

SKINNER, OWEN GEORGE

Name: Owen George Skinner
Rank/Branch: Colonel/US Air Force
Unit: 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron,
Nakhon Phanom Airbase, Thailand
Date of Birth: 18 November 1933
Home of Record: Lima, OH
Date of Loss: 12 December 1970
Country of Loss: Laos
Loss Coordinates: [163900N 1061900E \(XD410417\)](#)
[Click coordinates to view maps](#)
Status in 1973: Missing in Action
Category: 2
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: [O2A "Super Skymaster"](#)
Other Personnel In Incident: Thomas A. Duckett (missing)



REMARKS:

SYNOPSIS: The Cessna O2A Super Skymaster is a small twin-engine, light aircraft with the engines in line. The one in front drives a tractor propeller and the one in the rear a pusher prop. Its primary mission was as Forward Air Controller (FAC) to locate enemy targets and enemy terrain, and it often operated within easy range of hostile ground fire.

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.

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 the vicinity of the junction of Highways 92 and 922 than any other place in Laos. This was because burrowed deep in the hills of Oscar Eight and located just to the east of the road junction was North Vietnamese General Vo Bam's 559th Transportation Group's forward headquarters. It was also the Ho Chi Minh Trail's control center as well as containing 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. All of these AAA batteries were expertly camouflaged.

At 1700 hours on 12 December 1972, 1st Lt. Thomas a Duckett, aircraft commander; and then Major Owen G. Skinner, navigator; comprised the crew of an O2A aircraft, call sign "Nail 84." They were conducting an evening Forward Air Control (FAC) mission to direct a cell of B52s against truck movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail's Highway 19 as it ran to the east-southeast through a long narrow valley. Further, this primary infiltration route ran through the northern sector of Oscar Eight and crossed into South Vietnam due west of the major American base of Khe Sanh.

The mission identifier was Steel Tiger. Once the FAC spotted enemy targets of opportunity traveling down Highway 19, Major Skinner plotted the bombing coordinates for the B-52 strike force, then transmitted that information to the bombers who proceeded to strike the target. Weather conditions in the target area included broken clouds at 5,000 feet.

At 2003 hours, Major Skinner and 1st Lt. Duckett were last heard by the command and control aircraft as they successfully directed a B52 strike on three trucks moving down the Highway 19. Several attempts to contact Owen Skinner and Thomas Duckett were made, but all were unsuccessful. By 2300 hours, Nail 84 had not returned to Nakhon Phanom Airbase, its fuel supply would have been exhausted and it was declared overdue.

At 0530 hours the next morning, search and rescue (SAR) aircraft arrived in the area of loss. Overcast clouds with bases at 3,000 feet existed with the cloud bases lowering as the day went on. Shortly after arriving on site, SAR personnel located the OV-10's wreckage and a parachute in the high grass and brush close to the edge of the trail approximately 6 miles east-southeast of Tchepone and 3 miles north-northeast of Phou Om Mountain in the thickly forested valley, Savannakhet Province, Laos. This location was also 18 miles west of the Lao/South Vietnamese border, 23 miles south of the DMZ that separated North and South Vietnam and 53 miles west-northwest of Khe Sanh, South Vietnam.

Over the next 88 hours, SAR aircraft conducted an extensive visual and electronic search for the downed aircrew. On the morning of 14 December, SAR personnel heard emergency beepers, but were unable to establish voice contact with Major Skinner or 1st Lt. Duckett. By 16 December, no sign of either crewman could be found and the search operation was terminated. At that time Thomas Duckett and Owen Skinner were listed 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, 9 North Vietnamese radio messages were intercepted and correlated to this incident. The NSA synopsis states: "16th AAA Battalion; its altitude gradually decreased and the target was lost at coordinates (pos XD5757) on the 1 to 100,000 map of the Tchepone area. .the 17th AAA Battalion, on 12 December 1970, shot down one F-4. BT-9's area (Binh Tram 9 was an NVA way station located along the infiltration route and was used by enemy troops for a variety of purposes) shot down on the spot one B-57 and one O-2."

1st Lt. Thomas Duckett and Major Owen Skinner 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 Owen Skinner and Thomas Duckett died in the loss of their aircraft, each man has a right to have his remains returned to his family, friends and country. However, if they survived their loss, they most certainly would have been captured and their fate, like that of other Americans who remain unaccounted

for in Southeast Asia, could be quite different. Either way, there is no question the Vietnamese or Lao could return them or their 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 POWs remaining captive throughout Southeast Asia TODAY.

Pilots and aircrews in Vietnam and Laos 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.