



***The Hidden Air Force***

*Prologue—Late in 2002 the former employees of Air America, Inc. decided to seek veteran status eligibility. The Air America Association, which is a social organization, composed of former employees and their affiliates, agreed to endorse the issue. In the early part of 2003 a letter was written to the C.I.A. asking for assistance and direction. They responded with instructions on how to proceed and stated their intentions to furnish appropriate information to the Department of Defense as needed for the effort. Yet, when queried by the DoD, they refused. Former C.I.A. employees, who had worked in Laos with AAM, and were now working as Independent Contractors on occasion for the Agency, asked their superiors if they could act to draft an endorsement for the effort and furnish non-classified information as requested by the DoD. That request too was denied. The Civilian/Military Service Review Board, assigned by Congress by public law 95-202 to evaluate veteran status applications, has approved the Application for evaluation, which is quite large, and includes books, videos, copies of contracts and manuscripts, eyewitness testimonies and company records of events. A notice was placed in the Federal Register and several copies of the application have been made and sent to appropriate military historians for their opinions as part of the process. The absence of a formal endorsement by the C.I.A., who was the owner of the various corporations of which Air America was included, may stymie the effort, and their reluctance is not completely understood. Unofficially, the C.I.A. says they do not wish to endorse this issue until the issue of civil service retirement has been settled. It is a separate issue and a Bill, S651, has been introduced seeking a change in the U.S. code. A similar House Bill, 1276, also has been introduced. The Senate Bill is in the Homeland Security committee and appears to be stagnant. I contacted my Senator, the honorable Mary Landrieu, and asked her to write the C.I.A. asking for assistance. She too was essentially ignored. The question on both issues is whether employees of Air America, Inc. deserve to be compensated for their effort in the war in South East Asia. I believe they deserve both veteran status and some kind of retirement compensation. This document explains the reasons for that belief. Additional information can be found on the Air America Association web site [www.air-america.org](http://www.air-america.org) and the Texas Tech Vietnam Virtual Archive <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive> and searching for Allen Cates, where my collection is held. At the very least, we deserve an up or down vote on this issue and the bill should not be allowed to simply die in committee—*

## *Hidden Air Force*

Senator Mary Landrieu's office called and told me they had received a response from the C.I.A. Essentially, they said we have already received all the information available that is applicable and referred to the records given to The University of Texas at Dallas. They are refusing to appoint an independent contractor as requested. The suggested information I was searching for, and the endorsement I sought, is not contained in the records furnished to UTD. Their refusal to act constitutes a rebuff to our request and a renege on their original agreement.

There is probably more disinformation about Air America than valid information. Part of this comes from the media, which seems to concentrate on entertaining more than informing the public. Air America was used by the United States government, used by individuals to promote their books and image and used by the media to create sensationalism. But, no one really wants to tell the truth about us and most would prefer we just go away.

HL Mencken said, *"I believe that it is better to tell the truth than to lie. I believe that it is better to be free than to be a slave. And I believe that it is better to know than be ignorant."* I tend to agree with that portion of his creed and have decided to place on record some historical information I was hoping the C.I.A. would furnish. A very dear friend recently wrote to me and said this— *"But these are things that the U.S. cannot afford to state publicly. So the real issues are deflected by trumped up stories like WMD and "spreading democracy." I really have no faith that gov't's will ever, or can ever, be honest. The truth can be too dangerous - it can be deadly, and often is."*

I see what is happening now in Iraq to be similar to what happened in Vietnam, and there is a question in my mind about truth. I don't believe our government and our news media need to always be candid, but why is it necessary to forge international policy on an image founded on prevarication? What value are we as a nation if we cannot be trusted? Several years ago Alfred McCoy wrote a book called the "Politics of Heroin In South East Asia." He falsely accused Air America personnel of involvement in the drug trade. His true intention was to sell books, and he was successful, because people were interested in the theory the government was involved in the drug business. Disproving a negative is difficult and some people will never believe the truth. Dr. William Leary, an accredited expert on Air America, spent a decade investigating the claims made by McCoy and others and concluded there was no credible evidence whatsoever incriminating Air America. I personally worked in Laos for more than 5 years and I never saw any evidence of the drug trade, but how do you prove you did not do something?

Some go the other route and claim to be former Air America employees, or to have been rescued by them, but when the claims are placed under the microscope and found to be false it adds fuel to the controversial fire and further tarnishes our image. The following is an example. Almost nine years ago a friend of mine living in Idaho sent me a clipping

printed in several newspapers in the Washington-Idaho area. It was an obituary of a man who had been killed in an aircraft accident. This is a portion of the obituary.

*SPOKANE - Some 200 people listened to a tribute from television newsman Ted Koppel at a memorial service for pilot Bob Heale, who died in an air show plane crash last weekend.*

*Koppel, host of the ABC news program "Nightline," sent a videotape in which he told of how Heale had rescued Koppel and his crew in 1970 while they were covering a battle in Laos during the Vietnam War.*

*"Bob Heale was and remains my hero," Koppel said in an interview yesterday. "In some measure, everything good that's happened to me since 1970 I owe to him.*

*"You better believe gratitude kept me in contact with him," Koppel said. "If not for his courage in pulling us out of there, I'd not be alive today."*

I was a board member with the Air America Association at the time. There was a picture of a younger Koppel taken, without doubt, near a Pilatus Porter because you could clearly see the counter weight below the wing and I flew that aircraft for two years in Vietnam and was well familiar with the physical description of the aircraft. The former employees needed a better public image if we were to be successful with several issues that included veteran status. According to my Idaho friend, Heale ended his air show by declaring he was a former Air America pilot. No one questioned the declaration and now, with Koppel's eulogy, we, at last, had recognition by a well known TV personality, or so I thought.

I called Koppel's office from a number I found on the Internet. He wouldn't return the call. I finally was able to get in touch with his executive secretary. I was accused of calling Koppel a liar. Alarmed, I explained I needed his story and hoped it was true, but I also needed attribution because some of Koppel's claims about being in Laos did not appear to be accurate.

I ran into a dead end and contacted the editor of the newspaper in Coeur d'Alene and told him I why I wanted the truth and why I was starting to have doubts about the validity of Koppel's story. He agreed to do some investigative work. The result was that Heale's family told the editor Heale had never worked with Air America and had never been to South East Asia. I have learned since to be skeptical—perhaps even cynical. Apparently there are those who believe it is for the common good to present an image to the American people that differ from reality and if individuals, or groups of individuals, are maligned in the process, then, it's considered acceptable collateral damage.

The C.I.A. initially agreed to endorse my application for veteran status, but it is apparent from the last letter they too are trying to distance themselves from us. I feel obligated as the author of the application to make a last attempt to explain the role of Air America.

Let me preface my comments by saying, No American, regardless of circumstances, has the right to present for public knowledge information that is classified. There is a purpose for secrecy. It saves lives. The information I am presenting is, to my best knowledge, either unclassified, or declassified. I'm an American first and foremost and I care about the welfare of this great country. It would not serve any purpose for me to fall on my

sword on this issue, but I believe the information I am presenting is true and correct and I am including supporting documents for my opinion.

I am challenging the historical concept that it was solely President Nixon's doctrine in 1969 that ended the war in Vietnam. Rather, I suggest the war ended by indirect and less noticeable events that were triggered by this doctrine and history has excluded the direct involvement of a forgotten air force, the existence of which the United States Government apparently prefers to remain obscure.

In the spring of 1969 there was a turning point in the war in Vietnam. Nixon won the election with a promise to end a war for which public support was swiftly waning. General Westmorland said there was a light at the end of the tunnel, but it appeared to be a long tunnel and a faint light. He was replaced and a philosophy alteration was initiated after the truth was revealed about the strategic hamlet program that most intelligence officers had known all along.

There were two truths actually. The program was a dismal failure, and telling Washington the truth resulted in your quick removal and often ended your career. People soon learned to write warm, glowing reports spewing success and people lived happily thereafter—that is until TET 1968. Nothing said here should disparage the work done by many well-meaning people in Vietnam, and certainly not to the troops of many nations who fought and died there. Communism was a real threat and had we not gone into Vietnam it is quit possible the Pacific Rim might have fallen to China and become a communistic regime. Capitalism was and still is a better course and China came to realize that fact. Certain concessions had to be made first and you really don't need to read between the lines to see how it was unveiled. Prior to the traumatic event of TET 1968, Saigon, a city built for 500 thousand was teeming with more than three times that amount. Life within the city was surreal. It was clear that the war was happening. It was covered in the newspaper and on television. One could stand in the middle of the city and feel and hear the thunder of bombs being dropped by waves of B-52 aircraft, but it was not actually happening to individuals in Saigon and so it was like living in a dream world.

It was a posh assignment for the diplomatic crew, military support personnel and the press alike. I never saw a steak stamped in purple lettering "US Prime" until Saigon. All the restaurants, and there were many, had them, and much more, and all courtesy of the United States government. Nightclubs galore were on every street corner with blaring music and staffed with some of the world's most beautiful women. The nightlife in Saigon was an extravaganza of every conceivable delight. Civilian contractors like RMKBRJ, Alaskan Barge, and Lycoming and countless others were making money faster than it could be spent, but in the field, away from the lights, American boys were dying at the rate of 50 a day and Air America was there also.

It is true the North Vietnamese did not achieve their goal of dominating the south with the TET offensive, and their casualty rate was enormous due to superior American firepower. Equally obvious though, was the undeniable fact we were not stemming the

fervor and intensity of the North Vietnamese resolve and running out of time to achieve victory while retaining support of the American public.

The war did not end in 1975 like many people think. It ended in late 1972 and there were several events that took place that I have to believe Nixon could not know would occur. His advisors told him there would have to be a dignified agreement between North Vietnam and the United States, but China too had to be appeased. The following information represents a fairly accurate chronological order of events.

## 1969

- \*Richard Nixon replaced Lyndon Johnson.
- \*William Rogers replaced Rusk as Secretary of State.
- \*Melvin Laird replaced Clark Clifford as Secretary of Defense.
- \*Henry Kissinger replaced Walt Rostow as National Security Advisor.
- \*Gen. Creighton Abrams had replaced Westmoreland in 1968.
- \*Adm. John McCain replaced U.S. Grant Sharp as CINCPAC in July 1968.
- \*A "two-track" approach - separation of military and political conflicts established.
- \*Hanoi and Washington would negotiate military solution.
- Saigon and NLF would negotiate political solutions.
- \*"Vietnamization" policy - transfer burden of war from U.S. to ARVN established.
- \*A "carrot and stick" strategy - negotiate through strength established
- \*Nixon proposed "mutual withdrawal" of troops, no bombing of NV Jan. 25, 1969.
- \*Op. Menu - secret bombing of Cambodia began Mar. 18, 1969 - would continue to 1973 - 16,527 sorties dropped 383,851 tons explosives on Cambodia, but story leaked by NY *Times* May 9 - Kissinger ordered wiretaps on 7 NSC staff and 4 reporters.
- \*Abrams withdrew from Ap Bia "Hamburger Hill" in A Shau Valley May 27 after loss of 241 dead and first 25,000 troops withdrawn June 8 - a "meaningful signal".
- \*Nixon's Pacific trip in July - met with Thieu, Marcos - "Nixon Doctrine" promised U.S. would honor treaties and extend nuclear shield to allies, but no U.S. troops. (Laos)
- \*"Vietnamization" of ARVN with modern weapons.
- \*CBS Evening News July 28, 1969 reported Paris peace talks stalled, despite secret meetings of Kissinger and Xuan Thuy at apartment of Jean Sainteng.



Map from *Time* 3/28/69

- \*Jimi Hendrix played "Star Spangled Banner" for the 300,000 at Woodstock Music and Art Fair August 15-17 held on Max Yasgur's farm at White Lake near Bethel NY. (Not at the original site planned near Woodstock NY)
- \*Death of Ho Chi Minh Sept. 2 - replaced by Politburo of Pham Van Dong, Le Duan, Vo Nguyen Giap.
- \*Kissinger and Poland ambassador Walter Stoessel proposed Warsaw talks with Chinese - began Jan. 20, 1970.
- \*National demonstration Oct. 15 by Vietnam Moratorium Committee - 250,000 marched in D.C.
- \*Nixon's TV speech Nov. 3 appealed to the "silent majority" for support.
- \*Moratorium demonstration of 500,000 in D.C. on Nov. 15 - largest anti-war protest yet - Nixon feared chaos and disorder.
- \*Seymour Hersh published Nov. 12 story about the My Lai massacre of 500 civilians that had occurred Mar. 16, 1968, led by Lt. Wm Calley.

