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Air America

An Historical Synopsis From the Beginning to End

The history of Air America is enigmatic and complex, not the least reason so because it has often been distorted. Authors of books and articles assume, imply or assign CIA ownership because of the spy agency's romantic overtures and eye-catching appeal, but the truth is the United States government owned Air America, not the CIA.

There was, however, a CIA connection, and initially CIA personnel managed the company, though that didn't last long. For the most part, the Air America complex was administered internally. Air America's president, Hugh Grundy was not a CIA employee, but George Doole, the CEO of Air America from 1959 until 1971, worked for the CIA overseeing various contract companies that included Air America. It is unclear whether Doole was a staff employee or worked under a personal service agreement. Officially, the CIA says there is no record of him working for them. Doole died of cancer in 1985. He was a lifelong bachelor, and there was no obituary, flowers or funeral. Ironically, although Grundy was married and had outside interests, he too requested no funeral; both Grundy and Doole died in virtual anonymity.

Great effort was made to make the Air America appear as a private enterprise for plausible deniability, but all work was for the U. S. government, and when the complex company was dismantled and the assets sold, the U.S. Treasury received the profit.

It should be noted that the flurry of reports concerning the diplomatic meetings and decisions dealing with Civil Air Transport and CAT Inc. are exhaustive and contained in letters and historical notes referenced in the footnotes. The presentation here is a minuscule rendition of the actual history and persons reading the references may arrive at different conclusions. The intent herein is to provide a basic understanding of a 30-year period when progressive elaboration was a daily occurrence.

Air America began life in 1946 with a Chinese company named Civil Air Transport owned by General Claire Chennault and Whiting Willauer. Chennault was best known for his leadership of the Flying Tigers supporting Chinese troops against Japan's encroachment into China before America's involvement in World War Two. Willauer was a Princeton University and Harvard law school graduate. Unsatisfied with practicing admiralty law and fostering an innate desire for adventure and wanderlust, Willauer found a way to go to China, team up with Chennault, and get involved with China's fledgling aviation transport industry after Japan surrendered. Chennault and Willauer did well in the late 1940s hauling furs, tin, food and practically anything else people needed to be moved from one place to another. Flying was treacherous and with the absence of navigation aids difficult at best. The pilots, World War Two veterans, were experienced, spunky and brave.[1]

CAT -- the employees liked using the abbreviated term -- sided with the Chinese Nationalist Party headed by Chiang Kai-Shek when in 1945-46 civil war broke out again between the Nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Tse-tung. In 1949, the Nationalists fled China when they lost the war and CAT helped them move to Formosa where Chiang Kai-Shek ruled the Republic of China until his death in 1975.

Once the Nationalists were finished moving to Formosa, CAT no longer had a job and was nearly insolvent. Chennault pleaded with the State Department to purchase the airline using the argument that the company had the assets and expertise to contain China from

expanding along the Pacific Rim. The CIA wanted to use the air transportation assets for their intelligence-gathering operations in China and urged the U. S. government acquisition. The argument fell on deaf ears. The State Department didn't want clear ownership of a Chinese company.[2]

So, the CIA devised a plan for indirect ownership and suggested a U. S. government-owned corporation in Delaware that would create a subsidiary which in turn would purchase a portion of Civil Air Transport, and thus disguise the real owner.

The State Department agreed and incorporated the slightly misspelled Airdale, Inc. as the holding company. The subsidiary was named CAT Inc., which in turn purchased forty percent of Civil Air Transport. Chinese investors held sixty percent.

CAT Inc. created a wholly owned Republic of China company called Asiatic Aeronautical Company Ltd., and all of the hard assets transferred to that company. The pilots, mechanics and staff personnel moved to CAT Inc. Civil Air Transport became the flag carrier of the Republic of China hauling people and freight all over Southeast Asia.

Southern Air Transport was a Florida corporation touted as a CIA front company, but it too was owned by the U. S. government. Further confusing the ownership issue, SAT had two divisions (SAT Atlantic and SAT Pacific) but only one operating certificate. Employees of SAT Atlantic could not interact with SAT Pacific. And, all of the employees of SAT Pacific were on the same seniority list with CAT Inc. employees.

