he moved about on the ground discarding his parachute and other flight gear. Based on his observation of Cmdr. Hall's movements, the wingman believed he had not been wounded or injured during the shootdown. Two emergency beepers were heard, but no further voice contact was established with either crewman. By this time weather conditions consisted of scattered clouds with bases at 4,000 feet and 6 miles visibility. Conditions deteriorated further with another layer of scattered clouds at 400 feet and the overcast scud layer remaining at 2,000 feet.

As soon as the crew of Taproom 113 safely ejected, Nail 89 diverted from Dakota flight's strike mission to the search and rescue operation for Cmdr. Hall and Lt. Cmdr. Kientzler. Both men landed in an area that was open, flat and populated approximately 3 miles west of Highway 1 and the single track railroad line that paralleled the road and was located just to the west of it, 8 miles north-northwest of Quang Tri City and 11 miles south of the demilitarized zone, Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam.

Nail 89 was flying just to the south of the downed Phantom crew at 9,500 feet when 1st Lt. Peterson radioed they were going to go down for a closer look. 1st Lt. West advised Mark Peterson not to do so because of the intense AAA fire and SA-7s. 1st Lt. Peterson acknowledged the warning, and then declared they were going down anyway. Nail 89 began its run-in from the southwest and had descended to 4,000 feet when Adam West saw a shoulder-fired SA-7 directed toward Nail 89 from its 6 o'clock position. He immediately transmitted, "SAM, SAM, SAM! BREAK LEFT, BREAK LEFT, BREAK LEFT!" Nail 89 broke hard left and popped an inferred flare anti-SAM countermeasure device. The missile altered course following the flare when the Bronco inexplicably broke back to the right and into the SA-7.

The Bronco took a direct hit in the right engine causing pieces of aircraft wreckage to sever the Bronco's tail. According to witnesses, it entered a spin before beginning to tumble end over end. Both 1st Lt. Peterson and Capt. Morris managed to eject and they landed in an area US pilots nicknamed "the fingers" because the group of inlets and coves loosely resembled a hand. Further, the open, flat terrain in which they landed was 2 miles southeast of Taproom 113, ½ mile southeast of the Cua Viet River and 6 miles southwest of the coastline. Both men immediately established voice contact with other flight members.

With two aircrews alive on the ground in the middle of enemy held territory, Ernie Christensen sent the rest of his section high while he tried to get a ground plot on the downed aircrews' positions. He never got it, and within 10 minutes his section had reached the point of fuel exhaustion and were forced to return to the Enterprise. As Dakota flight began its return trip to the carrier, 4 fully armed sections of Navy aircraft were checking in with King.

It was not until 1st Lt. West saw two good parachutes that he realized Nail 89 was a two-man crew. He initiated a second Mayday call and watched as both men touched the ground. About this time, King's pilot transmitted to all aircraft that he had lost two of his four engines and was returning to base. He also stated he was transferring mission control to Adam West, Covey 115.

1st Lt. West found himself in a very difficult position. With two aircrews down on the ground, his own fuel running low and the Air Force initially unwilling to send a replacement FAC to relieve him, Adam West had SAR Skyraiders and rescue helicopters arriving on site and checking in. George Morris successfully

established radio contact with the Covey FAC stating he was "okay and that he could see Mark Peterson and he appeared alright, too." 1st Lt. West acknowledged Capt. Morris' report and told him that the SAR operation was already under way. George Morris reported that 1st Lt. Peterson had been seen and was going to be captured. He then said, "Oh my God, they just killed him!" Adam West asked Capt. Morris to confirm his last transmission. Again the downed pilot said, "He's dead - they just killed him!"

