Wichita Warbird

This Cessna O-2A Skymaster Is A Real Vietnam Combat Vet

Story & Photos By Frank Mormillo

"I'm basically just your typical General Aviation bum but I was looking for a warbird and this is an affordable one."

Say says Mitchel Taylor of Torrance, Calif. of his Cessna O-2A Skymaster.

Taylor's warbird is restored in exactly the same markings and configuration it sported while serving in Vietnam. Nonetheless, keen-eyed air traffic controllers often ask him if the plane is really an 0-2 or just a Cessna 337 Super Skymaster painted to look like one.

That's an easy one for Taylor to prove to any "doubting Thomas," he said. He just points out the 45+ patches over bullet and shrapnel holes the plane sustained while serving in combat zones during the Vietnam War.

MITCHEL TAYLOR

In fact, Taylor is in regular contact with one of the pilots who flew his O-2 in combat: retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Tom Pilsch. According to Pilsch's logbook, he flew the plane on his longest mission of the war, a four-hour, 20-minute sortie along Route One north of Dong Ha.

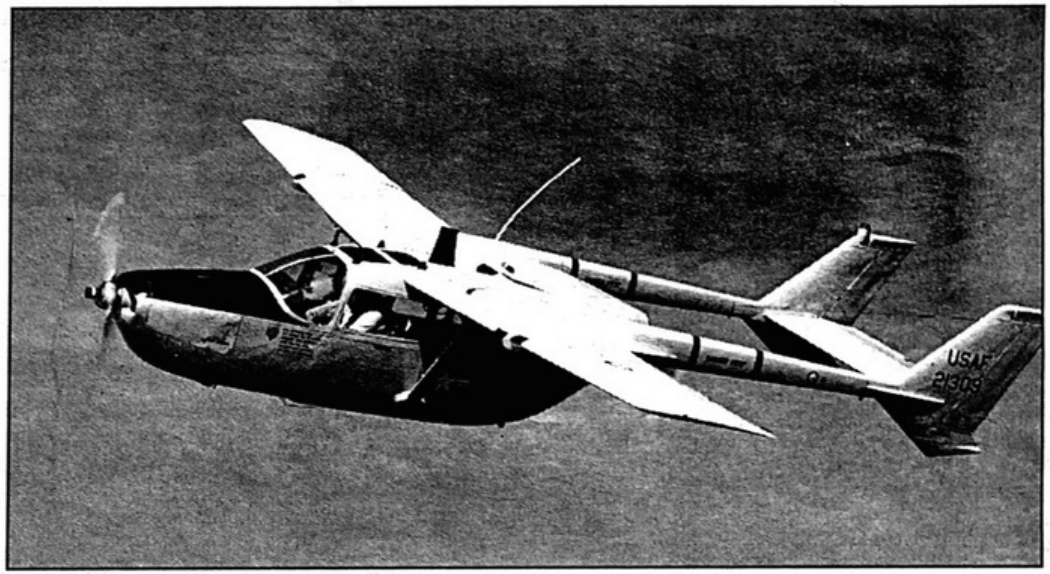
On June 15th, 1969, he was flying O-2A serial number 67-21309 as he directed six air strikes in support of a South Vietnamese Army unit engaged in combat with a strong North Vietnamese force. Pilsch was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions in the Skymaster that day.

Tested In Battle

Intended to supplement the Cessna O-1/L-19 Bird Dog in the forward air control mission, the O-2 was essentially an off-the-shelf version of the civilian Cessna 337. Equipped for its wartime mission, the O-2 was much more heavily armed than the O-1, could fly at greater speeds and was able to loiter in the target areas longer.

It could carry flares, smoke rockets and even light ordnance such as 7.62-mm machinegun pods on a total of four underwing pylons. that made it capable of flying light strike and counter-insurgency missions on its own at times.

Powered by a pair of air-cooled, 210-hp Continental I0-360C/D piston engines in push/pull configuration, the retractable tricycle-gear Skymaster could attain a top speed of 199 mph at sea level. It had a climb rate of 1,100 fpm, a service ceiling of 18,000 feet and had a maximum range of 1,060 miles.



BG TOM PILSCH won the Distinguished Flying Cross flying this Cessna O-2A Skymaster in Vietnam.

WIDE-ANGLE VIEW shows off the O-2A's 38.2-foot wingspan.

In its military configuration, it had an empty weight of 2,848 pounds and a maximum gross weight of 4,630 lbs. According to Taylor, however, when the first 0-2 production run was hurriedly flown from the U.S. to Vietnam in 1967 with ferry tanks installed, they were way over gross.

