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AIR AMERICA

History of Air America

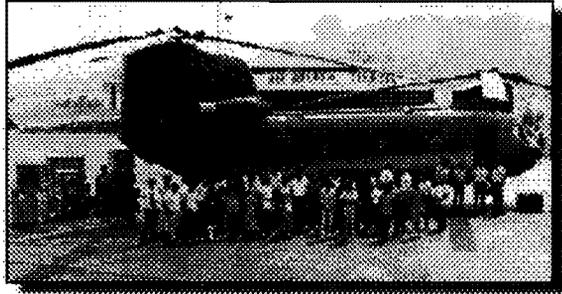


Photo Credit: *Judy Porter*

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The following text is taken from:
Air America Memorial Dedication
The McDermott Library
The University of Texas at Dallas
May 30, 1987

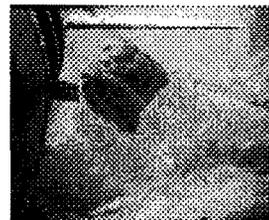
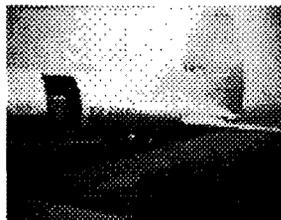
When Princeton University acquired the papers of Whitey Willauer in 1967, I had little idea that my curiosity about their contents would lead to a scholarly project that would last twenty years--and is not yet finished. Over the past two decades, I have learned a great deal about an extraordinary group of individuals who took part in a truly unique aerial adventure.

The story of Air America began in 1947 when two talented and adventurous men--Gen. Claire Chennault and Whitey Willauer--started a small airline in postwar China. They called it CNRRA Air Transport, and they hauled relief supplies throughout the country. After a year of hauling United Nations cargo they got a commercial contract and changed the name of the airline to Civil Air Transport--CAT--and they began operating throughout the country on a commercial basis. They never had much money, operating conditions were always difficult, but they had innovation and dedicated personnel--and they had what Gen. Chennault like to call "the CAT spirit"--which I think has been a central part of the organization ever since.

By the end of 1948, CAT was deeply involved in China's civil war. CAT evacuated more than 100,000 desperate people from the doomed city of Mukden in Manchuria. They brought in supplies and carried out wounded during the epic battle of Hsuehchow. In one of the most heroic and least known airlifts in history, CAT flew long missions to Taiyuan, supporting Marshal Yen His-shan in his struggle against the communist.

CAT retreated to Taiwan during the winter of 1949-1950, broke economically but with its precious assets of aircraft, personnel, and spirit intact. Shortly thereafter, the airline changed ownership. Not many people knew about it at the time-and some even later-because the new owner very much preferred to remain a silent partner in this enterprise. Only much later did it become clear that the Central Intelligence Agency had acquired the first of what became a worldwide network of air proprietors.

CAT went to work for the CIA during the 1950's first during the Korean war, later throughout the far east-and beyond. The CIA used CAT to deliver weapons to anti-Communist elements in Burma, to support guerrilla operations on the Chinese mainland and in Manchuria, and on a variety of covert operations. CAT pilots flew through the flak filled skies of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 in a valiant but doomed effort to support the besieged French garrison. CAT was in Guatemala in 1954. CAT was in Indonesia in 1958. CAT personnel were at the Bay of Pigs. And in some of the most demanding and successful long range missions ever undertaken by the airline, CAT supported a major CIA project in Tibet for many years.



Despite the wide range of activities, CAT remained a fairly small operation during the 1950's, but the 1960's brought a major change. As the United States expanded its commitment to Southeast Asia in the variety of diplomatic and political factors, Air America soon found itself at the center of a secret war in Laos. Air America aircrews hauled refugees and rice-lots of rice-ammunition and troops through Laos; they inserted and extracted reconnaissance teams under extremely hazardous conditions; they airdropped supplies out of C-130's, C-123's, C-46's, B-26's, and a variety of other

aircraft. They landed Helios and Porters on tiny strips carved out of mountain tops. And they undertook very, very difficult search-and-rescue missions with unsurpassed bravery and skill.

Air America became a legend in Laos. Although sometimes scorned by outsiders as mercenaries the aircrews earned high praise from the "customers." As one CIA case officer has recently written to me, "I have seen Air America pilots stay on runways under attack, waiting until they got all the people on board, delaying takeoff at considerable risk to themselves. They have made drops under hostile conditions when the normal thing to do would have been to return and try again. No military service excelled this group of people in dedication, or loyalty, or valor."

Air America personnel were in Thailand, working with the Border Police, training Thai pilots and technicians, performing maintenance work, and flying covert missions out of a secret base at Takli. Personnel of the air complex could be found throughout the region, from Phnom Penh to Chiangmai to Katmandu. Air America supported the United States effort in Vietnam. It was at the beginning, carrying refugees and CIA agents between Hanoi and Saigon in 1954. And it was there at the end. Indeed, the most enduring vision of the final act in Vietnam is that dramatic photo of an Air America helicopter loading passengers atop the Pittman Apartments.

Air America, under the guise of Air Asia, operated a superb maintenance complex at Tainan on Taiwan, serving both it's own needs and doing important contract work for the military. Southern Air Transport, another component of the Air America complex, carried military personnel throughout the Far East, and stood ready to provide heavy airlift for CIA projects when necessary.

At its peak during the late 1960's, the air complex employed more than 8,000 people.

Looking back on it, I have been impressed by that fact that all-or most-shared a common characteristics. The captains of the Mandarin Jet; fixed and rotary wing pilots; flight engineers; flight mechanics; flight attendants; air freight specialists and dispatchers; operations, maintenance and administration personnel; the people who shined the C-46's until they sparkled; Americans, Chinese, Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and other nationalities-they were dedicated professionals.

And they did a superb job, these dedicated professionals of CAT and Air America. But the cost often was high, which is why we are here today-to honor those individuals who lost their lives while serving the cause of freedom.

It is appropriate, I believe, that they have their special place, apart from the great memorial in Washington. They were after all a unique group of individuals-the secret soldiers of the cold war.

Remarks of Dr. William Leary, Professor of History,
University of Georgia, Athens, GA.

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