

Allen Cates

August 14, 2001

Dudley W. Foster

Dear Sir,

I am responding to your letter dated August 7, 2001. As per our telephone conversation, I am respectfully asking that all information in this regard be provided to UTD, TTU and the CIA Museum at Langley. In this manner, it can be assured that it will become part of the public domain. I do not wish this information to be given to a single person, historian or organization unless they obtain it from any of the institutions mentioned in accordance with normal procedures. I am also asking that this information not be held for any person or entity until they finish a personal project with the intent that it would be distributed to the public after they accomplish a personal project. It should be distributed immediately for all to see if interested. In the event you feel that you cannot act in this manner, then please destroy it, or return it to me with all copies. I sincerely appreciate your cooperation with this request.

My information is based solely on recollection. I could be wrong on some of the events. I intend to offer explanation concerning my observations and you may elect to exclude them if you so desire. Historians who write about personality conflicts and subjective information without firsthand experiences do not, in my opinion, qualify as historians. There are arguments against that conclusion, but I gather your intent is to obtain the history of KIA's in Vietnam and Laos from those who were there. I don't profess or claim to be a true educated and accredited historian and ask forgiveness for my inexperience. However, the information presented is true and correct to the best of my knowledge.

Some of the deaths I know about but was not employed at the time, or not present when the event occurred. I may make mention of them due to research conducted while a Board Member of the AAM Association, but first hand experience may provide a better picture. I have seen a great amount of false information from those who were present, but over the years had confused events with others. Usually, no harm is done. But, a great deal

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of harm is done if the events described are critical to the deceased. That is not my intention here. Rather, I want to describe the event as I experienced it, or after a thorough investigation. At any time, should a conflict between my observation and that of another exist, that information should be investigated thoroughly for veracity. It is not my intent to discredit any person, the CIA or Air America. I volunteered for this duty and tried to do my best. I feel those that died, and those injured did the same. I could have left any time I wished and my observations are based upon after thought rather than prior convictions before the event. My statements are presented for historical record, not to cause harm or find fault. Would I do it again, knowing what I know now? Yes, and although that may reflect a flaw in my character, it is a simple truth that I cannot deny.

**Richard Lieberth** was killed before I was employed. I am aware of his death and have seen pictures of him lying on top of the helicopter he crashed in. I did quite a bit of investigation concerning this accident. Two CIA employees were also killed along with the Flight Mechanic **Franklin D. Smith**. This was Richard's first flight as a PIC. It was also indoctrination for one of the CIA employees. They were carrying money and paying certain village chiefs. Richard's wife lived in Udorn and she requested that Richard be cremated. Several AAM employees observed this act, but they didn't actually look at the body before cremation. The CIA employee who was getting indoctrinated was Catholic and his family asked that he be returned for burial in the United States. His father was also a CIA employee. When the body arrived, the casket contained **Richard Lieberth** instead of the CIA employee! Apparently the wrong body was cremated. There was hell to pay over this. Years later, the dead CIA agent was awarded the appropriate star at Langley. This deed was written about in a publicly distributed article and in that article it was said his wife never knew how he had died. That's questionable since his death was not due to a covert act and his father was employed at the time. But, perhaps the author felt this mystique provided better copy, and I guess it is possible to be true. I was asked as President of the Air America Association for information and obtained it from Richard Ford. The mentioned picture was part of the portfolio Richard put together for the Association's stamp project while he was the Committee chair. Richard would be an excellent source of information for this project since he was very much involved in the 60's. He is 87 at the time of this writing, and appears to be as sharp as when I first met him more than 30 years ago. But, chronologically speaking, one should talk to him soon.

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17 Jan 72

I knew **Roelf Bijl** quite well. He took off from a strip in 4 Corps area and the aircraft did a hammerhead stall and crashed. Roelf apparently died from injuries received from the shoulder harness. The exact cause of the accident was not made known to me but it was my understanding that an unknown person placed a heavy object inside the back inspection door, which caused the aircraft to be tail heavy. Apparently, the person who did this thought it was a cargo area. The excess weight changed the center of gravity to the extent it stalled on take off.