## 1970

- \*Le Duc Tho replaced Xuan Thuy in Paris for 2nd round of talks Feb-Apr. - demanded end of SV government.
- \*NV invasion of Laos and Cambodia Feb. 21 - defeated Hmong army and captured Plain of Jarres - created Khmer Rouge.
- \*Cambodia coup Mar. 18 - neutralist Sihanouk replaced by pro-U.S. Lon Nol.
- \*Nixon saw film *Patton* Apr. 25 - made decision next day to invade Cambodia
- \*Cambodia invasion Apr. 30 - 32,000 U.S. troops attack the Fishhook and Parrot's Beak for 2 months - destroy NV supplies and set back NV plans for 2 years - a military success but political disaster.
- \*Kent State demonstration May 4 against ROTC - 4 students killed.
- \*Nixon visited Lincoln Memorial demonstration May 9.
- \*Cooper-Church amendment to limit U.S. troops in Laos and Cambodia passed Senate 58-37 on June 30.
- \*Le Duc Tho and Kissinger met in Paris for 3rd round of talks in June.
- \*Hatfield-McGovern amendment to require complete withdrawal from VN failed in Sept.
- \*Kissinger trip to Pakistan in Oct. - Pres. Khan acted as intermediary with new Chinese leader Chou En-lai - U.S. gave aid to Khan in Mar. 1971 suppression of Bangladesh revolt, but India would defeat Khan and create Bangladesh by Dec. 1971.



Map from *Time* 5/11/70

## 1971

- \*Winter Soldier investigation Jan. 31-Feb. 2 by John Kerry and the Vietnam Veterans against the War - 116 vets testified about atrocities committed by U.S. in VN.
- \*Operation Lam Son 719 - ARVN invade Laos Feb. 8 with U.S. air support - but failed to close the Ho Chi Minh trail and showed that Vietnamization had failed.

\*Kissinger met with Le Duc Tho in secret talks in house on the Rue Darthe in Feb. rather than the formal talks at the Hotel Majestic, but stalled.

\*Ping-pong team visit to China Apr. 10 - Nixon ended of 21-year trade embargo in June.

\*Nixon's 5-powers speech in Kansas City - world to be dominated by economic superpowers U.S., Russia, W. Europe, Japan, China.

\*New York Times published Pentagon Papers June 13.

\*Kissinger visit to Peking July 9 - shook hands with Chow En-lai. (Unlike Dulles 1954 at Geneva)

\*U.S. supported admission of PRC (People's Republic of China) to UN, and began to remove U.S. troops from Formosa.

## 1972

\*Nixon arrived in China Feb. 21 - Shanghai Communiqué.

\*NV invasion of Quang Tri Mar. 30 - largest since Tet.

\*Nixon responded with Op. Linebacker. Apr. 6 - bombing north of DMZ - B-52 raids on Hanoi and Haiphong Apr. 15.

\*NV captured Quang Tri City May 1 - low point for Nixon's "Vietnamization" policy - collapse of SV seemed inevitable.

\*Le Duc Tho and Kissinger met in Paris May 2 - 4th round of talks fail - talks suspended May 4.

\*Nixon decided May 8 to mine Haiphong harbor and blockade NV coast - 4 aircraft carriers added to 7th Fleet - massive bombing and "jugular diplomacy" successful - NV retreated June 18 and Quang Tri City re-taken.

\*Nixon arrived in Moscow May 22 - SALT I treaty signed May 29 - Brezhnev agreed to help pressure NV.

\*Gen. Giap ill with Hodgkin's disease - new military chief Van Tien Dung urged NV to return to Paris talks and make a settlement that would give NV time to recover losses.

\*Le Duc Tho and Kissinger met in Paris July-Aug. - 5th round of talks finally made progress - NV agreed to coalition government and Kissinger agreed to allow NV troops to remain in place - 9-Point proposal worked out Oct 8-12 - but rejected by Thieu.

\*Kissinger TV press conference Oct. 26 - "peace is at hand".

\*Nixon won election 60.7% to McGovern's 37.5% on Nov. 7.

\*Le Duc Tho suspended negotiations because of Thieu's opposition.

\*Nixon ultimatum to NV Dec. 14 to resume negotiations or "suffer the consequences".



Map from *Time* 5/1/72



Map from *Time* 11/6/72

## 72 Statement About the Situation in Laos.

March 6, 1970

IN LIGHT of the increasingly massive presence of North Vietnamese troops and their recent offensives in Laos, I have written letters today to British Prime Minister Wilson and Soviet Premier Korygin asking their help in restoring the 1962 Geneva agreements for that country.

As Cochairman of that conference, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union have particular responsibilities for seeing that its provisions are honored. My letters note the persistent North Vietnamese violations of the accords and their current offensives; support the Laotian Prime Minister's own current appeal to the Co-chairmen for consultations; urge the Co-chairmen to work with other signatories of the Geneva accords; and pledge full United States cooperation.

Hanoi's most recent military build-up in Laos has been particularly escalatory. They have poured over 13,000 additional troops into Laos during the past few months, raising their total in Laos to over 67,000. Thirty North Vietnamese battalions from regular division units participated in the current campaign in the Plain of Jars with tanks, armored cars, and long-range artillery. The indigenous Laotian Communists, the Pathet Lao, are playing an insignificant role.

North Vietnam's military escalation in Laos has intensified public discussion in this country. The purpose of this statement is to set forth the record of what we found in January 1969 and the policy of this administration since that time.

### I. WHAT WE FOUND

#### A. THE 1962 ACCORDS

When we came into office, this administration found a highly precarious situation in Laos. Its basic legal framework had been established by the 1962 accords entered into by the Kennedy administration.

Laos has been a battleground for most of the past 80 years. In 1949 it became a semi-independent state within the French Union. The Pathet Lao Communists rebelled against the government in the early 1950's, and fighting continued until the 1954 Geneva settlements ended the Indochina War. Laos at that time became an independent neutral state. The indigenous Communists, the Pathet Lao, nevertheless retained control of the two northern provinces.

Since then, this small country has been the victim of persistent subversion and finally invasion by the North Vietnamese.

By 1961 North Vietnamese involvement became marked, the Communist forces made great advances, and a serious situation confronted the Kennedy administration. In his news conference of March [9] 1961, President Kennedy said: "Laos is far away from America, but the world is small. . . . The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence."

In May 1961 negotiations for a Laotian settlement opened in Geneva, with Governor Harriman as the chief American

negotiator.<sup>1</sup> During the course of those long negotiations fighting continued, and the Communists made further advances. Faced with a potential threat to Thailand, President Kennedy ordered 5,000 Marines to that country in May 1962.

Finally, in July 1962, after 14 months of negotiations, 14 nations signed the Geneva accords providing for the neutralization of Laos. Other signatories besides the United States included the Soviet Union, Communist China, North Vietnam, the United Kingdom, France, the Southeast Asian nations most directly involved, and the members of the International Control Commission [ICC], Canada, India and Poland.

These accords came one month after the three contending forces within Laos announced agreement on the details of a coalition government composed of the three major political factions and headed by the neutralist, Prince Souvanna Phouma. North Vietnam claimed that it favored a coalition government. Both North Vietnam and the Soviet Union backed Prince Souvanna for his new post. The present government of Laos thus has been the one originally proposed by the Communists. In approving the 1962 arrangements, the Kennedy administration in effect accepted the basic formulation which had been advanced by North Vietnam and the Soviet Union for a Laotian political settlement.

#### B. THE RECORD 1962-1969

Before the ink was dry on the 1962 Geneva documents, and despite the fact that they embodied most of its own pro-

posals, North Vietnam started violating them. In compliance with the Accords, the 666 Americans who had been assisting the Royal Lao Government withdrew under ICC supervision. In contrast, the North Vietnamese passed only a token 40 men through ICC checkpoints and left over 6,000 troops in the country.

A steadily growing number of North Vietnamese troops have remained there ever since, in flagrant violation of the Geneva accords. They climbed to about 33,000 in mid-1967, 46,000 in mid-1968, and 55,000 in mid-1969. Today they are at an all-time high of some 67,000 men.

These are not advisers or technicians or attachés. They are line units of the North Vietnamese army conducting open aggression against a neighbor that poses no threat to Hanoi.

In addition, since 1964, over a half-million North Vietnamese troops have crossed the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos to invade South Vietnam. This infiltration route provides the great bulk of men and supplies for the war in South Vietnam.

The political arrangements for a three-way government survived only until April 1963 when the Pathet Lao Communist leaders departed from the capital and left their cabinet posts vacant. Fighting soon resumed and since then, there have been cycles of Communist offensives and Royal Laotian Government counteroffensives. The enemy forces have been led and dominated throughout by the North Vietnamese. In recent years Hanoi has provided the great majority of Communist troops in Laos.

North Vietnam appears to have two aims in Laos. The first is to insure its ability to use Laos as a supply route for North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. The

<sup>1</sup> W. Averell Harriman, Governor of New York State 1953-1958.

second is to weaken and subvert the Royal Lao Government—originally established at its urging—to hinder it from interfering with North Vietnamese use of Laotian territory, and to pave the way for the eventual establishment of a government more amenable to Communist control.

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has tried a variety of diplomatic efforts to restore peace in Laos. He has repeatedly appealed to the Cochairmen and others to help arrange for restoration of the 1964 Accords. He and the International Control Commission, hampered by lack of authority, have reported and publicized North Vietnamese violations of the Accords. And Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has made several attempts to achieve political reconciliation with the Pathet Lao and to reconstitute a tripartite government.

None of these efforts has borne fruit. Frustrated in his diplomatic efforts and confronted with continuing outside aggression, Souvanna has called upon three American administrations to assist his government in preserving Laotian neutrality and integrity.

By early 1964 the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao had openly breached the 1964 agreements by attacking the neutralist government forces in north Laos and by occupying and fortifying the area in southeast Laos along what came to be known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In these circumstances, the Laotian Prime Minister requested American aid in the form of supplies and munitions. The Kennedy administration provided this assistance in line with the Geneva Government's right under the Geneva Accords to seek help in its self-defense.

In mid-May 1964 the Pathet Lao supported by the North Vietnamese attacked

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's neutralist military forces on the Plain of Jars. North Vietnam also began to increase its use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to further its aggression against South Vietnam. The Johnson administration responded by Royal Laotian Government requests to meet this escalation by increasing our training and logistic support to the Royal Lao Government. In May 1964, as North Vietnamese presence increased, the United States, at Royal Lao Government request, began flying certain interdiction missions against invaders who were violating Lao neutrality.

Thus, when this administration came into office we faced a chronically serious situation in Laos. There had been 6 years of seasonal Communist attacks and growing U.S. involvement at the request of the Royal Laotian Government. The North Vietnamese had steadily increased both their infiltration through Laos into South Vietnam and their troop presence in Laos itself. Any facade of native Pathet Lao independence had been stripped away. In January 1969, we thus had a military assistance program reaching back over 4 years, and air operations dating over 1 year.

## II. THE POLICY OF TENS ADMINISTRATION

Since this administration has been in office, North Vietnamese pressure has continued. Last spring, the North Vietnamese mounted a campaign which threatened the royal capital and moved beyond the areas previously occupied by Communist forces. A counterattack by the Lao Government, intended to relieve this military pressure and cut off supply lines, caught the enemy by surprise and succeeded beyond expectations in pushing them off the

strategic central plain in north Laos known as the Plain of Jars.

The North Vietnamese left behind huge stores of arms, ammunition, and other supplies cached on the Plain. During their operations in the Plain of Jars last summer and fall, Lao Government forces captured almost 8,000 tons of Communist equipment, supplies and weapons, including tanks, armored cars, artillery pieces, machine guns, and thousands of individual weapons including about 4,000 tons of ammunition. The size and nature of these supply caches the Communists had emplaced on the Plain by the summer of 1969 show clearly that many months ago the North Vietnamese were preparing for major offensive actions on Laotian territory against the Royal Lao Government.

During the final months of 1969 and January 1970, Hanoi sent over 13,000 additional troops into Laos and rebuilt their stocks and supply lines. They also introduced tanks and long-range artillery.

During January and February, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma proposed to the other side that the Plain of Jars be neutralized. The Communist' response was to launch their current offensive which has recaptured the Plain of Jars and is threatening to go beyond the furthest line of past Communist advances.

The Prime Minister is now once again trying to obtain consultations among all the parties to the Geneva accords, envisaged under Article IV when there is a violation of Lao sovereignty, independence, neutrality, or territorial integrity.

In this situation, our purposes remain straightforward.

We are trying above all to save American and allied lives in South Vietnam which are threatened by the continual infiltration of North Vietnamese troops

and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Hanoi has infiltrated over 100,000 men through Laos since this administration took office and over 500,000 altogether. Our airstrikes have destroyed weapons and supplies over the past 4 years which would have taken thousands of American lives.

We are also supporting the independence and neutrality of Laos as set forth in the 1962 Geneva agreement. Our assistance has always been at the request of the legitimate government of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma which the North Vietnamese helped establish; it is directly related to North Vietnamese violations of the agreement.

We continue to be hopeful of eventual progress in the negotiations in Paris. But serious doubts are raised as to Hanoi's intentions if it is simultaneously violating the Geneva agreements on Laos which we reached with them largely on the basis of their own proposals. What we do in Laos has thus as its aim to bring about conditions for progress toward peace in the entire Indo-Chinese Peninsula.

I turn now to the precise nature of our aid to Laos.