Initially, the CIA was charged with the responsibility of operating CAT Inc., but they soon realized they didn't have enough work to keep the airline afloat. The U. S. government funding would require congressional approval, and reveal the government's ownership. It was decided to allow the company to act as if it was a private enterprise and bid on government contracts. At that point, the project became an ongoing operation, but no one considered the plight of the employees.

The U. S. government owned the company, and the employees worked directly for the enterprise. The government never revealed the real owner to the employees. Some were told the CIA owned the company, and a scant few worked directly for the CIA, but the CIA is part of the U. S. government and doesn't own anything. Therefore, the government couldn't enroll the employees into the civil service retirement program because that too would reveal the real owner, and couldn't issue personal service agreements because technically the workers were not contracted employees. As a result, the employees of SAT Pacific, CAT Inc., and Asiatic Aeronautical and Civil Air Transport -- all seemingly separate companies but actually one and the same -- were, being neither fish nor fowl, left dangling and officially unrecognized.

But now the companies had an inside track for government bids, and the ruse worked for financial funding, thus providing an avenue for the government to conduct clandestine and covert operations where political pressure prevented overt military activity. The ruse also stymied congressional oversight.

CAT now had multiple customers that included the USAF and the CIA. Later, the customer base broadened and included the French Republic, U. S. Army Special Forces, USAID, IVS, and CORDS, all of which provided income to the airline while keeping the ownership secret.

The U. S. government was contracting itself and paying itself back. It was a grand scheme for the government, but along with increased activity came increased hazards to the employees, many of who thought they were working for a private enterprise.

America was not prepared for the Korean War. Logistic support was severely needed, and an opportunity arose for CAT Inc. The first lucrative contract was Operation Booklift for Far East Material Command known by its acronym FEAMCOM. The requirement was extensive, more than 28 aircraft and 500 or more people. The operation was short-lived, but

CAT performed admirably under difficult circumstances. As one commentator put it: "Five members of the CAT Incorporated flying staff gave their lives on the Korean Airlift. Although civilians, the pilots took all the risks of the military members of the Combat Cargo operation, including the possibility of making the ultimate sacrifice. The CAT on the Airlift had done a good job." [3]

In November 1952, CAT Inc. pilots Norman Schwartz and Robert Snoddy, both WW2 decorated pilots, were assigned to extract an agent from Manchuria in Communist China using a newly developed snatching apparatus. A C-47 was designed with a hook that would snag a line between two poles. The person on the ground would have a harness attached to the line, and he would be snatched as the aircraft flew by at a slow speed. Two CIA agents would then drag the seized person into the plane.

But the mission was compromised and a trap laid for the unsuspecting pilots. The aircraft was shot down and the pilots killed in the crash. The two CIA agents, John Downey and Richard Fecteau, were captured and sentenced to prison for 20 years. No one knew their whereabouts until they were released and showed up in friendly territory two decades later.

At about the same time the French Republic was embroiled in their conflict with the Viet Minh in what was then called French Indochina. Ho Chi Minh had worked with Allied Forces against Japan and indicated President Roosevelt told him he would be granted control of Vietnam for his services. Roosevelt died, and Truman didn't honor the agreement whether real or not, declaring the French Republic retained control of the area. Ho had communist connections and vowed to take Vietnam by force. The French Republic asked the United States for military air cargo support, but Eisenhower was reluctant to use American pilots in a conflict unpopular both in France and America.

The job was given to CAT Inc. instead. Pilots were secretly trained in C-119 aircraft at Clark AFB in the Philippines. The plane was faster than the C-46, had more powerful engines and could carry a heavier load. The rear door allowed quick egress of parachuted supplies and thus shortened the time on the target. The aircraft were dressed in French colors to hide their identity. It was the first-time CAT operated military aircraft that were not FAA certified, but it wouldn't be the last.

The missions were not void of hazards, and several crewmembers were wounded. In 1954, CAT pilots James McGovern and Wallace Buford were shot down over Dien Bien Phu. The crash killed both pilots. They were well liked, and their deaths cast a pall over the CAT community. McGovern was good-naturedly nicknamed Earthquake McGoon for his appearance by his peers. This was a devastating blow to morale, and the U. S. government never acknowledged the tragedy. Partial remains were recovered several years after the war in Laos ended.