18 Jan 72  
12 Jan 72

**James Campbell** was killed in a training accident in Saigon. Ironically, **James Rausch** was in the chopper when it crashed and escaped death then only to die later at LS-69A from a bullet in the head while flying with a Thai co-pilot. It was common to carry two trainees who switched places to save time during checkouts. One pilot observed that Campbell was the kind of person who was so calm that if someone observed the rotor had flew off he would only comment "by Gosh, you are right." Rausch was injured badly and took several months to recuperate. He was a very handsome man and now sported noticeable scars on his face from the injuries. He was a militant black when he arrived. The accident changed him, or perhaps he finally realized that people would accept him as a man for the way he acted...not by his color. Bruce Jachens took Rausch back home and was met with friends and family that were just as militant. I flew with Jim often in Laos and like the rest of us...I liked him. Just before he was killed he often talked about death...almost like it was a premonition. I don't believe in such, but Jim seemed preoccupied with death and the plight of the wounded we carried. It was often a difficult task, but you had to force yourself to become jaded. On one occasion near 20A I carried a very young boy soldier, whose face had literally been removed by shrapnel, to the local hospital. Only holes remained where his mouth, nose and eyes had been. I kept looking down at him while they gingerly removed him from the helicopter on to a stretcher and I kept asking myself how this young boy would be able to cope with this tragedy that seemed far worse than death. I broke out into a sweat and decided to land at the ramp and have a quiet talk with myself. Spots formed in my sight and I actually barely made it to the ramp. There wasn't any real answer and I did not expect any. It wasn't that I feared for my on life and safety...it was the apparent absence of reason for such a tragedy. In my mind there had to be justification and I could not find anything tangible to hold on to and make it right. I wanted to hit something in a manner where I

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could feel I righted a terrible wrong...but in that respect I was impotent. It wasn't because all this was new to me either. I had spent a year in Vietnam with the Marines doing the exact same work. But children were not fighting that war. Young men yes...but not kids who had yet to experience puberty. Finally, the only way out was to go back to work and put it behind me. That's what I did, but that face will always be in my memory. It was one night when the wounded were numerous that Jim and I flew together near Pakse and the subject came up. One of the casualties was a young boy whose foot and ankle had been blown off by a land mine. He was in shock and sitting in the stretcher rather than lying down. We were both tired and I could tell the carnage was getting to him, and this boy's condition was affecting him. Having been there myself, I told him, somewhat sternly, to put it behind him and let's go to work. I often wondered if he thought then that I was void of social conscience.

John McRainey probably knows more about the Ritter/Townley crash than anyone. They apparently strayed over the Chinese road heading to LS-69A due to a stronger than normal southerly wind. The Chinese for no reason shot them down. They were carrying WP and the aircraft burned with a very white heat after the crash...according to village people nearby years later. I knew George fairly well, but not the others. Later, I got to know his son Phillip here in Louisiana. Like the others...Barbara, his wife, and Phillip never received closure and finally had to put it behind them to cope. But you can see it in their eyes. Its behind them, but still there ever present.

Howard Kelly was a retired Air Force officer who had flown in WW11. He received a single Air Medal for getting shot down in Europe and walking out across the Pyrenees into Spain to avoid capture. Howard was rotund and always laughing. He was a C-47 Captain and that was how we met. I was many years his junior and far less experienced. Howard enjoyed flying, but I felt he pushed the envelope on occasion. I am sorry to say this because it may not be fair to his family and the truth is that perhaps we all did. It was difficult not to take chances. Vietnam was a very small country and with the war there was a multitude of aircraft going in all different directions. Flying technology was not primitive...even then. But, for Air America...it was indeed primitive. Howard was flying in bad weather conditions, and in mountainous terrain with nothing but an old direction finder for a navigation aid. It was nearly impossible to be seen on radar. We did not have transponders and many people in these situations would refuse to fly. But,

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this wasn't like "most situations" and this type of flying was our job. Howard had been flying for years and twenty years older than I. On one occasion, during the time when Khe Sanh (sp) was under siege in I-Corps, Howard and I were flying supplies into the strip from Danang. The weather was terrible and Howard was determined to land. He had an idea of flying below the strip's elevation through a valley and pop up at the last instant to land. It was my job to drop the appropriate amount of flaps and lower the landing gear on queue from Howard. But on the last flight, the weather had deteriorated to the extent the valley was socked in. We were flying blind and definitely below the field elevation. I politely told Howard that we were below the terrain and blind. He kept going and I finally told Howard that I had the airplane. I took control, added full power and climbed well above the terrain and headed back to Danang. Howard released the controls immediately and never said a word. When safely clear and straight and level I handed the controls back to Howard. We flew back in silence and I knew I was fired. No junior officer would get away with taking the controls from a senior captain. But nothing was ever said. I did not know **Milton Matheson** well. He had just arrived, but he too was a retired Air Force pilot with plenty of experience. He told me that he planned on working three years and buying a 31-flavor ice cream parlor. At the time I had never heard of one. I don't believe they were shot down. I never saw such evidence. I believe Howard flew into that mountain. Had I been with him, would I have *again* taken the airplane away from him? I don't know. I was nowhere as good a pilot as Howard was at that time, but it's a dual crew airplane and both pilots are responsible. Would I risk my job doing it twice? Maybe it would not have made any difference and they would have crashed with the greatest pilot on earth at the controls. It was that kind of environment. It would not be fair to all those who flew there...and perhaps to Howard and Milton either...to say they were shot down...if they weren't. The truth is that flying in South East Asia with its inherent weather conditions and the absence of equipment, which makes such flying much more hazardous, was extremely difficult. Together with a war...one wonders how it was done at all. Pictures were taken and some of them are on the AAM web site. I kept the one showing Howard's broken body off the site. One picture showed Eugene Hasenfus, who was helping recover the bodies. Years later he would be seen by the entire world being led by a rope around his neck in Central America...the only one to survive the C-123 downing that shed the bright light on the Contra situation.