In response to press conference questions on September 26, December 8, and January 30, I have indicated:

- that the United States has no ground combat forces in Laos;
- that there were 50,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos and that "more paraps are coming";
- that, at the request of the Royal Laoian Government which was set up by the Geneva accords of 1962, we have provided logistical and other assistance to that government for the purpose of helping it to prevent the Communist conquest of Laos;

—that we have used air power for the purpose of interdicting the flow of North Vietnamese troops and supplies on that part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail which runs through Laos;

—that, at the request of the Royal Laotian Government, we have flown reconnaissance missions in Northern Laos in support of the Laotian Government's efforts to defend itself against North Vietnamese aggression and that we were engaged in "some other activities."

It would, of course, have posed no political problem for me to have disclosed in greater detail those military support activities which had been initiated by two previous administrations and which have been continued by this administration.

I have not considered it in the national interest to do so because of our concern that putting emphasis on American activities in Laos might hinder the efforts of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to bring about adherence to the Geneva agreements by the Communist negotiators.

In recent days, however, there has been intense public speculation to the effect that the United States involvement in Laos has substantially increased in violation of the Geneva accord, that American ground forces are engaged in combat in Laos, and that our air activity has had the effect of escalating the conflict.

Because these reports are grossly inaccurate, I have concluded that our national interest will be served by putting the subject into perspective through a precise description of our current activities in Laos.

These are the facts:

—There are no American ground combat troops in Laos.

—We have no plans for introducing ground combat forces into Laos.

—The total number of Americans directly employed by the U.S. Government in Laos is 616. In addition there are 424 Americans employed on contract to the Government or Government contractors. Of these 1040 Americans, the total number military and civilian, engaged in military advisory or military training capacity numbers 380. Logistic personnel number 393.

—No American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground combat operations.

—U.S. personnel in Laos during the past year has not increased while during the past few months, North Vietnam has sent over 13,000 additional combat ground troops into Laos.

—When requested by the Royal Laotian Government, we have continued to provide military assistance to regular and irregular Laotian forces in the form of equipment, training and logistics. The levels of our assistance have risen in response to the growth of North Vietnamese combat activities.

—We have continued to conduct air operations. Our first priority for such operations is to interdict the continued flow of troops and supplies across Laotian territory on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As Commander in Chief of our Armed Forces, I consider it my responsibility to use our air power to interdict this flow of supplies and men into South Vietnam and thereby avoid a heavy toll of American and allied lives.

—In addition to these air operations on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we have continued to carry out reconnaissance flights in Northern Laos and to fly

combat support missions for Laotian forces when requested to do so by the Royal Laotian Government.

—In every instance our combat air operations have taken place only over those parts of Laos occupied and controlled by North Vietnamese and other Communist forces. They have been flown only when requested by the Laotian Government. The level of our air operations has been increased only as the number of North Vietnamese in Laos and the level of their aggression has increased.

Our goal in Laos has been and continues to be to reduce American involvement and not to increase it, to bring peace in accordance with the 1962 accords and not to prolong the war.

That is the picture of our current aid to Laos. It is limited. It is requested. It is supportive and defensive. It continues the purposes and operations of two previous administrations. It has been necessary to protect American lives in Vietnam and to preserve a precarious but important balance in Laos.

### III. THE FUTURE

Peace remains the highest priority of this administration. We will continue our search for it in Vietnam. I hope my appeal today to the Geneva conference cochairmen will help in Laos. Our policy for that torn country will continue to rest on some basic principles:

—We will cooperate fully with all diplomatic efforts to restore the 1962 Geneva agreements.

—We will continue to support the legitimate government of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and his efforts to

deescalate the conflict and reach political understandings.

—Our air interdiction efforts are designed to protect American and allied lives in Vietnam. Our support efforts have the one purpose of helping prevent the recognized Laotian government from being overwhelmed by larger Communist forces dominated by the North Vietnamese.

—We will continue to give the American people the fullest possible information on our involvement, consistent with national security.

I hope that a genuine quest for peace in Indochina can now begin. For Laos, this will require the efforts of the Geneva conference cochairmen and the signatory countries.

But most of all it will require realism and reasonableness from Hanoi. For it is the North Vietnamese, not we, who have escalated the fighting. Today there are 67,000 North Vietnamese troops in this small country. There are no American troops there. Hanoi is not threatened by Laos; it runs risks only when it moves its forces across borders.

We desire nothing more in Laos than to see a return to the Geneva agreements and the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops, leaving the Lao people to settle their own differences in a peaceful manner.

In the search for peace we stand ready to cooperate in every way with the other countries involved. That search prompted my letters today to the British Prime Minister and the Soviet Premier. That search will continue to guide our policy.

NOTE: This statement was released at Key Biscayne, Fla.

\*Op. Linebacker II - the "Christmas bombing" Dec. 17-30 - most intense bombing campaign of the war.

### 1973

\*Nixon threatened Thieu Jan. 5 with "gravest consequences".

\*Kissinger and Le Duc Tho signed treaty Jan. 27 in Paris - POWs released in 60 days, ceasefire under International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICC), coalition government in SV to arrange elections, U.S. aid to SV to continue.

\*Return began of 591 U.S. POWs.

\*U.S. troops withdrawn by March.

On the surface it appeared Nixon's Vietnamization program was working, but there were other events going on that few people knew about. In a speech to the American public Nixon said the North Vietnamese were violating the 1962 Geneva Accords by using Laos to infiltrate South Vietnam with fresh troops and supplies. He said, however, American troops were not dying in Laos. That was not exactly true since several American flight crews lost their life in the attempt to stem the flow, and they included U.S. Military crews and Air America employees.

The inference was, in fact, entirely false because the Vietnamization program had only the appearances of working as thousands of North Vietnamese troops were pulled from South Vietnam to defend the supply line commonly called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The trail was being attacked from the west, not by American troops, but with Laotian soldiers pressed into service and trained by the CIA. Essentially, a new front was established in Laos to threaten the North Vietnamese offensive, which reduced pressure on the Army of South Vietnam and made it look like they were winning the war without the Americans.

The Laotian military structure did not have the capability to provide aerial support for food, water, ammunition, troop replacements and evacuation of the wounded and American soldiers could not legally do so. Civilian contractors filled the slots and Air America flight crews, using an unheard of precedent of operating non FAA certified, United States military aircraft became conscripted soldiers without their knowledge and only their implied consent.

Air America flight crews had been operating in Laos since 1959. Most of them had at least 5 years experience in country and some had more than 15 years with the company. These crewmembers had found a way to survive in a war torn country, but they were not totally prepared to act as combat soldiers. Essentially, they were unarmed. Well trained, but were never told about their intended plight. One hundred and forty six Air America flight crewmembers were killed in action from 1950 through 1975, but 56 of them, representing 38% of the total died from 1969 through 1974, and only one in 1974. Most of them died in United States military aircraft that were loaned to Air America by the Department of Defense and State. No other civilian employee of a private corporation was ever loaned U.S. military aircraft for operations in a combat environment in the entire history of the United States. Even more significant, at least two aircraft were shot

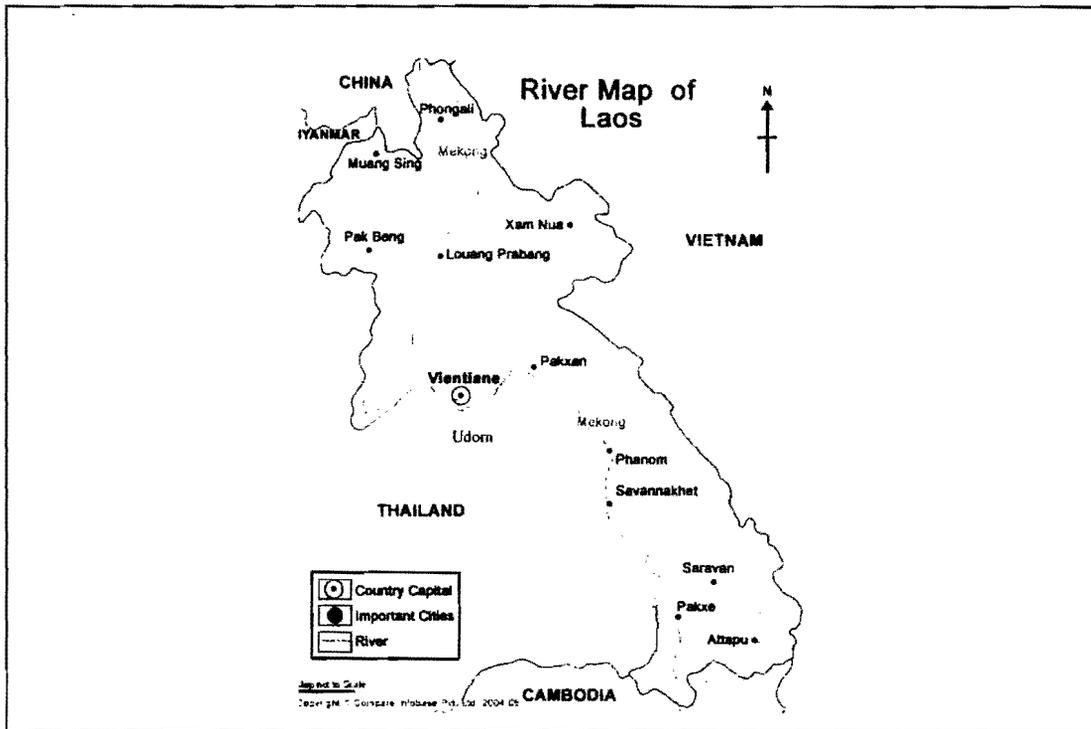
down over Laos, not by the North Vietnamese, nor the Pathet Lao, but by Chinese anti aircraft guns operated by Chinese military personnel in Laos.

The C-123 provider was an Air America workhorse. The original AAM aircraft were N-registered, meaning they were US Registered aircraft. Later, all of the aircraft were converted to C-123 K models with two jet engines added. All of them were property of the United States Air Force, not FAA certified and operated by Civilian aircrews. After 1969, there were normally six C-123 aircraft stationed in Udorn, Thailand, which is 30 miles south of Vientiane, and six in Vientiane, Laos. The fixed wing flight crews were all stationed in Vientiane and those assigned to fly the Udorn based aircraft would either deadhead across the border in the early morning, or would remain over night in Udorn the night before. Each aircraft was capable of carrying 18 thousand pounds of cargo and normally flew two to four missions a day, seven days a week.

No one knows the exact amount of cargo that was carried, but a close average can be easily estimated. Using an average load of at least 10,000 pounds and an average of two flights a day, and assuming some time was lost to aircraft in maintenance and weather delays, at least 8 aircraft a day carried 20,000 pounds five days a week, and that's a very conservative estimate. This lasted at least from January 1969 until December 1973 representing 960 flight days. (4 years times 12=48 times 20 days a month) That would mean in just that period, and not counting all the years prior to 1969, the C-123 aircraft carried, easily, 154 million pounds of cargo. These statistics do not include the fleet of C-46's and the Caribous that Air America operated. Many of the flights, and the majority of the C-46 flights were airdrop loads, where the aircraft was flying in an elliptical pattern at precise altitude to drop food, water and ammunition with pinpoint accuracy to refugee camps and battlefield locations. Very often these aircraft were fired upon while in the pattern and often were just sitting ducks with no protection.

The Vientiane aircraft carried mostly food, water, troops and fuel. The Udorn aircraft carried ammunition. All of the bombs and rockets used by the T-28s and Cessna Forward air control aircraft based in various places in Laos were delivered by the C-123K. There were no navigational aids in Laos. All flying was conducted by time and distance, visual reference and years of experience. The cargo was then distributed to various locations by the helicopter fleet, which consisted of United States Marine Corps H-34 helicopters, modified H-34 helicopters called "Twin Packs", Huey helicopters on loan from the United States Army and a fleet of Short takeoff and landing aircraft, which were primarily Helio Couriers and Pilatus Porters. The helicopter fleet was also responsible for troop placements and withdrawals deep in enemy territory.

All medical evacuations were handled by the helicopters from elevated pads in the mountains and often while under enemy fire. There were times that I was forced to stop flying and literally wash the blood from the decks with buckets of water because it became too slippery. It was difficult to remain focused at times because of the carnage. I carried out young fighting boys with missing limbs and in some cases missing faces where shrapnel had removed the nose, mouth and eyes and leaving only the orifices to a living person in terrible agony.



I have attached a detailed description of one C-123 that describes its history from the U.S. Air force to Air America and its eventual disappearance. What I am going to tell you next is a typical C-123 day, but in this case, the flight ended in a tragedy. The flight crew taxied from the Air America ramp in Udon down the taxiways along side of the active runway to a location on the Airfield called Pepper Grinder. There, they shut down and United States Air Force personnel loaded 18000 pounds of ammunition, which included white phosphorus, on the aircraft. The pilot in command was Captain George Ritter. The co-pilot was First Officer Roy Townley. The senior Air Freight Specialist, commonly called "Kicker" was Ed Weissenback and his assistant was Khamphanh Saysongkham, who was either Thai or Lao. John McRainey was flying a C-123 K the same day out of Pepper Grinder. John, George and their wives were close friends and while waiting to be loaded they agreed to have dinner together that night. John's load of bombs was designated for Lima Site 20A. George's aircraft was scheduled to fly to Lima Site 69A, which was further to the west.