On February 24, 2005, James McGovern was posthumously awarded (along with Buford and six other surviving pilots) the Legion of Honor with the rank of knight (chevalier) by the President of France Jacques Chirac for their actions in supplying Dien Bien Phu during the 57-day siege. [4]

One of the pilots honored was Alan Pope, who flew the Douglas B-26 Invader in the Korean War and earned three Air Medals and the Distinguished Flying Cross. Pope left the USAF in 1954 and accepted employment with CAT Inc.

The Eisenhower administration feared Indonesia would become a communist state but didn't want to use U.S. military troops to intervene. The solution again was using CAT Inc., which provided plausible deniability.

In 1958, Pope was ordered to Clark AFB in the Philippines where he was assigned to fly a B-26 painted black with the markings obscured. Others included CAT Inc. pilot William Beale and Connie Seigrist flying the Consolidated PBY Catalina. Their mission was to

support the PRRI/Permesta movement against President Sukarno's government of Indonesia.[5]

Pope was shot down on a bombing run and captured. An Indonesian military court tried and convicted him and he was sentenced to death. Bobby Kennedy negotiated a release in 1962 and Pope went to work for Southern Air Transport.

Airdale Inc. was renamed The Pacific Corporation in 1957. And because calling both CAT Inc. and Civil Air Transport by the acronym CAT caused confusion, a name change for CAT Inc. to Air America, Inc. was proposed. Some major airlines grumbled, but in 1959 the name of CAT Inc. was changed to Air America, Inc. It was the same company but with a different name. Asiatic Aeronautical Company Ltd. also received a new name: Air Asia Company Ltd.

Eisenhower told his successor John F. Kennedy that Laos was the "key to the entire area of Southeast Asia." [6] Laos was land locked, but it served as a natural barrier from China and Kennedy, fearing a Pathet Lao Communist takeover, sent a carrier task force to the Gulf of Siam in April 1961. U. S. Special Forces were already in Laos training Lao troops as early as 1959 under Project Hotfoot.

Laos was primitive by most standards and had few navigable roads. The only logistical source was Air America. Kennedy ordered Marine Air Base Squadron 16 to Udorn, Thailand to set up Air America's operations and maintenance departments and had 16 UH-34D helicopters sent directly from the Marines. At the same time, Project Hotfoot was renamed White Star.[7]

The 1962 Geneva Accord was an agreement between the United States, the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, South Vietnam, France, India, Poland, Canada, and Laos.[8] All U.S. troops departed Laos, but the North Vietnamese remained in violation of the Accord and were using neutral Laos to transport military troops and supplies along the Lao-Vietnam border into South Vietnam to kill Americans and South Vietnamese troops.

America faced three bad choices: overtly attack North Vietnamese troops in Laos and be publicly excoriated for violating the Accord; walk away and risk losing the Pacific Rim to communism; or conduct covert and clandestine operations in an attempt to halt the traffic. They chose the latter, but they needed logistical support and couldn't retain secrecy while using the U. S. military. The solution once again was Air America.

Activity in Laos in 1963 was minimal, but tragedies still occurred. An Air America C-46 was shot down east of Savannakhet. The rear crewmembers bailed out, but the pilot, Joseph C. Cheny and his newly hired co-pilot, Charles G. Herrick were killed when the plane blew up in midair. The crewmembers who bailed out were captured by the Pathet Lao. One American, Eugene H. DeBruin, and five indigenous Air Freight Specialists, commonly called "kickers," became prisoners of war and endured inhumane hardships for several years. One of the survivors, Phisit Intharathat, escaped after almost three and one-half years in captivity. His courageous story is heartbreaking. All the other kickers died in captivity. Eugene DeBruin is listed as MIA but presumed dead. [9]

