

WHITESIDES, RICHARD LEBROU

Name: Richard Lebrou Whitesides
Rank/Branch: Captain/US Air Forces
Unit: 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron,
34th Tactical Group
Bien Hoa Airbase, South Vietnam
(TDY to DaNang Airbase)
Date of Birth: 14 January 1937
Home of Record: Stockton, CA
Date of Loss: 26 March 1964
Country of Loss: South Vietnam
Loss Coordinates: [163912N 1064621E \(XD890419\)](#)
[Click coordintaes to view maps](#)
Status in 1973: Killed/Body Not Recovered
Category: 1
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: [L19 "Bird Dog"](#)
Other Personnel in Incident: Floyd J. Thompson (returned POW)

NO
Picture
Available

REMARKS: NVA TOLD THOMPSON W385 KILLED

SYNOPSIS: The Cessna L19 Bird Dog was used extensively in the early years of the Vietnam war as an observation and a Forward Air Controller (FAC) because it could provide low, close visual reconnaissance and target marking which enabled armed aircraft or ground troops to close in on the enemy. The L19 was later redesignated the O1 Bird Dog. It was feared by the Communists because they knew that opening fire on it would expose their location and invite attack by fighters controlled by the slowly circling Bird Dog. The enemy became bold, however, when they felt their position was compromised and attacked the little aircraft with a vengeance in order to lessen the accuracy of an impending strike.

On 26 March 1964, Captain Richard L. Whitesides, pilot, and US Army Special Forces Captain Floyd J. Thompson, observer, comprised the crew of an L19 Bird Dog that was on a two hour visual reconnaissance mission. They were scheduled to return to Khe Sanh at 1615 hours, and would have been out of fuel by 1740 hours.

After departing Khe Sanh Airfield, Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam at 1415 hours, Capt. Whitesides began experiencing a problem with the aircraft almost immediately after take off. About 6 miles north of Khe Sanh, a ground party of Montagnards lead by Special Forces advisors received a report from local natives that a small plane was seen just above the treeline smoking and turning as if preparing to return to its departure point.

Search and rescue (SAR) operations by both air and ground were postponed because of weather until the next morning. The Bird Dog went down in extremely dense jungle approximately 3 miles north of Khe Sanh. It was also an area known as a Viet Cong (VC) stronghold. Once search efforts were initiated, no sign of the small aircraft or its crew was found. At the time extensive search efforts were terminated, both Richard Whitesides and Floyd Thompson were listed Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered.

Capt. Floyd Thompson was captured by local "patriotic guerrillas" who followed the disabled Bird Dog in its descent. Later when US intelligence learned that he had in fact been captured, his status was immediately changed from KIA/BNR to Prisoner of War. He was held the first few years in South Vietnam

by the Viet Cong (VC), then transferred to North Vietnam where he was subsequently released to US control on 16 March 1973 during Operation Homecoming. During his debriefing, Floyd Thompson told US intelligence personnel that because he had been knocked unconscious during the crash and came to only to discover he was in the control on the VC, he did not know if Capt. Whitesides had also been captured or killed in the crash. Much later the North Vietnamese told him that the pilot of the L19 had been "killed," but provided no proof of death.

If Richard Whitesides died in the crash of his Bird Dog, the Communists most certainly know where his remains are buried. He has the right to have his remains returned to his family, friends and country. On the other hand, if he managed to survive, 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 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 in Vietnam 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.