They both departed at the same time and climbed out to the north to the normal altitude of 9000 feet since the C-123 was not pressurized. John reached his destination, unloaded and headed back to Udon for another load. George Ritter and his crew never reached 69A and were never heard from again. John told me the ground was obscured by clouds and there was a stronger than normal wind from the south that day. George's flight path would take him north to where the Mekong turned to the west and then west to 69A staying well south of the Mekong and Pak Beng. The Chinese were building a road in accordance with an aid contract from the southern part of China, south through Pak Beng to the Mekong River. It was known the Chinese had heavy anti aircraft guns near Pak Beng, but no one had been shot at before to my knowledge, and no one to this day has been able to explain why the Chinese needed heavy anti aircraft guns in a neutral country.

UTD/CA/BISF 4

COMPANY  
Version  
(Restricted)

AIR AMERICA, INC.  
PRELIMINARY REPORT OF AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT  
C-123K, 57-6293  
NEAR BAN HONG SA (LS-62), LAOS  
27 DECEMBER 1971

18 February 1972

A. SYNOPSIS

On 27 December 1971, Air America, Inc. C-123K, 57-6293 crewed by PIC G. L. Ritter, F/O R. F. Townley, AFS E. J. Weissenback, [REDACTED] disappeared while on a cargo flight to Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69), Laos. No reliable information has been received since of either aircrew or aircraft and it must be presumed both are lost.

B. INVESTIGATION

1.1 History of Flight

Between 0615L<sup>1/</sup> and 0630 on 27 December 1971 the flight crew for C-123K, 57-6293, consisting of PIC G. L. Ritter, F/O. R. F. Townley, AFS E. J. Weissenback, [REDACTED] reported to the Air America, Inc. Flight Operations Section at Udorn RTAFB for briefing. The early briefing was required since 293 needed a Functional Check Flight (FCF) prior to release for operations. The right propeller had been changed on 26 December 1971 and the aircraft required an FCF.

The crew was briefed that they would work out of Peppergrinder (PPG) after the FCF. PPG work primarily consists of loading and dispatching mixed ordnance for up-country sites.

The Senior Operations Specialist, Mr. E. J. Wilson, in the Flight Information Center (PIC/UTH) was able to ascertain that he personally

<sup>1/</sup> All times herein, unless otherwise noted, are local based on the 24-hour clock.

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- 2 -

had briefed the aircrew and believes the briefing was actually given to the PIC, Captain Ritter. The briefing was general and covered the normal PPG missions. It included the current tactical situation at 4 to 5 major airfields and some 2 to 3 commonly used Drop Zones (DZs). The situation in the LS-69 area was included since this was a frequent destination for PPG flights. Captain Ritter should have been familiar with the tactical situation near LS-69 since he had flown the same route on 25 December 1971, some two days prior to the mishap. A general briefing was necessitated since the actual destination would not be known until assigned by PPG. The aircrew acknowledged the briefing and was duly signed off on the daily flight schedule (a normal procedure of the PIC briefer).

The aircrew signed for the aircraft/mission and departed to the aircraft. It may be presumed the aircrew reviewed the posted weather, including that of LS-69, prior to departure. Evidently, the ground run was satisfactory and 293 departed T-08 at 0658 for a short FCF, landing at 0722. The aircraft checked normally and the PIC radioed its "OK" condition to the Senior Operations Manager (SOM). He dispatched 293 directly to the PPG. The FCF forms were taken with the aircraft to the PPG - a not infrequent minor discrepancy which probably did not influence the subsequent mishap.

At PPG, the aircraft was loaded with 12,892 pounds of mixed ordnance including 75mm shells, 81mm rounds, 222 caliber small arms ammunition and white phosphorous smoke rounds. This, plus whatever fuel remained from the original 1250 gallon load brought the aircraft close to its maximum allowable weight of 60,000 pounds (see Weight and Balance Section).

1.4 Airfield Information

LS-69 and LS-69A have been combined to one site now called LS-69. It is basically 3,100' x 100' clay/laterite strip with an on-call non-directional beacon. Evidently this beacon was not functioning at 0900 on 27 December 1971. The surrounding terrain, both north and south, is heavily populated with enemy forces.

1.5 Search and Rescue

The Search and Rescue (SAR) effort was conducted out of the VTE station and consisted largely of Air America, Inc. aircraft. A detailed log of search efforts is available at AAM, Inc. VTE if required. For various reasons, the USAF could only offer limited assistance. O-1 and A-1 aircraft did search late the first day but the bulk of their assistance was through radio relay from control aircraft.

With a few breaks due to weather and one false lead from a native claiming to have seen an aircraft, the SAR continued through 5 January 1972. All efforts to find traces of 293 were unsuccessful.

Due to the extreme hostility of the area, several AAM, Inc. aircraft received battle damage while on the SAR. Due to the proximity of the hostile Route 46, the SAR was rather constricted in nature. The final effort consisted of dropping leaflets offering rewards for information and/or the aircrew. The SAR, although late in starting, was as thorough as terrain, the weather and the enemy would permit. Further air search was deemed fruitless after 5 January 1972.

C. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

2.1 Analysis

Very little of a positive nature can be said of the final flight of 57-6293 since its location is still undetermined. However, from statements of the pilots of other C-123K aircraft, an analysis of weather, the cargo, and the current tactical situation in and around the LS-62/LS-69 area, a reasonable conclusion can be reached.

Based on the computed crosswinds at 8,500 feet, 293's reported altitude, it was likely that 293 was to the right of his desired track enroute out of L-08 and at a higher than normal ground speed. The pilot, Captain Ritter, although supposedly well familiar with the route, was likely flying an inadequate crosswind correction heading in and out of cloud bases. This could have placed him to the right of L-23 and, later, well to the right and beyond LS-62 since no navigational aids were available. A valley, similar to that of LS-62, is present just to the northeast of LS-62 and close to Route 46. An off-track course to the right could have explained Captain Ritter's apparent concern over the weather although both of the other two Captains were flying at the same reported altitude but in relatively good weather conditions. Had Captain Ritter been to the northeast of his reported position at LS-62 and initiated a descending left turn towards LS-69, the enemy reaction over Route 46 would be immediate and violent. Large anti-aircraft guns are only 15 miles north of LS-62. With some 12,892 pounds of ordnance aboard the aircraft, it could well be imagined that no time for radio calls was available. The SAR effort could not be extended into the Route 46 area.

Several other possibilities in the causal areas include maintenance malfunctions, lost, hijack, etc., but all are even more unlikely than enemy action and would probably have precipitated some radio call(s). The likelihood of 293 merely crashing in the weather is a remote possibility if he were well off-track to the right - say with an in-operative heading indicator but, again, some radio calls should have been made. A possibility that 293 blew up from an internal explosion is present but was not considered likely. Flight in and out of clouds while on a visual clearance is an operational requirement and was not, by itself, considered a factor in this mishap.

In summary, although the cause of the disappearance of 293 must be listed as undetermined, the aircraft probably strayed from course and, over exceedingly hostile country, was hit by enemy fire and rapidly destroyed.

## 2.2 Conclusions

### a. Findings

- (1) The crew was properly certificated.
- (2) The aircraft was generally properly maintained in accordance with Company/Customer procedures and standards.
- (3) The aircraft was probably correctly loaded and dispatched from PPG.
- (4) At the time of the flight towards LS-69 the winds were relatively strong and from the southwest.
- (5) C-12X, 57-6293 became overdue at about 0900 on 27 December 1971.
- (6) An erroneous report of the aircraft landing at LS-69 misled the Flight Watches into non/late notification of an overdue aircraft.

Vientiane (L-08) on 30 July 69, Long Tieng (LS-20A) - Udom (T-08) on 14 November 69, and Udom (T-08) - Luang Prabang (L-54) on 29 June 70 (Log book of D. Keele, in: UTD/Keele/B1F6); USAF records note: administratively transferred from XMTG, that is from Udom, to 315TAW, Phan Rang, on 70154, that is on 1 June 70; to maintenance by 315TAW on 70162, that is on 9 June 70; landed at Pakse (L-11), Laos, on 5 May 70 with the landing gear retracted, damaging 85 % of the belly skin (Accident report, in: UTD/Dreifus/B1F11); repaired and returned to service on 21 May 70 (Minutes ExCom-AAACL/AAM of 12 May 70, in: UTD/CIA/B8F4); current on 1 July 70 (Leary, *The aircraft of Air America*, p. 20); based at Vientiane 1-31 July 71, still assigned to contract AID-439-342 (F.O.C. of 1 July 71, 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); in use out of Vientiane at least between 6 November 71 and 13 November 71 (Log book of R. L. Wofford, in: UTD/Wofford [Sm.C. 6]); in use out of Udom at least between 23 October 72 and 7 February 73 (Crew member duty report of H. F. Miller, in: UTD/Miller/B4F6); at Udom on 24 January 73 (Udom daily flight schedule of 24 January 73, in: UTD/Dexter/F1); at Udom on 18 April 73 for local training out of Vientiane (Udom daily flight schedule of 18 April 73, in: UTD/Dexter/F1); used out of Vientiane 1-30 November 73 for Royal Lao Air Force training (F.O.C. of 1 November 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7C).

**Fate:** probably given to the R.Lao Air Force in 73; but possibly came to the R. Thai AF in 75 (?), as it was used 1990 in the movie "Air America" for the crash at "Tango 7".

**4) C-123s received in 1966:**

Fairchild C-123B	"293"	20303	24 March 66	ex USAF 57-6293; Bien Hoa (BY 16) to 2AD, Da-nang, on 63182 (1 July 63); was to go to AAITTVL04 (Air Asia, Tainan) for maintenance on 63251, but did not; instead to Hong Kong for WK-maintenance the same day; back to 2AD, Bien Hoa, on 63278; AAI TTF WQPC (maintenance at Tainan) to 2AD, Tan Son Nhut on 64366; 2AD to AAI TTF WQPC on 65328
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**Service history:** transferred from AAITT WQPC, that is from overhaul by Air Asia, Tainan, to TL (= Air America) on 66083 = 24 March 66; in use out of Vientiane at least between 9 May 66 and 3 March 68, when still a C-123B (Log book of D. D. Wharton, in: UTD/Wharton/B1F2); used out of Vientiane on 8 April 66, 1 May 66, and 1 May 68 under contract AID-439-342 (Aircraft status as of 8 April 66, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1, of 1 May 66, in: UTD/Hickler/B1F2, and of 1 May 68, in: UTD/Herd/B2); made a gear-up touch-down at Nam Bac (LS-203), Laos, on 12 August 67, damaging the bottom of the fuselage, but subsequently landed correctly; repaired and returned to service on 6 September 67; still a C-123B at this time (Accident report, in: UTD/Hickler/B24F3; Minutes ExCom-AAACL/AAM of 22 August 67, in: UTD/CIA/B8F2); photo in *Airliners*, summer 93, p. 18; second Air

America C-123B to be converted by Fairchild to C-123K, departed Vientiane to Clark AFB on 27 March 68 (Aircraft status as of 1 May 68, in: UTD/Herd/B2); returned to Air America in late August 68 (F.O.C. of 15 Aug. 68, in: UTD/LaShomb/B14); in use out of Vientiane at least between 6 September 68 and 20 April 69, when already a C-123K (Log book of D. D. Wharton, in: UTD/Wharton/B1F2); in use out of Udorn at least between 3 May 69 to 27 February 71 (F.O.C. of 15 June 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B; Crew member duty report of H. F. Miller, in: UTD/Miller/B4F6, Log book of D. Keele, in: UTD/Keele/B1F6); was already a C-123K on 15 June 69; used out of Udorn under contract AID-439-713 at least between 16 June and 31 August 69 (F.O.C.s of 15 June 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B and of 15 Aug. 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B1F1); USAF C-123K 57-6293 was administratively reserialled as 57006293 in 1969; administratively transferred from Tainan to 315TAW, Phan Rang, on 70146, that is on 24 May 70; passed on to Air America (GD) on 70155, that is on 2 June 70; current with Air America on 1 July 70 (Leary, *The aircraft of Air America*, p. 20); at Nam Tan (LS-268), Laos, in 70 (photo in *Air America Log*, 1970/1); based at Vientiane at least between 1 July 71 and 31 July 71, still assigned to contract AID-439-342 (F.O.C. of 1 July 71 and 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); hit by ground fire in Laos on 29 November 71, damaging the cylinder and sheet metal; repaired and returned to service on 30 November 71 (Minutes ExCom-AACL/AAM of 11 January 72, in: UTD/CIA/B9F7).