In 1964, the Navy used F-8 Crusaders as photo reconnaissance aircraft for flying over the eastern Lao border to try to verify North Vietnamese activity heading south on what was later called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. At one point, an F-8 pilot bailed out, and Air America tried to rescue him but failed after encountering intense ground fire. The pilot escaped, but the Navy insisted on search-and-rescue aircraft being available in case more aircraft were shot down. By December 1965, 170 U.S. aircraft had been lost during interdiction operations called "Rolling Thunder." Initially northern Laos was too far away from Thailand to be useful for search-and-rescue (SAR). The USAF kept helicopters in Laos, but the risk of being captured and publicly exposed as violators of the Accord was too high. The Secretary of State ordered Air America as primary Search-and-Rescue for northern Laos.[10]

Air America once again took up a combat role, and five fixed-wing pilots -- John Wiren, Rick Byrne, Ed Eckholdt, Joe Hazen, and Tom Jenny -- and later Don Romes were secretly trained in the T-28D Trojan and used as close air support for search-and-rescue operations. The exact number of rescues made by Air America is not known exactly but estimated at more than a hundred.[11]

The USAF used enlisted men as forward air controllers in Laos in 1963. They were called Butterflies and flew on Air America Helio Couriers and Pilatus Porters. It was a successful program, and not one person died or was injured, but the Commanding General of the USAF Tactical Air Command wanted commissioned officers who were rated fighter pilots.[12]

In 1966, the USAF founded the Raven program flying Cessna 0-1 Bird Dog aircraft. It was an aggressive and hazardous program, and a significant percentage of the pilots were killed from enemy gunfire. They too needed logistical support. Air America handled the maintenance for the aircraft, hauled white phosphorus rockets for spotting targets from Thailand to various places in Laos, and acted as SAR for downed pilots.[13]

USAF military strikes in Laos escalated throughout the 1960s, but the weather in Laos made flying difficult. The USAF needed navigational gear, and a secret radar site was installed in northern Laos on one of the tallest mountains in the area. Air America supplied the location with food and other items and was jointly responsible for emergency evacuation of the site should that become necessary. The site was manned by USAF technicians with no combat training or experience. From the CHECO report: "As conceived in evacuation plans, the decision to evacuate was reserved for the Ambassador, Vientiane. First priority of evacuees was allocated to the 13 TSQ/TACAN personnel; however, enough helicopters were to be provided to permit a total of 155 to be lifted out. The others, guerrillas, were to be extracted when the Local Area Defense Commander deemed appropriate. Five helicopters, three USAF and two Air America, were designated as the force required to accomplish the evacuation.

To provide an immediate capability, two Air America helicopters were to remain overnight (RON) each night at nearby Lima Site 98; USAF helicopters were to come from Thailand-based resources. Subsequently, some USAF messages expressed the desire for Air America helicopters at RON Site 85, not 98. However, nothing changed; it was feared that a helicopter presence at Site 85 would provoke an enemy attempt to destroy these lucrative targets. If they had been destroyed, the planned emergency lift capability would have vanished. But the point was well taken, for weather also might have disrupted the rescue flight from Site 98 to Site 85." [14]

TOP SECRET

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SAR in Laos

DDI-3
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D/SEC-5
LDDP-6

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C/INAF-2

1. Political factors require that Air America helicopters continue to assume responsibility for all SAR operations in Laos.
2. For SAR missions in North Vietnam, Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters are to be used and for this purpose may be, if necessary, prepositioned on ground in Laos at Site 36 as required for scheduled Rolling Thunder operations, and may at your discretion be authorized to refuel at Sites 46 and 107.
3. USAF-marked aircraft and associated personnel are not authorized to remain over night at Site 36 or elsewhere in Laos.
4. CINCPAC's proposal at your request for increasing helicopter UE to 21 being considered by JCS and will be subject of septel. For temporary period only pending resolution of this matter, Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters may be used in

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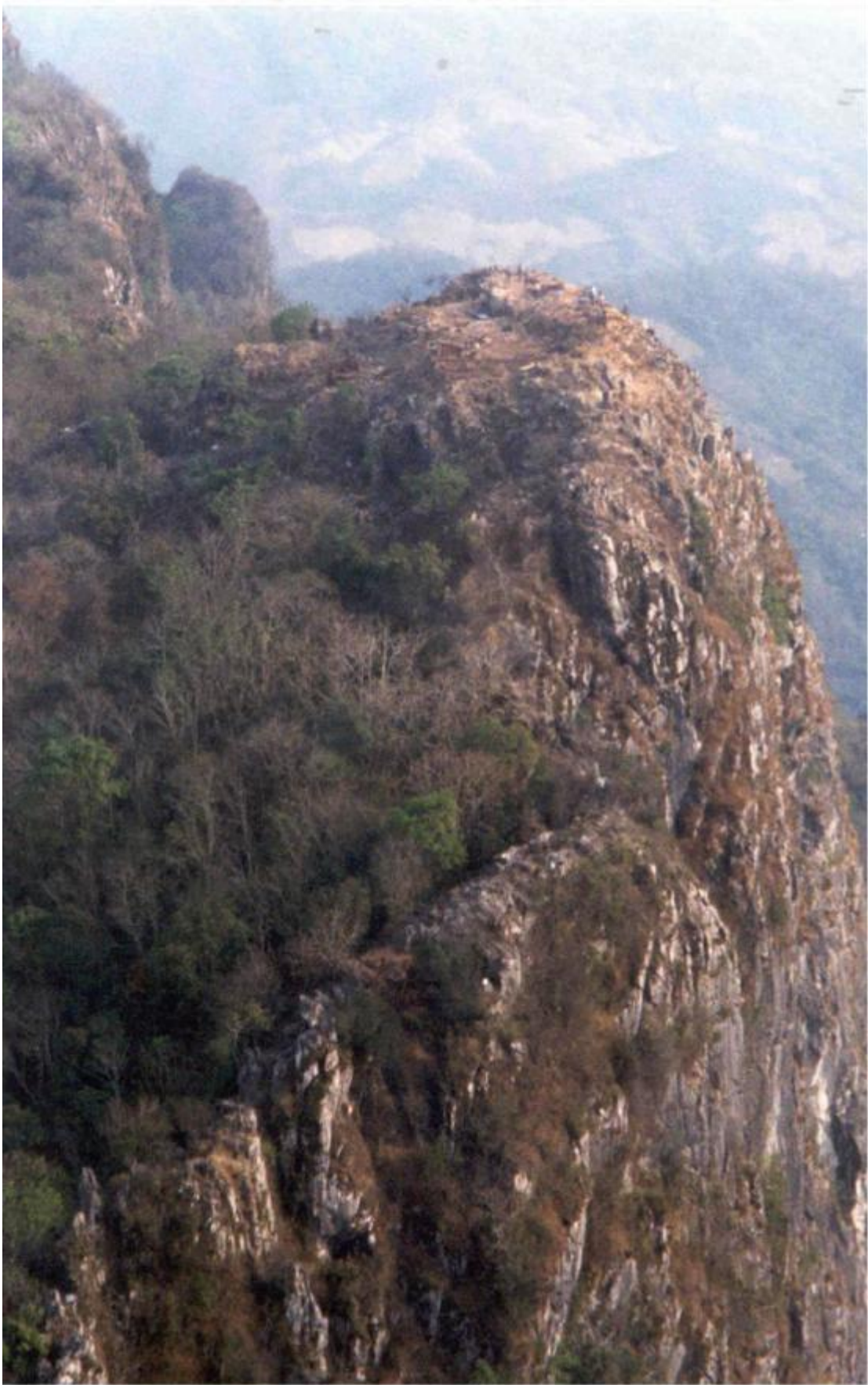
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TOP SECRET

Therefore, Air America did have jurisdiction and authority to perform military activity in Laos; the CHECO report along with the top-secret directive from the U.S. State Department is prima facie proof for that claim.

In January 1968, two Russian-built AN-2 Colts bombed the site. An Air America helicopter was just arriving with supplies and observed the attack. The helicopter pilot, Ted Moore, flew alongside one of the attacking aircraft and the flight mechanic, Glen Woods, shot the plane down using a survival rifle that most of the flight mechanics carried should they be forced down in hostile territory. It was the first time a helicopter ever downed a military fixed-wing aircraft.