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**Bruce Massey** does not appear to be on your list. He too died the same way. Bruce looked just like the actor Danny Kaye. His accident had more fanfare than the other weather related accidents. Bruce was flying a Volpar and his passengers were some very top-level educators. All died. I really don't know if the absence of navigation aids would have helped, but I know he didn't have any. Hugh Grundy was an absolute marvel at developing maintenance stations. Air Asia could literally build an aircraft with a data plate. I have nothing but praise for the maintenance conditions of the aircraft I flew. So...why couldn't we have installed VOR with DME, or TACAN and transponders? The ground facilities were there and the military used them constantly. Why were we not integrated with them with UHF radios? Would it have saved Bruce and the educators? I don't know, but the absence may have been a factor. Did you need to have that kind of equipment? Well...we used to ferry C-46's, C-47's and Caribous all the way from Saigon to Taiwan with nothing but VHF and ADF with no trouble. I only made two trips and always was fascinated to break out of the clouds at Hong Kong when the last time I saw the ground was in Danang. Still...there are no mountains in the South China Sea. Strange as it may seem, the ADF is pretty reliable. In the 30's they were traversing the Gobi Desert using nothing more than a wet compass and calculating time/distance. I am enthralled when reading Springwyler's book where they landed and kept the coolant from the water-cooled engines hot at night over an open fire. Yet, here we were 30 years later doing much the same. It was interesting that we often asked high flying jets to relay our calculated position reports, an act that Springwyler could not take advantage of.

I was at LS-69A when **Leonard Welhardt** crashed. I had known Lenny in Saigon, like Howard, when he was a C-47 pilot serving my first 6 months as a F/O and had flown with him often. Lenny was a retired Air Force LT. Col. With ample experience. I did not see the crash and was at the compound when it happened. Don Henthorn, a UH34-D Pilot, was just arriving and observed the crash. He landed next to him and the flight mechanic, name unknown, picked Lenny up and placed him in the chopper. They were right next to the airstrip and it was practically just a hover to land on the strip. We all went out to see and Don had covered Lenny up with a newspaper. He had massive head injuries and obviously dead. I'll never forget Don's face. He was visibly moved seeing Lenny this way. I don't know how it happened. It looked like he was flying very low next to the airport and hit a tree. There may have been mechanical problems...I don't know.

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**Gerald Booth** was first stationed in Saigon flying the Bell when he was hired. I was not a personal friend, but we both stayed at the same house when I arrived. He later transferred to Udorn in the H-34 program. You can see the pad where he crashed when you look at the original Air America movie *Flying Men and Flying Machines*. It's the one that Phil Goddard is seen flying the Bell and surrounded by clouds. The pad overlooks the PDJ and we often flew in supplies for the look out team that was stationed there. It was elevated and small. It was necessary to be precise and there was very little room for error. I remember flying with a First Officer in the Twin Pac when we were flying food in sling loads in identical pads. He continually chastised me for flying into a certain pad that he felt was dangerous. Remembering my experience with Howard, I gave him the controls for the next few trips. The loading personnel would hold up a card with the letter identifying the pad when you hovered in to connect. My First Officer kept telling me that if this one pad showed up he was turning it down. I said that was fine with me. It was his decision since he had the controls. He repeated his intentions several times and when we hovered in...sure enough...it was the feared pad. I could see him gritting his teeth, but he hooked up and away we went. The trip was uneventful and I never said anything. On the way back though he looked at me sheepishly and told me that he guessed it was different when the decision was yours alone.