They used every bit of a 10,000-foot runway to get airborne and took an hour to reach an altitude of 5,000 feet. A more typical takeoff roll, he added, was actually about 1,200 feet.

Taylor's O-2 was the 15th built and went straight from the production line to the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron at Da Nang, Vietnam in 1967. It took part in the battle for the Hue Citadel in 1968 before

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Skymaster...

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moving on to the 21st TASS in 1970.

The Skymaster found its way back to the states, where it served with the 182nd Tactical Air Support Group at Peoria, Ill. and later the 110th TASG at Battle Creek, Mich. before being stored at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz. in 1984.

Civilian Warbird

After the plane was surplussed in 1994, it was purchased by its first civilian owner in Milwaukee, Wisc. Taylor acquired it in '99.

"It was pretty much restored when I got it," he admitted, "but Bob Grant's Great American Aircraft shop at Torrance went through all the mechanicals and did a serious airworthiness check for me," Taylor reported.

The O-2 is fitted with its original military radio stack, underwing pylons and even a functional gunsight.

Mitch Taylor's Cessna O-2A Skymaster

Specifications:	
Length	29.75 ft.
Height	9.5 ft.
Wingspan	38.2 ft.
Gear	tricycle, retract.
Seats	2
Weight and Loading:	
Gross weight	4,900 lb.
Empty weight	2,787 lb.
Useful load	2,113 lb.
Engine:	
Continental IO-360-GBs, 210-hp.	
Performance:	
Max. speed	206 mph
Cruise speed	144 mph
Ceiling	19,300 ft.
Max. range	1,422 s.m.

O-2'S MILITARY radios work.

"You can use the gunsight to help with the landings by keeping the lighted crosshairs centered on the runway," Taylor noted.

A builder of custom wood stairways, Taylor, 49, has logged about 550 hours since he first started flying 10 years ago, including 250 in the O-2. The aircraft itself has a total of about 5,300 hours on it.

Taylor flew N521Z to California from Milwaukee with the assistance of the previous owner, who had a CFI rating and was able to give him flight instruction along the way.

Although it's less expensive to maintain and run than a T-6, Taylor said he flight plans for a fuel burn of 20 gph. Since the pylons reduce the cruise speed by about 10 knots, Taylor usually installs them only for display purposes, which gives it a true airspeed of around 150 knots.

Despite the drag of the pylons and armament, Taylor is considering building a special pod to hang on one of the pylons so he can carry his golf clubs.

TAYLOR FLYING the O-2 along the Los Angeles-area coastline.

In its military configuration, the O-2A generally has only two seats; however, that configuration does include tracks for a third seat next to the radio stack. Taylor's plane is fitted with UHF and VHF radios, a Garmin 295 GPS on the yoke and an antenna for a spare handheld radio that he carries "just in case."

"It's a great airplane with a typical Cessna feel," Taylor said. "It's reasonably light on the ailerons, heavy on the elevators and very stable, plus it gets a lot of looks."

Who could ask for anything more?

PANEL W/ functional gunsight.

The O-2A: Born In Peace, Bloodied In Combat

The O-2 Skymaster is the military version of the Cessna Model 337 Super Skymaster.

Derived from the Cessna Model 336, the 337 went into production as a civilian aircraft in 1965. In late 1966, the Air Force ordered a military variant of the Model 337 equipped with four underwing hardpoints, extra windows for the observer and military radios.

Designated the O-2 Skymaster, it was acquired to supplement the Cessna L-19/O-1 Bird Dog in the forward air controller role in Vietnam.

The O-2 first flew in January 1967 and production deliveries began in March '67. Production ended in June 1970 after some 532 O-2s had been built for the USAF.

Since it had two "push-pull" engines, the O-2 was able to absorb more punishment and still get home, which endeared it to its crews. Even if one of its two engines was knocked out, the centerline-thrust configuration eliminated the problem of asymmetrical forces.

And because it was a two-seater, the pilot was able to concentrate on flying while the right-seater was took care of such FAC duties as marking targets for airstrikes, giving strike briefings to incoming attack pilots and avoiding ground threats.

Despite the leap in technology it represented from the L-19 Bird Dog, the O-2 still did not offer its crews the protection of armor plating. That didn't come along until the North American OV-10 Bronco.

Two models of the O-2 were produced: the O-2A and O-2B. The O-2A was the lightly armed FAC plane; the O-2B was an unarmed psychological warfare aircraft equipped with three loudspeakers and leaflet dispensers.

The O-2 was retired from USAF service in the 1980s but a militarized version of the Model 337 is still in service in some countries. Many surplus O-2s were used by the California Dept. of Forestry & Fire Protection in the 1970s ... until they were once again replaced by the OV-10A.