LS-85 Photographer unknown

In March 1968, a trained North Vietnamese unit attacked the site by scaling a cliff thought impossible to climb. The site fell, and several technicians were killed. Two Air America Bell helicopters were dispatched from LS-20 Alternate, Captain Phil Goddard in one and Captain Ken Wood in the other. Goddard landed on the lower portion of the site and evacuated key CIA personnel. Wood could not land on top of the mountain and had to hover out of ground effect along the side. He was able to extract seven technicians. The last one in was M/Sgt. Richard Loy Etchberger. He helped load the wounded into slings and fought off the advancing North Vietnamese troops. Rusty Irons, the flight mechanic, assisted evacuees into the helicopter.

As the helicopter took off, Sgt. Etchberger was mortally wounded by an enemy bullet. The bullet also shattered the flight mechanic's survival rifle and nearly wounded him.

The survivors were fortunate the pilot wasn't hit.[15] M/Sgt. Etchberger was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, which was deserved. Wood and Irons received nothing.

In 1969 Richard Nixon vowed he would end the Vietnam war. Nixon escalated the fighting in Laos, thus forcing the North Vietnamese to divert assets to Laos and made it appear the South Vietnamese could handle their security against the North Vietnamese. Air America military activity increased as well. The fighting in the north at LS-20 Alternate was intense and bloody and fought by both the Hmong and Thai soldiers. In 25 years Air America suffered approximately 186 killed in action, with 35% occurring between 1969 and 1973.

By this time, Air America was hauling tons of ammunition, rice and other foodstuff, water, and fuel for aircraft in unmarked military issue C-123s, Caribou, C-130, C-46, UH34D and Ch-47C helicopters along with FAA- approved Bell helicopters and Pilatus Porters. The USAF had improved their rescue helicopters and techniques, but Air America was still relied upon to assist with search-and-rescue operations.[16]

The battle for Skyline, fought by the Hmong, Thais, USAF and Air America, was bloody and intense. The North Vietnamese army tried to make Skyline another Dien Bien Phu and failed. It was a victory of immense proportions but went unreported. America and the Royal Lao Army, along with the Hmong and Thais won the battle but lost the war to the politicians.[17]

The war in Laos ended abruptly in 1974. There were no victory parties or accolades. It just stopped. The American POWs in Hanoi were released in January 1973 with the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, but no mention was made about POWS in Laos, including those who had worked with Air America.[18]



Permission to use photo from former AAM Air Freight Specialist Dan Gamelin. LS-20A

Years later, antiwar authors began to write about the war in Laos saying it was the CIA's secret war and accused America of murder and mayhem in the region. See, for example, a New York Times opinion piece written by a Lao lady who never saw Laos.[19] There would be much more like these.

A former Air America pilot wrote a response and is paraphrased here.

"Truth, as described by one philosopher, is most often used to mean being in accord with fact or reality. The commonly understood opposite of truth is a falsehood, which, correspondingly, can also take on a logical, factual, or ethical meaning. Eloquence does not necessarily provide veracity. The author uses truth and falsehood collectively and eloquently, but the truth is somewhere in the middle.

America signed the 1962 Geneva Accord with sincerity, and they intended to abide by the covenants contained therein. And, by the way, the CIA acts by instructions from the National Security Council. So, it was America's war, not the CIA's war in Laos. But, it was not America that violated the agreement. It was the North Vietnamese. America had a commitment to South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese were using Laos to infiltrate South Vietnam because they assumed America would not stop them in a neutral country. In 1959 and the early '60s America tried to train the Royale Lao army to defend themselves. It was a difficult undertaking because Laos was split into three factions that had been at war with one other many years before an American military presence arrived. Laos was a sleepy kingdom with few roads and different tribes with different ideologies, and the Hmong was only one of them. None of the hill tribes paid allegiance to the Royale Lao government. Most didn't even know it existed.

America faced severe choices. They could confront the North Vietnamese overtly, which would have brought condemnation by a host of other countries; attempt to thwart the NVA covertly, or walk away.

America chose to act secretly and clandestinely. America did not bomb Laos. America bombed the North Vietnamese, who were in Laos illegally killing innocent Laotians and

South Vietnamese. Many Laotians died in that war, but so did many Americans. Americans didn't kill Laotians and Americans -- the North Vietnamese killed them.