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But on some instances a person really didn't have a choice. **Ralph "Cotton" Davis** loaded up at 20 A, and made a right turn after take off and turned 180° past the starting end of the strip. He climbed up Skyline ridge going to Site 20 when he crashed killing everybody on Board. Cotton Davis was as nice a person as anyone could meet and the news was just devastating. The company line was that the crash was caused due to excess weight and pilot error. An autopsy revealed that Cotton had been shot in the heart and died instantly. VP, supposedly, found the culprit, who was reported to be a bored soldier on top of the ridge who fired the lethal bullet. He loaded him up on a Bell flown by French Smith and dropped him alive from a high altitude into the village. He sported a sign saying something to the effect that this is what happens to people who shoot at his aircraft. The incident unnerved French and he refused to fly with VP again. Some have said the man who was dropped wasn't the one who fired the weapon, and some have said that the bullet in Cotton's heart came from the cooking off of weapons on board from the intense fire after the crash.

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**Jon Merkel** was flying with John Ford when he was hit with a bullet. So...it did happen. It happened with **Frank Thorsen** too. Frank and I arrived in Bangkok the same day along with **Dick Theriault**. Dick was destined for Udorn and Frank and I were heading to Saigon. Both of us had a choice of either C-47 or C-45. Frank had quite a bit of Beech time and opted for the C-45. He had a quick and ready smile and he was easy to like. Neither of us had any idea what we were getting into at the time. Later, Frank transferred to Laos and was flying the Volpar when a stray bullet hit him. I was in the ready room when I heard. Ray Jeffery came in with some of Frank's gear and together we washed the arterial blood down the sink in heavy silence.

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I did not know **Harvey Potter** well and **John Beardsley** less. Beardsley was a personal friend of Harvey's from the Army and was being checked out in the H-34 near L-54. I know the pad where they crashed well and had landed there many times. The pad appeared to be situated where there was only one way in and one way out. I was fortunate to have been trained by Tim Woosley who taught me to always land into the wind...even if that meant landing down hill. I don't know if that is what happened to Harvey and John that day. Ed Rudolphs was the first on the scene. He later told me that he was surprised to see that all of them...including Joe Gaculais the Flight Mechanic... were in their underwear and appeared uninjured. The AAM flight uniforms melted when heated and they had burned on their bodies leaving the cotton under clothing. Shortly thereafter we started using Nomex to make uniforms. They didn't look as neat and tidy, but they didn't burn. He took them down to L-54 and a C-130 took them to Udorn. They were on stretchers outside the administration building when I saw them. They seemed in good spirits and were joking with each other. Both looked like they only had bad sunburns, but it was far more than that. The superheated air from burning 115/145 aviation fuel had seared their lungs and they were both to die at the burn center in Tokyo later. I met Beardsley's daughter many years later at the Lafayette reunion. She had written to me wanting to know about her father. She was nine when he died and they had just arrived in Udorn...and quickly ushered out after the accident. It was a moving experience for both of us and I introduced her to Wayne Knight and Dick Ford, who were in charge at the time. I like to think that one of the most important aspects of the Association is to help surviving families close the door on these experiences among friends.

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I met **Lloyd Randell** when I first got to Saigon. He later transferred to Vientiane. Lloyd was Porter pilot and a good one. Weather and a blind canyon killed him according to my best information. He was soon to be married to a local lady that everyone admired. She was pregnant with his child when he was killed. His family would not have anything to do with her and it was one of the kickers who were able to get her into the USA where their son was born.

I knew **Jim Ackley** and **Clarence Driver** but I don't know the details of the crash. Jim was the assistant chief pilot doe C-47's when I was in Saigon. The same with **Howard Boyles**. He also was in Saigon when I first arrived.

**Billy Paul Pratt** was another pilot that I am proud to say is in the group of some of the nicest people I ever met. Again, in the C-47, we used to often take off at first light. There were no restaurants to go to for breakfast and the cooks at the local hostel would not be up preparing food until well after we had departed. I would arrive at the aircraft famished and B.P. would take pity and offer half of his prepared lunch to me. B.P. told me he got married at 15 and was still married to the same woman. Losing his wife, he said, would be like losing one of his arms. And B.P. had arms. His hands looked like small animals attached to his wrists. B.P. was not a KIA. He died of cancer, but who is to say it wasn't caused by his work in Vietnam and Laos.

Number 18...**Ernesto Cruz**. Wasn't he with Bill Foster when a RPG in Laos hit them flying a H-34? I believe he was killed and Foster was severely wounded. Ernesto was the flight Mechanic and he was training another, or being trained. I don't remember.

These are the only people that I can make comments about. I hope this is helpful, and again, feel free to cut any of the extraneous information I supplied that wasn't asked for.

Yours truly,

  
Allen Cates