**Fate:** believed destroyed en route to Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69), Northern Laos, on 27 November 71, while on a "PPG", i.e. *Peppergrinder* flight, carrying a full load of ammo and white phosphorus; believed shot down (by Chinese building a road in Laos ?) and possibly disappeared in a midair explosion, as no wreckage was ever spotted; it is unknown what happened to pilot George L. Ritter, co-pilot Roy F. Townley and kickers Edward J. Weissenback and Khamphanh Saysongkham (Accident report, in: UTD/CIA/B15F4; Board of Review report, in: UTD/CIA/B29F2; List "Aircraft destroyed or lost", in: UTD/CIA/B49F2; Memorial; Memorial file, in: UTD/LaShomb/B16F3; XOXO dated 25 April 72, in: UTD/Luckett/B1F3; UTD/Leary/B1 for 27 November 71; see also Robbins, *Air America*, pp. 206-12).

Fairchild C-123B "613" 20062 24 March 66 ex USAF 54-0613

**Service history:** transferred from 2AD, Tan Son Nhut, to TL (= Air America) on 24 March 66; ferried to Tainan on 7 April 66; test flown at Tainan on 15 April 66; ferried Tainan-Hong Kong-Danang-Vientiane on 16 April 66; used out of Vientiane at least between 19 April 66 and 12 May 69 (Log book of D. D. Wharton, in: UTD/Wharton/B1F2); based at Vientiane; used out of Vientiane on 8 April 66, 1 May 66, 1 May 68, and 15 August 69 under contract AID-439-342 (Aircraft status as of 8 April 66, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1, of 1 May 66, in: UTD/Hickler/B1F2, of 1 May 68, in: UTD/Herd/B2, and of 15 Aug. 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B1F1); USAF records note: C-123B 54-613 GI (= returned from outside USAF) CNA (= Air America) to LOG HQ, Wright Patterson, on 67120; GF / Reconciliation on 67151; that is: C-123B 54-613 was administratively transferred to the Logistic Air Command Headquarters, Wright Patterson AFB, on 28 April 67, but administratively, the decision was made on 29 May 67 to let the aircraft with the same user; USAF records note: to CADTT, Tainan, on 67304, that is on 29 October 67; "613" had IRAN at Tainan in November 67 (Aircraft status as of 1 May 68, in: UTD/Herd/B2); made a nose gear up landing at Udorn (T-08), Thailand, on 21 September 68 (Accident report, in: UTD/Hickler/B24F7); repaired; converted to C-123K in 68/69; USAF records note: reserialled as 54000613 in 1969; used out of Vientiane on 4 April 69, when already a C-123K (Log book of D. D.

Jim Rhyne, Chief Pilot fixed wing Laos, loaded up a Volpar (A converted Beech C-45 with twin turbo prop engines) with leaflets soliciting any information about the crew and offering a reward. He and the Senior AFS (Kicker) Mr. Bobby Herald were in the vicinity of Pak Beng where they thought The C-123 might have gone down to drop their leaflets. They were hit with a heavy anti aircraft gun and Jim was severely wounded. His leg was amputated at the ankle, but he eventually returned to flying.

There was absolutely no reason for the Chinese to fire on an unarmed aircraft. There should have been a complaint lodged, but looking at the chronological events and you will see that Nixon was making an unprecedented trip to China during this period and China was soon to become a member of the United Nations. An argument could be presented that China, who everyone thought was trying to spread communism, actually was trying to obtain firm entrenchment in the world dominated by capitalists. As you can see, China was granted inclusion in the United Nations during this period and over the years the United States has a major trade imbalance with China.

The Chinese shot down another C-123K in March 1973. Captain James Ackley, First Officer Clarence Driver, AFS, Chudchai Chiewchongsuk and AFS Kenekeo Narissak were all killed. Clarence was one of the few black Americans with Air America. He and his wife and family were well thought of by us. Jim Ackley had been my direct supervisor when I was co-piloting the C-47 in Saigon. He was retired from the Air Force and well experienced.

Flight Mechanic Alfredo Alor was killed in a Marine Corps H-34 helicopter operated by Air America by a rotor blade after the aircraft was forced down from small arms fire in the southern part of Laos in May 1972. His death hit hard with me. Fred always looked like he was going to a parade. He had an infectious smile and I liked flying with him.

Captain John M. Bannerman, First officer Charles McCarthy, AFS B. Somchai and AFS Suthi Chipaibul were flying a U.S. Air Force C-7 Caribou when they were hit by 37 MM near Saravane Laos in November 1972. The aircraft crashed and all died. Air America was involved with supplying Laotian troops in the southern part of Laos in a paramilitary role and the fighting was very heavy in Saravane.

Captain Harvey Potter and training captain John Beardsley died in March 1970 from burns received in a U.S. Marine Corps H-34 that crashed while supplying Laotian troops near Louang Prabang north of Vientiane. FM Joe Gaculais was severely burned, but survived and eventually returned to flying. Joe's Burn scars were obvious and extreme. Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Beardsley were quickly packed up and shipped out of Udorn. Neither remarried and both had to sue the C.I.A. to get the life insurance promised to them when their husbands were killed.

Gerald Booth and FM Montano Centeno were killed in a U.S. Marine Corps H-34 in July 1969 when it crashed in an elevated pad over looking the PDJ. He was supplying the Laotian troops with food, water, ammunition, or a combination of all.

Captain Howard Boyles, First officer Jack Cavill, AFS Pracit Chaichana, flying a U.S. Air Force C-123K, were killed in February 1973 after being hit by a missile near Thaket to the east of Vientiane and north of Savannekhet. AFS Sourinch parachuted and survived.

Captain Herbert Clark was killed in June 1971 after his C-46 was hit by enemy ground fire and crashed. Three of the AFS crewmembers bailed out and survived, but Trikit Thuttanon was killed also.

Vietnam was not totally administrative. In April 1973 Captain Charles Osterman, FO Terry Clark and FM Valeriano Rosales were flying a U.S. Army Huey and was hit by a stella heat-seeking missile near Huong Hoa SVN. All three were killed and the aircraft destroyed.

Air America also operated C-130 aircraft on loan from the United States Air Force. The C-130 was capable of carrying huge loads and much faster speeds than the other cargo aircraft. They were also pressurized, but as I mentioned earlier, entry into the airfields in Laos had to be done visually. There were no navigation aids and the weather in Laos during the smoky season was like flying in a glass of milk. In April 1970 Captain Kevin Cochrane was trying to land at LS-20 Alternate, which was nestled in between two ridgelines. There was only one way in and one way out of this airfield because a huge Karst was at one end. The C-130 was a big plus for the war effort. They were able to carry many wounded soldiers at faster speeds to the hospital in Thailand, and bring back fresh troops the same day. On this day Kevin hit a mountain very close to the airfield and all were killed. Other crewmembers included FO Robert McKean, AFS Gerald Delong and Billy Hester. Adding to the tragedy, the aircraft that day included training FO Huey Rodgers and Flight Engineer Milton Smart.

In July 1972 Captain Ben Coleman ran into a mountain trying to drop arms to Laotian troops in heavy battle. The weather was bad that day and the clouds were touching the trees at it often does in the mountains in Laos. The crash also killed FO John Grover and AFS Thanom Khanthaphengxay. They were flying a DHC-6 Twin Otter. All of them were highly experienced. Jack Grover previously was a Porter captain in Vietnam and accepted a FO position in Laos. Only the very senior pilots operated the fixed wing fleet in Laos and one of the reasons I transferred to helicopters in Udorn was because I could not retain a captain's position in the Porter.

Ernesto Cruz was a highly experienced flight mechanic and often conducted line training for new flight mechanics. In January 1971 he was flying with Bill Foster in a U.S. Marine Corps H-34 and conducting line training with FM Reginald Boston. A rocket either hit the aircraft, or one of the grenades exploded while on a pad north of LS20A. Ernesto was killed. Boston lost an eye and was burned severely. Foster was also injured.

Ralph "Cotton" Davis loaded up his Porter at LS20A, took off and was climbing parallel to Sky Line ridge adjacent to the runway when he was hit by small arms fire and killed instantly. The aircraft crashed and burned all aboard were killed. Everybody liked Cotton



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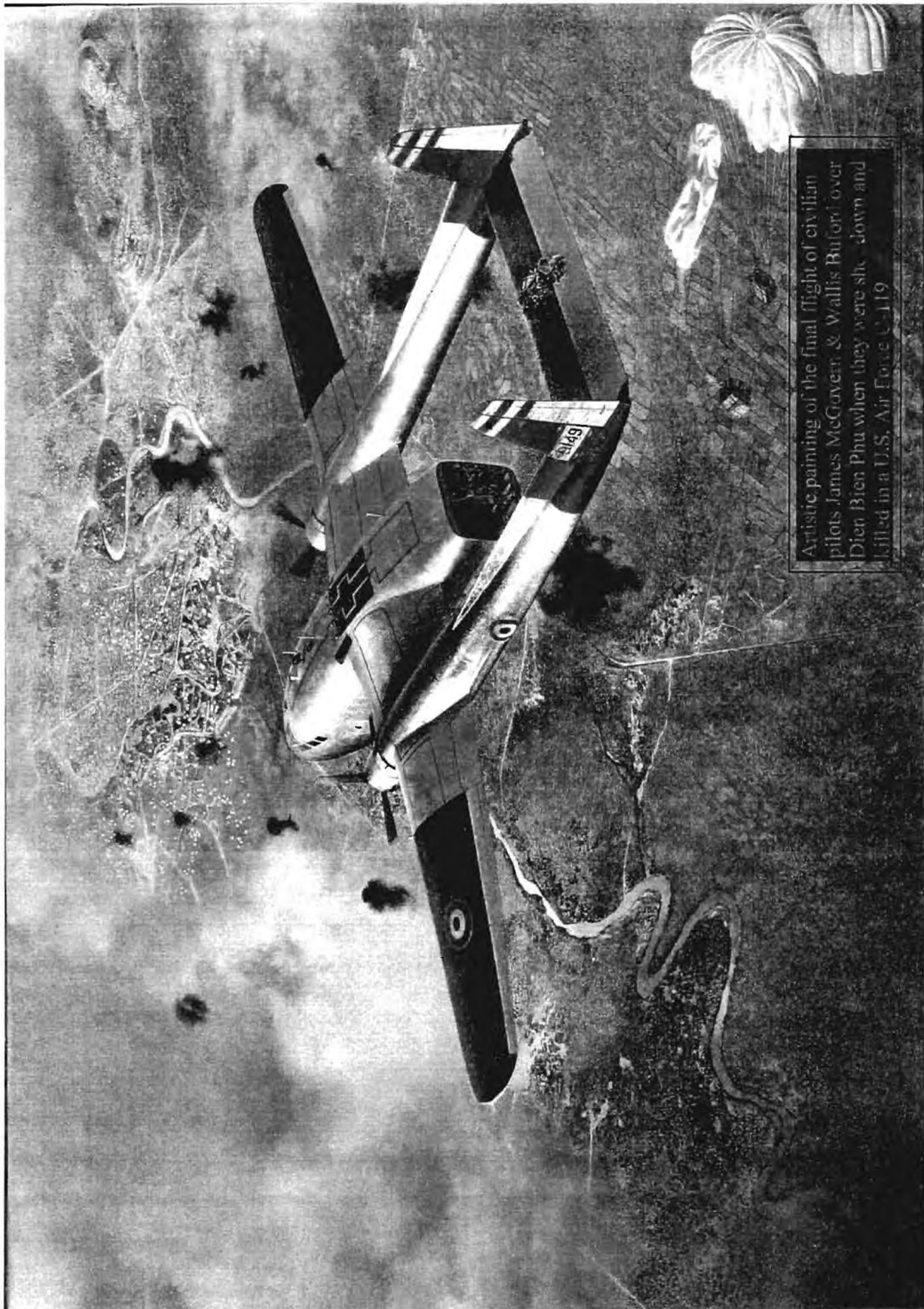
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## Enlarged Photo



Air America pilots Howard Kelly & Milton Matheson were killed in this U.S. Air Force C-47. This accident might not have happened had the navigation equipment not been removed.



Artistic painting of the final flight of civilian pilots James McGovern & Wallis Burford over Dien Bien Phu when they were shot down and killed in a U.S. Air Force C-119

and this tragedy was hard to swallow. Initially the CIA tried to pin the blame on Cotton for overloading the aircraft. An autopsy revealed a bullet in his heart.

The Porter was an amazing aircraft. It had a 550-shaft horsepower turbine engine and a 48-foot wingspan. It could land on a dime and had phenomenal takeoff capability. In Laos it was used to make airdrops to troop pads deep in the mountains. It was popular because it was powerful and could operate at very slow speeds, but this capability also made its mission difficult and precarious in the weather conditions often encountered in Laos. In March 1971 Ben Franklin crashed into a mountain slope and was killed after taking off from a strip that looked more like a mudslide than a landing strip.

A sniper round to the head killed William Gibbs in May 1969. He was flying a U.S. Marine Corps H-34 helicopter near Louang Prabang and was taking off from an outlying pad after delivering supplies to Laotian troops.

Norman Grammer was flying a U.S. Army Huey and approaching LS20A when his aircraft crashed after completing a re-supply flight killing all of the crewmembers aboard. The exact cause of the accident has not been fully explained. One source said he was shot down, but another said it was caused by mechanical failure due to pilot induced mast bumping trying to remain in visual contact with the ground in bad weather. It has been confirmed one blade came off the main rotor system and the aircraft plummeted from a high altitude. The FM was Glenn Woods. Mr. Woods was the flight mechanic who shot down the AN-45 Colt North Vietnamese aircraft that had been bombing LS-85 in 1968. LS-85 housed several Air Force technicians who operated a secret navigation site used by US Air Force aircraft to pinpoint bomb targets in North Vietnam.

Captain William Reeves, FO Joel Gudahl, AFS Praves Satarakia and AFS Thonkham Khammanphet were killed when their C-123K hit a mountain in bad weather near Ban Namm Eui, Laos. They were carrying 12000 pounds of ordinance and five passengers.

Captain Howard Kelly, FO Milton Matheson and AFS Nguyen Van Hanh were killed when their U.S. Air Force C-47 hit a mountain in bad weather just north of Danang in January 1969. Danang had a navigation aid that was used by the Air Force and the Marine Corps. I flew the C-47 for six months and with Howard Kelly often. Howard was a WW2 pilot who was shot down and escaped by walking across the Pyrenees. He had years of experience. Milt Matheson was also a retired Air Force pilot, who was hoping to make enough money to buy an ice cream franchise in the USA. All of the C-47 aircraft I flew in Vietnam were U.S. Air force owned. So, why was the navigation equipment removed from the aircraft? Howard took off from Danang and flew to Hue in the north. In bad weather there was no way to get back unless you flew beneath the clouds along the beach. I did this often in the Porter because the waves could be seen breaking on the beach. The problem was that everybody did the same, but the military used UHF radios and Air America used VHF. We couldn't talk to each other and very often I would come face to face with a C-130 coming in the opposite direction, or a F-100 coming off a bomb run and all of us were below 500 feet. Howard took the safer route and crossed of the mountains to the north of Danang through a passage. This time the passage was closed

and Howard and Milton crashed and dashed all the hopes and dreams of both their families because Air America did not want to place UHF radios and navigation equipment in their airplanes.

It was never clearly understood why we were operating U.S. military aircraft but never had a close relationship with the military. It was CIA secrecy I'm sure, but not having radio contact with each other in a combat area was deadly. In March 1971 Kenneth Houp had a mid air collision with an Army Cobra. Ken was flying a Porter and I know for a fact that all AAM Porters had VHF only and no other navigation aid. Both were trying to land in Can Tho in the southern part of SVN. I would imagine the Army was as upset about the lack of communications as we were. It is unprecedented that an airfield with hundreds of landings a day would operate with some on VHF and some on UHF, each unable to hear or speak to each other.

I wrote an article about the plight of flight mechanics, recently updated it and have attached it to this letter. The H-34 did not allow the flight mechanic to see where he was going. He could only see where he had been. Manu Latloi was killed in April 1974 when his aircraft over shot a pad and rolled over. He was thrown from the aircraft and the fall killed him. There have been several flight mechanics with similar stories and many lived to tell the tale. However, all of them received serious injuries and many were never able to fly again. The CIA essentially abandoned them and some are destitute to this day.

Feliciana Manolo was a Flight Mechanic flying a H-34 in July 1972. He was killed by gunfire while attempting a medical evacuation near Pakse in the southern part of Laos. The Filipino Flight Mechanics flew the H-34 for the most part. Many of them were wounded or killed. None of them ever received any compensation that I am aware of.

Jon Merkel was flying as co-captain in an H-34 with John Ford near Tha Lin Noi Laos in February 1970. A single bullet through the cockpit window killed him.

In April 1971 Harry Mulholland had a mid air with a Air Force U-17 and was killed. Again, no communications between aircraft.

Lloyd Randell was killed in a Porter in bad weather trying to land at LS20A in April 1972.

James Rausch was another black American. Jim came to Air America with a militant attitude. He crashed in a training accident in 1967 just out of Saigon. He was seriously hurt. He recovered and ended up in Udorn with a changed attitude. I liked him personally and considered him to be a good pilot. He was flying near Ban Houi Sai in June 1972 with a Thai co-pilot in a Marine Corps H-34. They were delivering the normal load of food, guns and water to troops at an outlying field and ran into some enemy gunfire. A single round hit him in the head and he probably died instantly.

Frank Thorsen and I came to Air America on the same day and both of us were assigned to Saigon. Frank learned how to fly as a civilian, where most of us had been taught in the

military. Frank opted for the C-45 and ended up in the converted Volpar stationed in Udorn the same time I was there. The Volpar, with its turbine engines, could be used as a high altitude radio relay for the U.S. Military after Site 85 was demolished, and also as a photo recon aircraft. Pilots would fly in a circle at 25,000 feet for hours on end on oxygen. It was a tedious and thankless job. The photo recon work was equally dangerous, but livelier. These missions required two crewmembers and they were often shot at by enemy troops. In July 1973 Frank was killed with a single round. I helped clean the blood from Frank's personnel effects.

Leonard Wiehrdt was a retired Air Force pilot. I had flown with him often when he was assigned to C-47s in Saigon. In April 1972 he was flying a Porter near LS69A and ran into the ground. I was there when it happened. He has sustained severe head injuries and probably had died on impact.

When you consider the volume of flights from 1950 through 1975, the number of years, which represents a quarter of a century, and the conditions under which we operated, one hundred forty six KIA's is relatively small. Yet, it should be remembered, these people were civilians. Nixon's doctrine was successful. Pulling the pressure off the ARVN by widening the war in Laos did make the Army of South Vietnam appear able to defend them selves. The cost to the ethnic tribes was high. More than 100,000 died and are still being purged by the new Lao government.

Without Air America it is apparent Nixon's Vietnamization program would have failed. Nixon had other problems. He needed to know what the North Vietnamese were thinking to obtain an edge at the bargaining table in Paris. Once again Air America was used.

Air America had two H-500 helicopters used in Laos, but they were only cover for two H-500P helicopters that each cost over one million in 1972 dollars. Air America also had 6 Twin-Packs, which were converted Marine Corps H-34 fitted with two 900 horsepower turbine engines. The 500P had an extra rotor blade and a tail rotor that was altered to make less noise. The engine had a muffler and it was called the quiet helicopter. Ground Navigation Systems were a relatively new concept in those years. So was terrain following radar and forward looking inferred radar, commonly called FLIR. The two 500P aircraft were outfitted with FLIR. It was elaborately configured, and used liquid nitrogen in the system, but for the pilot it consisted of a TV monitor that displayed objects according to heat and made it seem like you were looking at a negative. You could the shape of a person, but unless you knew the person well, you couldn't recognize him if seen in the light. You could see a car, but only if it had been driven recently and still warm. A cold auto would be seen as a shadow. Learning to fly with the monitor only was difficult, at least for me. A blade of grass would look like a tree when you were parked on the ground and you tended to go backwards involuntarily when coming to a hover.

I never flew the aircraft in Laos. I did later in 1973, but none of that had anything to do with Air America's mission in Laos to my knowledge, and is only mentioned here to prove I am definitely familiar with the aircraft. I was assigned to special project and

flying the Twin Pack with several other pilots when the 500P was used in Laos. Two pilots who were not employees of Air America operated the 500P.

The mission was for the 500P to go into North Vietnam with a crew, who would splice into the main phone line. A series of antennas that resembled spider webs were placed in trees in locations where the telephone signals could be relayed from antenna to antenna and finally to a place where the telephone conversations could be monitored in safety. The missions for the Twin Packs were to act as search and rescue for the 500P when it conducted its mission and to place the spider web antennas in the trees. Two Twin Otter aircraft equipped with TFR were used in the mission as well. The navigation aids allowed us to find an object as small as a tree in the middle of the night. We also were equipped with night goggles and learned to fly with them so that we could place intelligence-gathering teams in small landing pads without the use of lights.

Several weeks of intensive training was required to learn how to place the antenna in a tree while flying with night goggles. There is much more to the process, but further descriptions would not have any value. The point is, that Air America was responsible for furnishing information to the Americans at the Paris peace talks, which allowed them to obtain a final peace plan and obtain the release of the POWs held in Hanoi.

For all intents and purposes the war, as I said, was then over. In 1974 I was assigned to airborne road watch missions where we could see streams of North Vietnamese traffic going from the north to South Vietnam through Laos. The war in Laos ended in 1974. The NVA could travel through Laos with their guns and troops without fear. As soon as they got their troops in place and their logistics organized they attacked South Vietnam and the country folded practically over night. There were no more US troops to stop them and the Army of South Vietnam was never a match for the NVA.

The employees of Air America scattered like leaves on trees in a windstorm. I went to Taiwan and began a career in the oil field. Many went to Iran, where another adventure was about to unfold. Some ended up with Southern Air Transport, which was another CIA owned private company.

I am reminded of Stephen in the Book of Acts. Speaking truth, as he knew it, resulted in his death by stoning. The average person working in the C.I.A. or any government position is too young to remember Vietnam. Yet, the lessons we learned there can be applied today. Pointing out the errors, the misleading circumstances and the truth more often than not falls on deaf ears. It shouldn't. Several years ago, before Vietnam and even before Korea, a very wise man said *"The things that will destroy us are: politics without principle; pleasure without conscience; wealth without work; knowledge without character; business without morality; science without humanity; and worship without sacrifice."* His name was Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi. We must acknowledge the past and not cast out those who participated in the fight for freedom we take for granted today.

Should there be any question whether we qualify for veteran status? Who else would

qualify more? There is a group attempting to obtain civil service retirement. I believe that one should qualify in accordance with a certain set of rules. I have problems with the civil service retirement issue because no private employee ever qualified for CSR and it does not include the many local and third country nationals that fought, bled and died with us. Then again, perhaps we should not look too hard at the vehicle used to provide the honor. I have been told that \$20,000,000 was returned to the U.S. Treasury when Air America was dissolved. I can understand why many former employees think that some of it should have been returned to them. Why not? Because of precedent? The law? The rules? The truth is we never could have accomplished all that we did had we been operating by the rules. Perhaps we should start doing what's right.

Give the former employees of Air America some of the money that was returned to the treasury. It is ours and we earned it. And, grant the former employees veteran status. We were soldiers too and no other entity deserves it more. Do it for the simple reason that honoring those who served in the past provides guidance to those who must serve in the future to preserve the freedom we enjoy now.

*Allen Cates*

Allen Cates

**THE AIRCRAFT  
OF**

***AIR AMERICA***

by

**Dr. Joe F. Leeker**

The following database is the result of many years of research, especially done at the Air America Archives at McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas. All information contained in the sections entitled "Types of missions flown," "Statistics," and "Service history" as well as the photos are exclusively based on archival material, mostly preserved at the Air America Archives. Additional information came from the USAF Aircraft Assignment Records preserved at the USAF Historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB, the records of the Director General of Civil Aviation of the Republic of China at Taipei, and other archives. The section entitled "fate" is mostly based on material published in various booklets and magazines whose information may be based on observation. This section is not considered to be complete. The references given in the section "Service history" indicate the exact location of the document within the Air America Archives, e.g. UTD/CIA/B51F12 meaning: UTD, McDermott Library, Air America Archives / CIA Corporate Records / Box 51, Folder 12. Abbreviations like ACA-22 or AVH-6 indicate the no. of the microfilm reel preserved at the AFHRA. Other abbreviations used may be looked up in the file "Abbreviations."

## AIR AMERICA: SIKORSKY UH-34Ds (2nd series)

### The types of missions flown by Air America's UH-34Ds:

The Sikorsky UH-34D was one of Air America's work horses in Laos. With the exception of "803", which was always operated in Thailand and so had a white color scheme similar to that of Royal Thai military aircraft, all Air America UH-34Ds were olive drab and did not carry any titles. They looked like Royal Laotian Air Force UH-34Ds, except for the fact that RLAFF UH-34Ds carried an Erawan and a four digit serial painted in yellow, while the Air America serial was white. Officially all Air America UH-34Ds were based at Udon Royal Thai AFB where they were maintained periodically, but normally, all of them operated in up-country Laos for several weeks. Other Air America or CASI planes flew the crews as "dead heads" to the location from where they had to work for a period of several days. During that period the crews either slept in or next to their helicopter or were the guests of the local villages where they were temporarily stationed. At several "hubs" like Sam Thong there were even hostels where to get a shower. There were several types of missions flown by the UH-34Ds: to transport all sorts of supplies (food, ammunition, fuel) to gun positions and other outposts; to fly medical evacuation missions from the villages or from battle areas, to transport indigenous; especially Hmong troops from one point to another during the battle ("leap frog" technique), to evacuate villages and outposts under fire, to rescue downed aircrews, and even to transport back to Udon small aircraft like Helio Couriers or Pilatus Porters which had had an accident in Laos. In this case, the fuselage of an ill-fated aircraft was tied to one side of the UH-34D and its wings on the other side. Normally an Air America UH-34D could carry 12 or 13 passengers or cargo. All of them had armor plates and a hoist; inertia reels and a sling could be installed to carry outside cargo (Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14). In 1972 and 1973, Air America's Udon facility also reconstructed 14 former US Marines UH-34Ds for use by the TNI-AU or Indonesian Air Force - this was called "Project Peace rotor".

### Statistics according to official Air America documents:

- 1962:** 20 (Minutes ExCom-AAACL of 23 January 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1)
- Oct. 1962:** helicopter operations were confined to Thailand (Minutes ExCom AAACL of 30 October 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1)
- 1963:** +3 in August 63 (= H-16/7/8 ?), making a **total** of 7, minus 1 destroyed on 27 October 63 (= H-16), making a **total** of 6 on 29 October 63 (Minutes ExCom-AAACL/AAM of 29 October 63; in: UTD CIA/B7F2)
- 1964:** + 4, making a **total** of 9 (Minutes BoD-AAM 21 July 64, in: UTD/CIA/B3F5)
- 1965:** + 4, in March 65 (Minutes ExCom-AAACL/AAM of 25 February 65, in: UTD/CIA/B7F4), making a **total** of 19, in July 65 (Minutes ExCom-AAACL/AAM of 27 July 65, in: UTD/CIA/B7F4)
- 1966:** + 3 in January 66 (Minutes ExCom-AAACL/AAM of 12 January 66, in: UTD/CIA/B8F1)  
Inventory of 1 February 66 (in: UTD/Herd/B2): 23 + 3 > 26
- 1967:** + 5 in May 67 + 4 about 1 June 67 > a **total** of 31; some of these aircraft were turned over to Laos (that is to the RLAFF) (Minutes ExCom-AAACL AAM of 23 May 67, in: UTD/CIA/B8F2)
- Feb. 69:** 23 assigned to Air America + 10 assigned to Laos (R.Lao A.F. ?), that is a total of 33 UH-34Ds were operated on 28 January 69 under the Madriver contract (Minutes ExCom-AAACL/AAM of 28 January 69, in: UTD/CIA/B8F3)
- April 1970:** 24L (Minutes ExCom-AAACL/AAM of 12 May 70, in: UTD/CIA/B8F4)



## AIR AMERICA: BEECH / VOLPAR TURBO BEECH 18:

### **I) The types of missions flown by Air America's Beech 18s, Beech Ten-Twos, and Volpar Turbo Beech aircraft:**

In the sixties and the early seventies, Air America was probably one of the world's largest operators of Twin Beeches. There were three different types of aircraft used. The first aircraft bought were Beech C-45Gs, two of which (N7950C and N7951C) were introduced in Laos in 1960 where they were used to transport MAAG and CIA personnel and supplies to small airstrips. Both aircraft left Laos in 1963/64 and moved to South Vietnam where Air America started to build up a huge fleet of more than 30 Beech 18s since 1963. While those original Beech C-45s and most of the aircraft acquired later had a maximum take-off weight of 8,750 lb., including a useful load of 2,150 lb., which allowed them to fly 900 s. m. at 175 mph., some 12 of the C-45s were converted to "Ten-Two" in 1963 and 1964. Although the engine remained the same, a P & W R-985 with 450 b.h.p., the new aircraft had a maximum take-off weight of 10,200 lb. (hence its name "Ten-Two"), including a useful load of 3,350 lb., which allowed it a range of 915 s. m. This increased performance was achieved by a power plant modification, a stabilizer incidence increase, new gear doors, and aerodynamically improved wing tips. Finally, since 1966 a total of 14 Air America Beech C-45s was converted by Air Asia, Tainan, to Volpar Turbo Beech, whose two Garrett TPE-331-47 turbo-prop engines gave it a maximum take-off weight of 10,286 lb., including a useful load of 3,886 lb., a true air speed of 245 mph. and a range of 1,040 s. m. (*Air America Log*, vol. II, no. 5, 1968, p. 1). In their new role in South Vietnam, all three versions flew for USAID and for the US military, transporting people like CIA or *Phoenix* personnel and a variety of goods which ranged from pastries or typewriters to life animals or hand grenades. It seems, however, that the Volpars were mainly used for passengers, including courier services for the US Embassy, while the older C-45s and Ten-Twos were used for cargo. Although USAID was officially the main contractor to Air America in South Vietnam, all CIA missions in that country were flown as part of the USAID contracts, and within those contracts, all CIA requirements were handled with priority (Harnage, *A thousand faces*, pp. 12-15 and 81/2). Other Beech 18s were operated outside South Vietnam in the mid-sixties, in part adopting special color schemes: N343T was operated by *Scheduled Air Services Ryukyus* out of Naha, Okinawa, between 1964 and 1967; this aircraft had airline style titles. N5454V was operated in Thailand as a sprayer aircraft for experiments with defoliants; this aircraft was "disguised" as a private agricultural plane. And N5269V was also operated in Thailand under the provisions of the contract with the Royal Thai Border Patrol Police and used for communications and parachute training; this aircraft had a red belly. In late 1966, two Volpars were transferred to Udorn and equipped for high sensitive photo reconnaissance, and these two aircraft (N9542Z and N9671C) were used on reconnaissance missions from Udorn until March 74. In late 1967, a number of Volpars were transferred to Savannakhet in Southern Laos and used on an Aerial Survey Project, which collected and relayed signals received from road watcher teams hidden close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. When this project was terminated by the end of 1968, the Volpars returned to South Vietnam, but later, another Volpar (N3728G) was equipped for special photo missions, while all regular Volpars were equipped to carry 10 passengers and had even air conditioning, although they could also be used for air drops (Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14). During the late sixties, most C-45s and Ten-Twos were inactivated, so that only the Volpars remained active until the end, four of which (N9838Z, N7695C, N9157Z, and N91295) even flew for *ICCS Air Services* in 1973.



## AIR AMERICA: SIKORSKY S-58Ts

### The types of missions flown by Air America's S-58Ts:

In addition to the UH-34Ds flown by Air America since 1961, 5 UH-34Ds were converted to S-58Ts at Udom in 1971, the first being completed in March 71 and the last in July 71 (Morrison / Conboy, *Shadow war*, p. 379). A 6th UH-34D was converted for CIA contingencies and based at Taiwan, where it was flown by pilots of the 34th Squadron of the Republic of China Air Force (Morrison / Conboy, *Shadow war*, p. 386, note 14). In late 1971, this 6th S-58T was painted in the colors of the Republic of China Air Force (see the photos in: Conboy / Morrison, *The quiet one*, pp. 44/5) and used to train 6 Taiwanese 34th Squadron crewmen at Tainan to rescue a downed Hughes 500P, as a Hughes 500P was to be used on a covert wiretap mission into Vinh, North Vietnam. In the spring of 1972, training was continued at PS-44, a secret location located 26 kilometers north of Pakse in southern Laos (Conboy / Andradé, *Spies and commandos*, p. 255). All of these 6 helicopters were bailed from the US Marine Corps, only the 6 S-58T conversion kits belonged to Air America (Inventory list made up by R. Dixon Speas Associates Inc and dated 10 and 11 November 1975, p. 3, in: UTD/CIA/B18F6).

### Statistics according to official Air America documents:

- Inventories of 31 March 72 > 30 November 72 (UTD/CIA/B1F10): 6 > 6 conversion kits

### The individual aircraft histories:

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
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S-58T XW-PHA, probably taken in March 71 (UTD/Hitner/B1F3)

Sikorsky S-58T	XW-PHA	58.1398	March 71	converted from USMC UH-34D BuA 148811
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**Service history:** arrived at Udom on 13 December 70 as a UH-34D (Minutes ExCom-AAAC/AAM of 22 December 70, in: UTD/CIA/B8F4); the first flight as a S-58R was on 17 March 71; a photo (probably of its first flight) is preserved in: UTD/Hitner/B1F3; project manager for the conversion of 5 UH-34Ds into S-58Ts was Captain R. D. Davis (UTD/Leary/B1 for 17 March 71); made its first operational heavy lift, when it transported the engine of UH-34D H-73 from Nong Khai (T-22), Thailand, back to Udom in 71 (photos are published in: *Air America Log*, vo. V, no. 4, 1971, p. 6, and in: Lundh, *Sikorsky H-34*, p. 127); assigned to contract AID-439-713 for use out of Udom at least 1-31 July 71 (F.O.C.s of 1 and 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); on 9 November 71, XW-PHA made a precautionary landing at



## AIR AMERICA: DOUGLAS B-26s / ON MARK RB-26Ks

### The types of missions flown by Air America's B-26s and On Marks:

About 25 Douglas B-26s, all owned by CIA/Air Asia, were stored at Tainan, Taiwan, at various times from June 58 to about 1965. Some were used for CIA or USAF strike missions. The following 18 aircraft are believed to have been used by Air America pilots on various missions during the sixties. These aircraft are believed to be identical with the CEECO B-26s that were to be maintained and modified by Air Asia in 1962 (Minutes ExCom-AAAC of 25 September 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1). The question was still open in October 62 (Minutes ExCom AAAC of 9 October 62, in: UTD/CIA/B7F1). CEECO stands for the "Consolidated Electric Equipment Company" (Summary of revenue contracts, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F4). On 11 February 1964, all B-26s in South Vietnam were grounded after a wing had failed on an aircraft in the US (Dorr / Bishop, *Vietnam air war debrief*, p. 30). The best source of information about the B-26s and On Marks used by Air America still is the book *Foreign Invaders* by Hagedorn / Hellström, to which Trest (*Air Commando One*, p. 110) adds the note that 4 black B-26s were flown from Tainan to Takhli in December 60 for air strikes at Vang Vieng; they were to be flown by Air America pilots during the abortive operation *Mill Pond*. Most of the information given below is based on the excellent book by Hagedorn / Hellström, *Foreign Invaders*, especially, pp. 132-36 and 169-74, to which some details have been added that can be found in documents preserved at the Air America Archives.

### Statistics according to official Air America documents:

- Inventory of 1 February 66, in: UTD/Herd/B2: 0
- Inventories of 31 March 72 > 30 November 72 (in: UTD/CIA/B1F10): 1 A-26A owned > 0

### The individual aircraft histories:

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
Douglas B-26C	"844"	?	March 59?	?
	<b>Service history:</b> possibly used by Air America.			
	<b>Fate:</b> probably scrapped in 64 or 65.			
Douglas B-26C	"862"	?	March 59?	?
	<b>Service history:</b> possibly used by Air America.			
	<b>Fate:</b> probably scrapped in 64 or 65.			
Douglas B-26B	(unmarked)	27547	April 61	ex USAF 44-34268
	<b>Service history:</b> possibly participated in the aborted project <i>Mill Pond</i> in Laos, April 61, with Air America crews.			
	<b>Fate:</b> fate unknown; probably returned to Tainan with Air Asia; possibly scrapped in 64 or 65.			
Douglas B-26B	(unmarked)	28969	April 61	ex USAF 44-34690
	<b>Service history:</b> possibly participated in the aborted project <i>Mill Pond</i> in Laos, April 61, with Air America crews.			
	<b>Fate:</b> fate unknown; probably returned to Tainan with Air Asia; possibly scrapped in 64 or 65.			



## AIR AMERICA: BOEING-VERTOL CH-47C CHINOOK



An Air America Chinook airlifts a C-46 fuselage at Udorn in 1973  
(*Air America Log*, vol. VII, no. 8, 1973, p. 3)

### **The types of missions flown by Air America's CH-47C CHINOOKs:**

All Air America Chinooks had armor plates and IFR capability. Essentially, there were four types of missions flown by the Chinooks: First, they were used as troop carriers within Laos, and in this configuration, they could carry 32 passengers (Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14); to quote one example: On 20 January 73, two Air America Chinooks were used to transport troops to re-open the Vientiane-Luang Prabang highway (Bowers, *The USAF in South-East Asia. Tactical Airlift*, p. 462). In another configuration, they could carry wounded out of a battle area, then they could be equipped with 24 litters, while 2 attendants could take care of the wounded. In still another configuration, they could carry cargo and even small vehicles, and so they had roller conveyer tracks and inertia reels. They could also rescue besieged people and lift heavy equipment with its hoist winch, and they could transport large outside cargo in a sling (Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14), including downed aircraft like a Twin Otter or even a C-46 fuselage estimated to weigh about 13,000 pounds. But the primary mission of the Chinook was probably transporting large external sling loads from Udorn, Thailand to isolated exact positions in Laos. An Air America Chinook could move a 155MM gun with ammunition and crew from one position to another in one trip; the crew and ammunition were loaded inside and the gun outside to a cargo hook. Sometimes, even four cargo hooks were used in order to transport four different loads to four different places (Hutchison, *Chinooks*, p. 4).



## AIR AMERICA: DE HAVILLAND CANADA DHC-6 TWIN OTTERS

### The types of missions flown by Air America's Twin Otters:

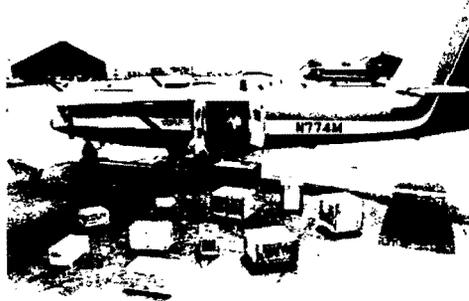
Air America's Twin Otters were the special project aircraft of the early seventies. This explains why the official blue and black stripes of its color scheme were quickly replaced by a black night color scheme, which makes the registration very difficult to be seen. Some of them had special electronic equipment, including terrain following radar. Of course, the aircraft could make deliveries of all sorts of supplies, and sometimes did so in order to hide their real activities. These included nightly supply drops to road watcher teams and relay missions for electronic signals. N389EX acted as an airborne command post during the wiretap mission to Vinh, North Vietnam, and during that period it was operated out of the secret base at PS-44 in Southern Laos.

### Statistics according to official Air America documents:

Inventories of 31 March 72 > 30 November 72 (UTD/CIA/B1F10): 3 > 3

### The individual aircraft histories:

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
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DHC-6 N774M at Udorn in 1973  
(with kind permission from Judy Porter)

DHC-6-300	N774M	236	25 Feb. 71	leased from Aviation and Inland Marine Rentals Inc; had been with Intermountain Aviation, then Rocky Mountain Airways (leased)
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**Service history:** leased from Aviation and Inland Marine Rentals Inc on 25 February 71 (Status as of 12 August 74, in: UTD/CIA/B56F4); assigned to contract AID-439-713 for use out of Vientiane at least 1-31 July 71 (F.O.Circulars of 1 July 71 and 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); probably operated out of PS 44, a secret base 26 kms north of Pakse, where Taiwanese crews were living and trained to fly the Twin Otter on daylight supply drops (Conboy/Morrison, *The quiet one*, p. 44; used as an airborne relay link during a dusk raider insert near Dien Bien Phu on 25 July 71 (Conboy/Morrison, *The quiet one*, p. 44); on 20 October 71, a person walked into the left propeller of N774M at Wat Phu (L-107) and was instantly killed (XOXO of 20 Oct. 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F11); hit by ground fire at Ban Nongkin near Toong Set

## AIR AMERICA: DOUGLAS C-47 GOONEY BIRDS

### The types of missions flown by Air America's C-47s:

The C-47 was one of the aircraft Air America inherited from CAT Inc. in March 59. They were immediately used in a number of theaters: One C-47 was operated on Taiwan for the NACC, a front for the CIA (B-809, later "6110"); up to two of them were based at Bangkok for use by USAID - including a plane for parachute training by the Royal Thai Border Police and one that ensured the Embassy run from Bangkok to Vientiane via Udon. But in the early sixties at least four C-47s were based at Vientiane for use in Laos (B-817, B-829, "147", "994"), two of which had been bailed from the USAF especially for that use. Those C-47s were also responsible for what was called the "Milk Run North" and the "Milk Run South," scheduled flights for customer ASB-036 following the route Vientiane > Luang Prabang > Sayaboury > Luang Prabang > Vientiane to the north and back and Vientiane > Savannakhet > Pakse > Attopeu > Pakse > Savannakhet > Vientiane to the south and back. On 8 September 64, for example, the "Milk Run North" was flown by C-47 "994", and the "Milk Run South" by C-47 B-817 (Vientiane daily flight schedule of 8 Sept. 64, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F8), and on 20 May 66 the "Milk Run North" was ensured by C-47 "994" and the "Milk Run South," which followed a slightly different pattern at that time (Vientiane > Paksane > Thakhet > Savannakhet > Pakse > Savannakhet > Thakhet > Paksane > Vientiane) by C-47 "147" (Vientiane daily flight schedule of 20 May 66, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B). At that time, the other C-47s which had been used to drop supplies and arms to locations in Laos had already been replaced by bigger aircraft. In South Vietnam C-47s were used at a very early date, including B-829, B-879, and B-929, which were joined by the former Laos-flyers B-817 B-829, "147", and "994" in the mid-sixties when Air America Saigon also received five newly bailed C-47s from the USAF. From the second half of the sixties to the very end in 1975 the bulk of Air America's C-47 operations was at Saigon where nearly everything was transported under both USAID and military contracts: passengers like CIA and *Phoenix* personnel or even troops and cargo ranging from medicine or life animals to arms. On one occasion an Air America C-47 even transported a Volkswagen from Danang to Saigon. But although USAID was officially the main contractor to Air America in South Vietnam, all CIA missions in South Vietnam were flown as part of the USAID contracts, and within those contracts all CIA requirements were handled with priority (Harnage, *A thousand faces*, pp. 42-45 and 81 2). But two particularities should be mentioned: Between 1964 and 1969, Air America even operated a C-47 that was painted in full USAF colors ("0-50883") and which was operated under various contracts out of Bangkok. And there was a special C-47 (B-879) that was used out of Udon for nightly drops to road watcher teams in the late sixties and then, in the early seventies, was used as a VIP aircraft out of Bangkok, having 8 plush seats (Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman.B1F14). At the very end, when they had to leave the country, many of Air America's remaining C-47s had been inactivated, thus creating those technical problems that Robbins (*Air America*, pp. 292-98) describes in a fascinating story.

### Statistics according to official Air America documents:

- 1964:** 1 C-47 was acquired in August 64 (Minutes ExCom-AACL AAM of 15 September 64, in: UTD CIA B7F3), that is B-879
- 1965:** it was approved that USAID Vietnam will receive 4 C-47s for contract AID-430-1092 (Minutes ExCom-AACL/AAM of 24 November 65, in: UTD CIA B7F4)
- 1966:** Inventory of 1 Feb. 66, in: UTD Herd B2: 8 plus 6 planned
- Oct. 70:** 1 C-47 was sold (Minutes ExCom-AACL AAM of 13 October 70, in: UTD CIA B8F4), that is B-829



## AIR AMERICA: FAIRCHILD C-123 PROVIDERS

### The types of missions flown by Air America's C-123s:

The C-123 was another one of Air America's work horses, but except for a short period in the early seventies, they were only used in Laos. They were essential because of their short take-off and landing capabilities. The first C-123s received in March 62 were B-models, which carried US civil aircraft registrations. But this method was not practicable for aircraft bailed from the USAF for a short period only like the 3 aircraft received in 1964, and since 1965, all bailed C-123s used the last three digits of their USAF serial as Air America serial. In mid-1966 even the remaining three of the original C-123s adopted those special Air America serials. At that time Company C-123Bs also received small Air America titles which they did not have while under N-registry. In 1968/69 all of Air America's C-123Bs were converted to C-123Ks receiving an auxiliary jet engine under each wing to improve their STOL capabilities. Officially most of Air America's C-123s were always based at Vientiane and assigned to a USAID contract. And one of them was officially based at Udom - at least until 1969 - and was used on missions for the Hmong guerilla army. But in reality, this distinction was not that clear: C-123s assigned to both contracts could fly all sorts of missions, and many of them out of Udom. Since 1971 all of the C-123s were officially based at Vientiane and assigned to the same contract which was a USAID contract in 1971 and an Air Force contract in 1973. Most of the time, however, they picked up their cargo at Udom. Perhaps the most important missions flown by Air America's C-123s were fuel runs: Fuel drums were put on pallets and parachuted over the drop zone. But C-123s were also used to fly weapons and ammunition. Even the rockets and bombs used by the RLAf were mostly brought to the T-28s by Air America C-123s. Former Air America kicker John Kirkley (*Air America: a daily adventure on Friday, May 2, 1969*) describes the role of Udom as follows: "Here we worked out of AB-1 or *Pepper Grinder*. AB-1 was where we loaded humanitarian supplies i.e., live pigs, chickens, water buffaloes, white rice and passengers. *Pepper Grinder* was where we loaded 'hard rice' e.g. ammunition, howitzer shells, rockets and bombs, as well as 55-gallon drums of aviation gas going to up country Laos. Today's 10,000 pound load of 250 lb. bombs and 50 caliber ammunition would be re-supplying the T-28s flying out of Long Tieng, Laos, aka. Lima Site 20 Alternate (LS-20A)." And C-123s were used as troop carriers: While in their normal configuration, Air America C-123s could carry up to 20 or 21 passengers plus cargo, an additional 38 centerline seats could be installed when necessary (Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14). Those flights could involve troop movements within Laos as well as movements between locations in Laos and training camps in Thailand. Those extra seats were also needed when Air America C-123s were used on evacuation flights. This happened for example in early 1970 when 3 Air America C-123s equipped with 50 seats each and 3 Caribous evacuated 5,627 refugees from Moug Soui to Ban Xon (*Air America Log*, vol. IV, no. 2, 1970, pp. 4-5). Finally, in 1973, all remaining C-123Ks were given to the Royal Laotian Air Force and painted in RLAf colors, but during the first half of that year, a number of them was used out of Udom in a flight training program for Laotian pilots. A last category of C-123s flown for Air America should not be forgotten: Since 1965, China Air Lines operated certain flights for Air America in South Vietnam, using, among others, 2 C-123s at the same time. Initially, these aircraft, which were bailed from the USAF, carried Air America-style three digit serials, but in 1968, the system was changed to ST-serials of no obvious meaning. They were under operational and contractual control of the CIA (Harnage, *A thousand faces*, p. 82). In part, they were used on USAID missions like rice drops to Cambodia, and those support missions to Cambodia were even an essential part of their tasks. But their camouflage and their strange serials make believe that they were also operated for military purposes. It is known, for example, that those China Air C-123s also



## AIR AMERICA: CURTISS C-46s

### **The types of missions flown by Air America's C-46s:**

Like the C-47, the C-46 was one of the types of aircraft Air America had inherited from CAT Inc. in March 59, but in larger numbers. At that time, much of Air America's operations was still concentrated in Japan and in the Republic of China. All that changed in 1960: Already in the fall of that year, a number of Air America C-46s had been transferred to Central America to fly arms and supplies to anti-Castro guerillas in Cuba, but most of them returned the following year. At about the same time it became evident that Communist support to Neutralist and Pathet Lao forces in Laos made it necessary to strengthen the pro-Western forces in that country. So in the fall of 1960, an endless stream of Air America C-46s moved thousands of tons of arms and supplies from the secret base at Takhli (T-05) in Thailand to General Phoumi Nosavan at Savannakhet. In January 61 Vang Pao was added to the CIA's list of receivers, and since that time, some of the supplies flown out of Takhli were delivered to a drop zone near Vang Pao's headquarters at Pa Doung in Laos (Trest, *Air Commando One*, pp. 109 and 116). Such numerous air drops were possible because Air America had inherited from CAT an agreement with the Civil Aviation Administration of Taiwan which went back to the early fifties. No less than 7 CAA-owned C-46Fs were leased to Air America to supplement their own aircraft. When CAA-owned C-46 B-130 was lost in November 1960, it was even replaced by another CAA-owned C-46: B-156.

Although Air America C-46s continued to fly in other theaters as well - two of them were used out of Japan to deliver the *Stars and Stripes* to Korea in the early sixties; two of them were used by *Scheduled Air Services Ryukyus* out of Naha, Okinawa between 1964 and 1967; one to two of them were used on CAT domestic flights until 1968; and two of them were apparently destined for another use against Cuba, but eventually flew for the *Aviation Research Center* of India (Conboy/Morrison, *The CIA's secret war in Tibet*, p. 191) -, South East Asia became the center of Air America's C-46 activities. In Laos C-46s were used for all types of air drops, especially to drop palletized rice and salt, but also other types of supplies and even arms and ammunition were flown in by C-46s. C-46s could also be used to transport troops and refugees, as the 39 standard seats of nearly all of Air America's C-46s could be upgraded to 68 high density and centerline seats (Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14). Two C-46s should particularly be mentioned: XW-PBV and XW-PBW. They were former Air America aircraft which had been sold to USAID-Laos in 1963 and then to the Royal Lao Government in 1964, who leased them first to Bird & Sons and their successor Continental Air Services and then in 1969 to Air America, who transferred them to Royal Air Lao in December 73. Because of their Laotian ownership, they always carried an Erawan on the fuselage that is the symbol of the Kingdom of Laos consisting of three white elephants in a red circle. In South Vietnam Air America's C-46s flew the usual mix of passengers and supplies for both USAID and military customers, except for some scheduled services like the one linking Saigon and Danang. Although USAID was officially the main contractor to Air America in South Vietnam, all CIA missions in South Vietnam were flown as part of the USAID contracts, and within those contracts, all CIA requirements were handled with priority. Since 1965, Air America's services in South Vietnam were also supplemented by some C-46s owned and operated by China Airlines, whose aircraft adopted strange serials like CA-1 or EM-2 when they flew for Air America: The reason is evident: They were under operational and contractual control of the CIA (Harnage, *A thousand faces*, pp. 81/2), and they were also used on secret missions for the *Studies and Observations Group* (see the photo in: Plaster, *SOG*, p. 72). Already in the early sixties, Air America was involved in secret flying in South Vietnam - not as a transport company, however, but with maintenance, as they supported the C-46s of VIAT, the front