The war in Southeast Asia did not end well. It just stopped with no victory. Promises were made on both sides and violated. But it was America that took in thousands of refugees, including the parents of the author, and provided them with the wherewithal to prosper. Several lament their old way of life, which was slash-and-burn hill farming and found it difficult to acclimate, but most of their offspring went to universities and became attorneys, teachers, and businessmen here in America.

The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, gathered all those who sided with America and placed them in so-called re-education camps. Several thousand of them, including the Lao King and Queen, were sent to Sam Neua and were forced to endure hard labor, live in caves with less than nutritious diet, and accept their conditions or be shot. Most died from malnutrition.

And now America is the villain? Why is it that no one suggests that the North Vietnamese make reparations for what they did to Laos and the Laotians? Perhaps it's because even to suggest such an idea in Laos or Vietnam would get you shot or imprisoned for life. Here in America, safe and warm, the author can spout her version of the truth freely without fear of retribution, and we applaud her writing skill -- but is it the truth?"

Air America employees scattered. Some went to work in Iran, Indonesia, and Taiwan and some just went home to the United States. A few went to Vietnam where another tragedy was about to unfold.

The work in Vietnam was more administrative than the work in Laos, which was more paramilitary, but that didn't mean hazards didn't exist. Ground fire hits were not as prevalent in Vietnam, but they still happened, and due diligence and vigilance were required by Air America crews. Milk runs were rare in Laos but frequent in Vietnam, and a milk run could change rapidly into a dangerous situation at a moment's notice. Navigation aids were available at various locations in South Vietnam, but that didn't help Air America because their aircraft were not equipped with navigational equipment. As a result, fatal and tragic accidents occurred that had nothing to do with the war, but may have been avoided had the equipment been installed.

The work for Air America was accomplished through contracts with USAID, CORDS and, in 1973, the International Commission of Control and Supervision. (The company was contracted; the employees were not.) ICCS was a spin-off from the International Commission established in 1953. Their job was to control and supervise the 1954 Geneva Accords agreement that separated North and South Vietnam along the 17th Parallel. Supposedly, ICCS had power, but the truth is they didn't. However, America was a superpower and a complaint by the ICS about America had greater impact publicly than a claim about North Vietnam.[20]

America was sensitive about adverse publicity and tried to adhere to the Geneva Accords, but it was faced with the reality that North Vietnam didn't and wouldn't and didn't care what anyone thought about it. Thus, America continued with a covert and clandestine policy of publicly presenting Air America as a free enterprise operating in Vietnam under various contracts. The contracts provided a method to separate the work and bill the different customers, but just as in Laos, an aircraft or helicopter working on a USAID contract might be working for the CIA, or a Special Forces unit in the Delta or II Corps area.[21]

Air America stayed or went wherever the president and the National Security Council told them and didn't have the autonomy of a free enterprise. When all of the free enterprise companies left Vietnam at the direction of their boards of directors, Air America remained by direct order of the president through the various chains of command that included the Department of State and Defense.

Military activity lessened after the 1973 Peace Accords were signed, but soon after that increased substantially. American troops were no longer present, however, and the fighting was between the North and South Vietnamese. South Vietnam was supposedly able to defend itself against North Vietnam after American troops departed, but province after province fell to the North Vietnamese in an orderly fashion. Just as in Laos, Air America became involved in evacuations of terrified people running from the encroaching North Vietnamese. The evacuations were chaotic and dangerous and required extreme patience and professionalism on the part of the Air America crews.

In 1974, a shoulder-fired heat-seeking missile struck an Air America helicopter killing everyone onboard. Such missiles could not be detected by flight crews and could be anywhere at any time; they represented a new peril to an already dangerous place.

