

Air America

33 years later, pilots can finally reflect on covert CIA operation in Southeast Asia

April 20, 2008 | By Luann Grosscup, SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

"The longer I was with Air America, the less I knew what it was." So says, Charlie Weitz, a pilot for Air America in Southeast Asia from 1961 through 1973. "Even after 13 years, when people would ask me about it, I really couldn't explain it." It was an airline covertly owned and operated by the Central Intelligence Agency. As such, its structure was deliberately confusing, according to Felix Smith, former Air America pilot and author of "China Pilot," (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.) "It was made so by CIA lawyers, so when newspeople would try and figure it out, they'd give up." The Freedom of Information Act has given former Air America employees more latitude in speaking about the lives they led from 1950 to 1975.

In his book "Flight of the Erawan" (eBookstand, 2006), former pilot John Wiren, for one, recalls muddy Laotian landing strips, and the hot, dusty hub of Air America activity, Vientiane, Laos, with its French cafes and opium dens and where goats and chickens were a part of street traffic.

Air America grew out of the Civil Air Transport, formed in China after World War II by Gen. Claire Chennault, the Flying Tigers legend. The operation moved to Taiwan after the Chinese mainland fell to communism, and CAT, which was established, thus became the flag carrier of Taiwan.

In 1950, the CIA bought the airline through a Delaware holding company. CAT continued to operate passenger

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flights, while also running the covert Air America flights for the CIA. CAT and Air America, along with Air Asia and Southern Air Transport, eventually fell under the control of the holding company Pacific Corp.

"We were all basically the same company," said Smith, who began with CAT after WWII and stayed on with Air America until 1968.

Pilots were ex-military who got the jobs largely by word of mouth. After training in Taipei, Taiwan, they were based in Saigon, Vietnam; Udan Thani (known as Udorn) or Bangkok, Thailand; or Vientiane, as was Wiren.

"We went to Laos to get acquainted with up-country operations," said Wiren. With no radar, "our navigational aids were basically following things like the bend in a river or a line of trees. Knowing the exact elevation of every mountain was mandatory."

The activity in Laos was strictly covert, adds Mike Kandt, operations manager in Southeast Asia from 1966-1975.

"Treaties signed by the U.S. were such that the U.S. military was forbidden to have any military assets in Laos. The Communists ignored the treaty, so the U.S. government sponsored a guerilla force of its own, the Hmong. Air America provided support for this operation."

"There were things going on that were on a 'need to know' basis," said Wiren. "We just didn't talk about it."

The Air America fleet numbered 200-300 aircraft, fixed wing and rotary. "We operated several different aircraft," said Kandt. "DHC-4 Caribous, C46s, two types of STOLs [short takeoffs and landings], the Helio Courier, which could go in remote areas, and a few different models of helicopters."

With a motto of "Anything, Anytime, Anywhere," Air America "moved military equipment, personnel, construction equipment and medical supplies," said Kandt. "We moved refugees, leper colonies; we did search-and-rescue missions for downed military pilots."

Pilots would make 20-30 takeoffs and landings in a day.

The pay was roughly \$800 per month for a co-pilot and \$1,200 for a captain, comparable to that of civilian pilots, with additional pay for hazardous duty in enemy territory.

"You just never knew what you'd be doing from one day to the next," said Wiren. "One day you might be flying farming or medical supplies for Pop Buell or Doc Weldon [U.S.

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humanitarians], and on another day you might be working for Tony Poe, taking live fish for his ponds for the Hmong people." (Tony Poe was a paramilitary CIA operative whose real name was Anthony Poshepny.)

Among the riskiest missions were picking up downed military pilots with helicopters.

"We'd pick up the Air Force tactical channels on our radios," said Weitz, who flew rotary aircraft in searches and rescues. "The main principle of a successful pickup is speed. The faster you got in there, the better off you were, otherwise you might end up getting shot down trying to do the rescue."

Air America was there when Saigon fell in 1975. "That famous photo you always see of refugee evacuation wasn't the American Embassy," said Weitz. "That was a hotel roof in downtown Saigon, but I'm proud to say those were our helicopters."

Wiren said pilots disliked the "Air America" movie, starring Mel Gibson. "We were not a bunch of drug runners," he said. "We were a very patriotic and professional group of people."



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Still Kandt is candid. "Air America did carry packages of the raw material of what was to become heroin on occasion. This was being done by some of the Laos military people as they had been doing for decades. After a period of time, when it began making its way to our guys in Vietnam, Air America decided they needed to be proactive in stopping it. They brought in sniffer dogs to sniff this stuff out.

"It was a job," Kandt continued. "The political shenanigans that went on, nobody was that much interested. There were many different agencies we worked for, so we were always transporting something different. It was just a job."

And a risky one at that, said Bill Lair, a CIA operative in Southeast Asia between 1951-1979. "Before we got involved in Vietnam, French troops were under attack at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, and the French Air Force couldn't fly in supplies. Air America did that for them and lost one plane as a result. Last year, the French government awarded that crew the Medal of Valor."

Air America lost 280 employees--pilots, freight specialists and others--in Southeast Asia.

"The first U.S. casualty of the Vietnam War was an Air America pilot," said Smith. "'Earthquake Magoon,' whose real name was James McGovern. But since he was considered a civilian, they didn't put his name on the Wall

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[the Vietnam Veterans Memorial]."

Following their Air America stint, pilots took jobs with overseas airlines, became aviation consultants, and flew for overseas heads of state in exotic places.

"After this type of work, everything else seems superficial," Weitz said. "It was, without a doubt, the best time of my life."



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