

RENELT, WALTER ALFRED

Name: Walter Alfred Renelt
Rank/Branch: Colonel/US Air Force
Unit: 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron
DaNang Airbase, South Vietnam
Date of Birth: 24 April 1929
Home of Record: Wilmot, SD
Date of Loss: 20 November 1969
Country of Loss: Laos
Loss Coordinates: [152300N 1073200E \(YC725041\)](#)
[Click coordinates to view maps](#)
Status in 1973: Missing in Action
Category: 2
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: [O2A "Skymaster"](#)
Other Personnel In Incident: John R. Baldrige, Jr. (missing)



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.

On 20 November 1969, then Lt. Col. Walter A. Renelt, instructor pilot; and 1st Lt. John R. Baldrige, Jr., pilot; comprised the crew of an O2A Skymaster, call sign "Lopez 11." Lt. Col. Renelt and 1st Lt. Baldrige departed DaNang Airbase at 1500 hours to conduct a single aircraft visual reconnaissance mission just west of the Lao/South Vietnamese border in a sector where communist forces were frequently known to be operating. Since John Baldrige was fairly new in-country, a secondary mission for Lopez 11 was to acquaint him with their area of operation. Their flight path was to take them from DaNang to the target and back to DaNang.

Further, this area of eastern Laos was considered a major gateway from several arteries of the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam. When North Vietnam began to increase its military strength in South Vietnam, NVA and Viet Cong troops again intruded on neutral Laos for sanctuary, as the Viet Minh had done during the war with the French some years before. This border road was used by the Communists to transport weapons, supplies and troops from North Vietnam into South Vietnam, and was frequently no more than a path cut through the jungle covered mountains. US forces used all assets available to them to stop this flow of men and supplies from moving south into the war zone.

The target location was less than a mile west of the Lao/South Vietnamese border. It included a major east/west road and was surrounded by mounds and heavy elephant grass. The general area was mountainous and also covered in heavy elephant grass. Weather conditions included scattered clouds with bases at 6,000 feet and visibility of 8 miles.

At approximately 1652 hours, an Air Force Forward Air Controller (FAC) operating in the same area heard a transmission from Lopez 11 stating they had been struck by ground fire and that an escort back to base

was required. The FAC acknowledged Walter Renelt's radio call. He then contacted the airborne command and control aircraft in command of all operations in the mission sector to request search and rescue (SAR) aircraft to immediately be dispatched in case their services were needed.

The FAC proceeded to the coordinates provided by Lt. Col. Renelt. When he arrived on site, he easily found the Skymaster's wreckage with smoke rising from it. The FAC made several low passes over the crash site in an attempt to detect signs of movement, but found none. Likewise, he found no trace of either Walter Renelt or John Baldrige in or around the Skymaster's wreckage.

The location of loss was just over the Lao/South Vietnamese border in an area laced with multiple arteries of the Ho Chi Minh Trail approximately 2 miles northeast of Peta Doc, Xekong Province, Laos. It was also 15 miles west-southwest of Kham Duc, a major US base in western Quang Tin Province; 62 miles southwest of DaNang and 76 miles due west of Chu Lai, South Vietnam.

By the time a Marine FAC later arrived on the scene, the weather conditions deteriorated to a broken cloud cover with bases at 4,000 feet, rain showers and visibility of 4 miles. The Marine FAC also made several low passes over the aircraft wreckage. Likewise, he found no sign of survivors in or around the area.

Neither Forward Air Controller heard any emergency radio beepers or voice transmissions from Lt. Col. Renelt or 1st Lt. Baldrige. Further, no one saw deployed parachutes on the ground. Later the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron determined neither pilot had a parachute onboard the aircraft.

A SAR helicopter arrived on site a short time later. In spite of the deteriorating weather, the pilot attempted to put a pararescueman (PJ) into the crash site, but the attempt was cancelled due to rapidly approaching darkness.

The following morning further attempts were made by SAR personnel to investigate the crash site. However, as the helicopters approached the Skymaster's wreckage, they came under direct enemy ground fire taking hits from small arms fire and possible .50 caliber machine gun fire from a nearby ridge. Daily attempts to reenter the target area were prevented by adverse weather and hostile ground fire. These efforts continued for 10 days without success. Finally formal search operations were terminated on 28 November 1969 and Walter Renelt and John Baldrige were declared Missing in Action at that time.

If Walter Renelt and John Baldrige died in their loss incident or as a result of wounds received in it, each man has a 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. Either way there is not doubt the Vietnamese or Laotians could return these men or their remains any time the communists had the desire to do so.

Walter Renelt and John Baldrige 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.

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.

Fighter pilots 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.