As 1st Lt. West was sorting out this information in his mind, Army ground forces contacted him saying they were going to make a push to the north to try a rescue from the ground. At the same time, Covey 115 had fighter aircraft checking in requesting directions. According to Adam West, the fighters "were coming in as flights of 12, 8, 10, etc. They were comprised of Air Force, Navy and Marine F-4s, and A-7s. An example of this configuration was a 12-ship of F-4s that was a combination of 6 Air Force (3 flights of 2 each), 4 Navy (2 flights of 2) and 2 Marine (1 flight of 2), thus 6 flights with 6 different mission numbers and armed with a total of 144 MK-82 bombs." Covey FAC stacked the different flights, which consisted of 135 aircraft in all, overhead at 500-foot intervals from 11,500 feet to 20,000 feet.

As he was organizing the fighter aircraft, the last voice transmission was received from Capt. Morris when he said, "They see me! They are coming for me! I'm going to surrender." After confirming that information, he heard George Morris scream and say, "Oh, no!" He also heard the sounds of what he believed to be a .51 caliber machine gun open fire before Capt. Morris' survival radio went dead. With these sounds still echoing in his ears, 1st Lt. West heard the Army's radio operator screaming for air support because they were engaged in a fierce firefight with enemy forces and were taking casualties. Deteriorating weather conditions and dusk became significant factors as the replacement FAC finally arrived. As it turned out it was a pilot Adam West had trained and who was familiar with the region. After briefing him on all aspects of the current mission, 1st Lt. West and one of the SAR helicopters as an escort turned to the southeast for the flight to DaNang. According to Adam West, "I didn't think I was going to make it home. I did, but the fuel gages were not moving. They were firmly planted on empty."

Shortly thereafter due to deteriorating weather conditions, approaching darkness and having no further voice or beeper contact with the men on the ground, the formal SAR mission was cancelled. The US military believed the probability of immediate capture was very high for all four men. At the time the search effort was terminated, Harley Hall, Phillip Kientzler, Mark Peterson and George Morris were declared Missing in Action. However, within a short time the status of Harley Hall and Phillip Kientzler was upgraded to Prisoner of War based on information received by US intelligence that confirmed their capture. The status of Mark Peterson and George Morris was not upgraded in spite of substantial intelligence that one or both were also captured.

Two weeks after his shoot down, US Naval Intelligence notified Harley Hall's wife that the agency knew with an absolute certainty, based on first hand sensitive intelligence, that he had been captured. Dr. Roger Shields, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, later buttressed that position when he personally told Mrs. Hall that her husband's case was "one of the compelling, if not the most compelling case of capture he had ever reviewed." He added: "They are holding your husband, Mrs. Hall, one way or another and they can answer for him. Never settle for anything less."

Two months to the day after capture, Lt. Cmdr. Phillip Kientzler was released on 27 March 1973 in North Vietnam where he had been moved shortly after capture. During his post-release debriefing, he reported that during his parachute descent, he and Cmdr. Hall received heavy enemy small arms ground fire and that he was struck in the leg by one of the bullets. He also said the last time he saw Capt. Hall was when they touched the ground. As to the fate of 1st Lt. Peterson and Capt. Morris, he reported that he saw approximately 30 enemy soldiers shooting at them as they descended in their parachutes. Shortly thereafter, Phillip Kientzler was captured. Later he asked his guards about Harley Hall and was told that another guard had killed him.

In March 1973, US intelligence received information pertaining to Capt. Morris and 1st Lt. Peterson from a former NVA soldier who described aircraft wreckage in the area where the Bronco crashed. The wreckage was said to be of an aircraft shot down three days before the ceasefire and two US airmen

were killed and buried in graves at that location. In another report in 1974, one US pilot was reported to have been captured alive and seen in the area on 30 January, and the second pilot was reportedly killed. Both of these reports were placed in Mark Peterson and George Morris' casualty files.

In May 1990, the area of the Bronco's loss was visited by a joint US/Vietnamese team from the Joint Task Force for Full Accounting (JTFFA). They interviewed witnesses who stated that both pilots had landed safely and had engaged surrounding Vietnam People's Army (NVA) forces. Both pilots were said to have been killed in the exchange of fire. One witness reported seeing two bodies on the ground where the two pilots landed. However, none of the witnesses were able to provide the team with information about where the Americans were buried.

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, 5 North Vietnamese radio messages were intercepted and correlated to the losses of Harley Hall/Phillip Kientzler and George Morris/Mark Peterson. These intercepted transmissions were also interlocking. In regard to the Phantom's loss, the NSA synopsis states: "Loss attributed to AAA. The 4 crewmen noted .. as POW's being moved northward are possibly from (Reference Number) Refno (data), Refno 1982 (Hall/Kientzler) and/or Refno 1983 (Morris/Peterson)."

In regard to the Bronco's loss, the NSA synopsis states: "Shot down by SA-7 while on FAC mission in vicinity of Quang Tri, South Vietnam. Two good chutes sighted and initial voice contact made with one crewmember (prob Peterson), stating 'I'm going to be captured.' Chutes were observed being gathered up by hostile forces 25 to 30 minutes after shutdown. The 4 crewmen noted .. as POW's being moved northward are possibly from Refno (data), Refno 1982 and/or Refno 1983."

Further analysis of NSA files have subsequently revealed that Harley Hall was tracked after capture as he was moved from communist battalion to battalion, then to a specific and documented prison camp on the Vietnamese/Lao border. For years first hand live sighting refugee reports have been received by our government documenting Harley Hall's capture and movements from northern South Vietnam and into the heart of North Vietnam. These reports frequently included information about how the communists paraded around "a big Blue Angel."

On 25 January 1993, during a repatriation ceremony in North Vietnam the Vietnamese turned over to US Government officials a baggy containing three teeth and 6 or 7 small bone fragments reportedly belonging to Cmdr. Hall. This material was transported to the Central Identification Laboratory - Hawaii (CIL-HI) for examination and possible identification. On 6 September 1994, only the teeth were formally identified as the mortal remains of Harley Hall. However, the condition of the returned teeth belie the fact that three months before Cmdr. Hall departed for Vietnam, he had a complete dental examination, with x-rays. That exam showed he had absolutely perfect teeth, with no fillings or restorations. The teeth recovered in Vietnam show severe deterioration that could only be caused by years of lack of care and malnutrition.

During the summer 1993, Mrs. Hall reviewed her husband's classified files, which were being made available for the first time to the POW/MIA families. Those records verified not only that Cmdr. Hall had been captured and moved through a number of holding areas/prison camps from one side of Vietnam to the other; they also confirmed he had been interrogated by the Soviets, and our government knew it.

In 1995, Harley Hall's wife, Mary Lou, obtained a second opinion regarding the identity of the teeth reported to be her husband's from a board certified forensic odontologist. The independent examination confirmed that they were Cmdr. Hall's #5, 6 and 9 teeth. It also confirmed that the #5 and 6 teeth had been extracted using forceps, and all three teeth showed extensive periodontal disease consistent with a long period of malnutrition with lack of care. This report also concluded that Harley Hall was alive for at least several years after capture. As for the 6 or 7 bone fragments, all the forensic experts agree they are

too small for mitochondrial DNA testing. Likewise, they are too small to be identified as either human or animal bones

Mrs. Hall summed it up quite succinctly stating: "I protest the closure of Harley's case in the strongest possible terms. Otherwise his name will wrongfully appear on the remains returned list, and many thoughtful Americans will assume that this notorious case is finally resolved/settled. To do otherwise on the basis of incomplete and misleading 'remains' of three teeth is a travesty and an affront to the truth, as well as yet another blow to the families, who have fought so valiantly, and have had their faith so badly shaken, in this cause. This is the least you owe the men who served and those of us who have paid so high a price."

If Mark Peterson and George Morris were killed during or shortly after capture, they have a right to have their remains returned to their families, friends and country. However, at this point in the war, it was well known that North Vietnam was offering huge bonuses to their troops who could shoot down and capture American aircrews alive. If Mark Peterson and George Morris were wounded before capture and not killed as thought, 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 and aircrews 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.