Congress wanted out of the Vietnam War. The agreements made at the Paris Peace talks were scrapped. America won the war in 1972 militarily but lost it politically because of Congress and inaccurate reporting by an antiwar press.[22] America could not use American troops in South Vietnam longer than sixty days, which meant not at all because it takes longer than that to provide logistical assistance to a sizable contingent. Some American military advisors remained and performed heroic duty in the northern portion of South Vietnam with South Vietnamese Marines in a battle known as the "Easter Offensive of 1972." [23]

But by 1975 it was evident to most people that South Vietnam was going to fall to the North Vietnamese. For some reason, the Ambassador held on to hope that the inevitable was not going to happen, but in April it did, and it was both tragic and disheartening. Air America personnel tried to prepare pickup points for key personnel to be evacuated and to secure fueling stations. The Ambassador would not cooperate because he thought such preparation would excite the population and signal defeat to the North Vietnamese. Improvisation because the new standard and Air America flight crews excelled. Operation Frequent Wind came with a vengeance, and video clips showed picture after picture of Air America helicopters performing heroic duty hour after hour, but the news media ignored the blue and silver birds.

Fixed-wing crews battled screaming hordes of people trying to escape and with broken hearts were forced to push women and children away because to do otherwise would mean overloading that would make the aircraft incapable of flying. The runway in Saigon became inoperable, and the fixed-wing aircraft crews made their last flight out to Bangkok depressed and weary.

Only the helicopters remained, and fuel now was a major problem. Calculations had to be done to determine how long they could stay and how long it took to fly to American ships offshore. The Navy crews were never told who Air America was, which made matters worse, and treated them as if they too were evacuees. Arriving on board the ships the crews were met with cocked weapons; pilots watched as their cabin doors were quickly removed and were told to ditch their helicopters in the water, an emergency and life-threatening procedure. Some complied and others did not, and those that didn't quickly took off and flew to other ships to refuel. One that complied, Captain Dave Kendall, was fished out of the sea dripping wet and scrambled on board a helicopter piloted by Larry Stadulis in order to continue making evacuations all day. Together Kendall and Stadulis may have operated the last helicopter out of Vietnam and landed aboard the USS Blue Ridge in the dark and on fumes.[24]



Air America helicopter Saigon 1975 GettyImages-514874806.jpg

The Air America helicopters that were saved were taken to the Philippines. The crews were dropped unceremoniously in Hong Kong. An Air America representative greeted the crews, gave them tickets to their homes of record and told to go home. Just as in Laos, the Air America experience in Vietnam was over abruptly. Again, there were no victory parties, no accolades, and no fanfare. Mind you, Air America was a U.S. government-owned corporation, and the employees were government employees. Few at this time knew the real owner. Within one year Air America, Inc. was dissolved, Air Asia Company Ltd. was sold to E-Systems, and the profit from the sale was returned to the U.S. Treasury. The employees, who had tenure with a government-owned corporation, were denied benefits. The CIA, which despite frequent reports did not own the company, stated in writing to the Secretary of the USAF that Air America employees conducted military activity without authority and jurisdiction, were overpaid and deserved nothing more than what they had received as employees working with the company. The USAF JAO wrote to the Secretary of the USAF that Air America employees were brave souls but were “unprivileged belligerents,” a kinder description of unlawful combatants, or mercenaries, who acted militarily as volunteers but without authority and jurisdiction.

It is a sad commentary on a group that deserved better. Lt. Col. RET Edward Marek may have said it best in his article, LS-36, “The Alamo” in Laos:

“Air America people were sent home in 1975, and probably because of all the politics and secrecy surrounding it, Air America people were not received with much, if any, fanfare. As an USAF veteran of the Indochina War whose unit was involved in electronic reconnaissance, mostly over Laos, I can tell you that the term “Air America” has always brought out the “haters” I will call them in the journalism and book writing businesses. My guess is none of them really understood the service, sacrifices, loyalty and valor with which these men flew, and more important, did not understand they did what they did for their country and its allies in that war. I personally tip my hat to them.”[25]

Allen Cates

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- [1] Louis Panzer, who represented David Hickler, Base Manager AAM Vientiane, Laos. Located in Air America Notebooks from the William M. Leary Papers, Eugene McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas; <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CAT%20VOL%201.pdf>
- [2] <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/196501.pdf>
- [3] The Greatest Airlift: The Story of Combat Cargo Hardcover – 1954 by Annis G. Thompson
- [4] <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/earthquake-mcgoons-final-flight.html>
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