

03/04/99 THU 10:56 FAX 318 988 2411

001

FROM : MARC-YABLONKA..

PHONE NO. : 818 846 0756

Mar. 01 1999 03:10PM P01

Greetings Allen - The story follows - Thanks! Marc

The rain was so incessant that if one closed one's eyes long enough, it could have been Vietnam 1968 in a heartbeat. Instead it was Vo's Restaurant in Oakland's Chinatown on a wintry Saturday afternoon. Three former pilots for Air America had come to set the record straight regarding the oft-maligned airline, once the wings for the Central Intelligence Agency in Indochina.

Former pilots Vince Clark and Marvin "Windy" Wingrove, of Novato, Calif., both also World War II flyers - Wingrove flew P-38's in Africa and P-51's in Europe - place a lot of the blame for the bad rap that Air America has received, as a mysterious, secretive, drug-running band of misfit rogues, in several corners.

First and foremost was the 1990 Carrolco Films release AIR AMERICA, starring Mel Gibson and Robert Downey, Jr., which, unlike the very informative book by Christopher Robbins from which it was adapted, most Air America pilots term "entertainment" at best.

"The word on the street was that Hollywood had it out for the CIA and since we were an extension of that, we got the brunt of it," said former Air America pilot and Richmond, Calif. resident Joe Mish who flew in Vietnam between 1964 and '67.

Willie Parker of Fairfield-Suisun, Calif., former Air America crew chief, was not entertained by it in the least. Parker, today a San Francisco International Airport-based aircraft systems maintenance controller responsible for the air-worthiness of United Airlines' entire worldwide fleet, put it succinctly:

"If you showed the film AIR AMERICA and took away everything the actors did - then you said 'Air America didn't do that' - that would satisfy me."

The film did a lot, the aviators feel, to further Air America's negative image. It would have one believe that AA flew for personal profit the opium harvest of the Hmong tribes people they often ferried in Laos from one battle to the next.

While some Air America pilots freely admit that opium conceivably could have been transported, they deny that anyone at Air America profited from it, as was portrayed in the film.

"I never knowingly transported any opium," said former Air America chopper pilot Ted Hellmers from his home in San Diego, from which he sells real estate since a helicopter crash not of his own making terminated his career flying with the Los Angeles County Fire Dept.

"I went looking for a new car and the salesman flat out insisted that I hauled dope all over Southeast Asia," added Wingrove, who, at 78, says that today he "works awful hard doing nothing."

He worked very hard, though, at flying the noted Bell 204 and 205 ("Huey") series helicopters in Southeast Asia along with the fixed wing C-47 "Gooney Bird" and DC-3 out of Saigon, Vientiane, Laos and Udorn, Thailand, where Air America had one of its bases.

"We didn't have the time nor the right to search anyone's baggage when we transported them. Plus there was a war going on," said Clark, who, at 76, is also retired.

After retiring as a pilot for the U.S. Air Force, Clark flew the seven-seater "Twin Beech," C-46, 47 and De Havilland Caribou cargo plane for Air America.

Another factor that contributed to the mysterious misunderstandings flung Air America's way lay in the Laos connection to the war. According to author Robbins, it was the secretive nature of the action in the land-locked country. Laos was, after all, a war that, on paper, never existed and much of what Air America carried out there remains classified to this day. Journalists were allowed no access to their missions. That was quite contrary, as documentaries have shown

and correspondents have related, to Vietnam. The media posted to Laos constantly tried to ascertain what Air America was up to, but to no avail.

Mish, a 66-year-old building contractor who flew the Twin Beech and DC-3s during his time in Air America, also post-USAf, stresses that Air America did far greater good than bad.

"We were roguish, sure. But, because of that and the fact that we were civilians, that meant that we did things that regular pilots either couldn't or didn't want to do."

Mish does admit that Air America pilots often "pulled the devils tail," as he termed it.

"I would fly down back roads with an empty load in a Twin Beech and fly through Viet Cong road blocks. I'd look right into their faces as they would be swinging around to fire."

He recalled one mission where his DC-3 served as a troop transport taking some badly needed replacements to a practically deserted outpost near the DMZ in Quang Tri Province. His was a mission that not only regular Air Force pilots did not want, they wouldn't have had permission granted them even if they had. Mish flew to the outpost with no lights so as to avert a Viet Cong attack in a tropical downpour typical of Vietnam. Visibility, according to Mish, was near zero. But the replacements got to the deserted outpost safely. A year or so later a famous siege involving the U.S. Marines and a massive loss of life would take place in the outpost that came to be known as Khe Sanh.

"I used to say that I'd rather be lucky than smart," Mish admits. "You can be smart as hell and still get shot. Lucky will get you home."

"I always felt sorry for those army guys. They had to be there. If we didn't like it, we could have gone home any time we wanted," added Clark.

"Not that I cared so much for the CIA," said Mish, "but they did do a lot of good things.

Some of those good things included having AA fly U.S. Embassy staff in aircraft, some of which was antiquated enough to have been right out of World War II.

Personnel, whether brass or troops, were carted from one strategic point to another in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. They also transported staff for the United States Agency for International Development from one village to another. USAID took it upon itself to supply villages with everything from vastly needed foodstuffs to materiel with which to repair villes that had been blown asunder by the war. Their job, Indochina hands agree, was one of positive psychological warfare, designed, as President Lyndon Johnson had declared, to "win hearts and minds."

Perhaps, in the case of USAID's agenda, hearts and minds were won, even if only temporarily and until the next firefight when the VC destroyed their homes again. Nonetheless, