

Flight Mechanic

By Allen Cates

There has been very little written about the flight mechanics employed with Air America. The military called them crew chiefs, combat air crewmen, or load masters. The responsibilities were multiple and with Air America they soon became a master of many trades. The "Kickers" with Air America, who manned the big fixed wing birds, can't be slighted. Many of them paid the supreme sacrifice in the struggle. Pushing out pallets while clinging on for dear life to keep from falling with the pallet was tricky business, and enemy gunfire usually hit the fuselage more often than the cockpit. Being swarmed by terrified refugees and making sure the load was balanced at the same time added to the misery, but the kickers usually went home at night to lick their wounds.

Air America's helicopter flight mechanics performed many of the same duties as the big bird kickers but stayed up country with their aircraft. Very often, after a full days work, a flight mechanic's job was just beginning. While the pilot went to his quarters to take a hot bath, eat a hot meal and relax, the flight mechanic was performing scheduled or unscheduled maintenance on his aircraft. Usually this work was conducted outside, with poor lighting and primitive conditions. The incentive to do a good job was part of his work ethic, but he had personal reasons also, because the next day he had to fly in the bird he worked on.

Flying with Air America wasn't routine. The situation was unpredictable and required experience and expertise. It's understandable why you often hear about the plight of the pilot just like you hear more about the quarterback than the linebacker, but one can't perform without the other. The flight mechanic flew looking at where they had been, blind to where they were going, and hoping the pilot didn't run out of altitude, airspeed and ideas all at the same time. He was a flight crewmember, provided another set of eyes and ears, and often aided in decision-making, but in effect was a passenger, and forced to accept the consequences, as fate would have it. Harvey Potter and Jim Beardsly died as a result of injuries received in a crash near L-54. Joe Gaculais was the flight mechanic. He survived but was terribly burned and it took several months of painful therapy before he was able to return for duty.

Willie Parker received excruciating burns on his hand from an accident in an H-34. Many years and many operations later he still lives with pain. When Bill Foster was hit with an enemy mortar, or RPG, he received substantial injuries. There were two flight mechanics on board. It was a line training flight and Ernesto Cruz was killed. Few people remember the other flight mechanic either. His name was Reggie Boston. Reggie received third degree burns and lost one of his eyes. He was one of the few African Americans working with Air America.

Pat McCarthy died with Bill Fraser in a Bell. Most people remember the pilot Ted Moore, who was flying the Bell helicopter near Site 85 and observed the North Vietnamese Colt bombing the site. It was he who maneuvered the aircraft in a position to shoot the Colt down, but it was Glen Woods, the flight mechanic, who actually did the shooting. Glen was later killed in a bizarre

flight accident where it appeared the blade came off in flight. Montano Centeno died with Jerry Booth in an H-34 on a mountaintop LZ overlooking the PDJ. You can see the site in the documentary Flying Men and Flying Machines where Phil Goddard, Assistant Chief Pilot Helicopter, is landing a Bell 205. It was a difficult site for the H-34 because it was high, small and usually windy. The H-34 used magnesium for weight reduction and high-octane aviation fuel to run a hot rod engine. It caught fire easily and burned furiously. Flight Mechanic Fred Alor died from a blade strike while fleeing the aircraft after it suffered a hard landing and collapsed the landing gear. It was speculated that Fred, who had seen what happened to Joe Gaculais, was so afraid of fire that he failed to wait until the blades had stopped. Fred always looked like he was performing in a military parade. His uniform was sharply creased and fitted perfectly. He had an infectious smile and he was very pleasant to work with. His death saddened everybody.

Lowell Pirkle died performing a service for his country. He too was a flight mechanic and could not have seen the RPG that exploded in the crew compartment at a site near L-54. The pilots escaped, but Lowell and a Lao military officer died instantly. His remains were not recovered for many years. His wife Debbie insisted on a burial at Arlington. The request was initially refused, but ironically Lowell had been wounded in Vietnam while serving in the Army. Lowell died in battle with Air America, but was granted burial in Arlington because he had been wounded in the Army. Had the irony not existed, Debbie would have been forced to pay for his burial and for his remains to be returned to the United States. I, and several other former Air America employees, attended the ceremony at Arlington for Lowell. The precision of the pallbearers, the gun salute and the sounding of taps had a sobering effect. You were acutely aware you were surrounded with history, tradition and honor and you could feel it as if it were tangible. Memories of my helicopter flying days with Air America and the flight mechanics I served with flooded my mind. I feel that the honor bestowed to Lowell Pirkle was also bestowed on all the others who died or were wounded. But the honor also goes to those who did not receive physical injuries. No one was closer to the wounded, the dying, the wretched and the poor than the flight mechanic. They saw it first hand, smelled the blood and felt the pain. There was no way to escape unscathed even though the scars were not always visible and the memories will be indelibly forged in their mind forever.

Yet, most of Air America's flight mechanics went on to lead very fruitful lives despite, or perhaps because of, their injuries and experiences, and represents a credit to their will and constitution.

I hope the day will come where Air America's flight mechanics will be officially recognized for their efforts and sacrifices, because none deserve it more than they. It was an honor for me to serve with them and I salute their service to this great country.

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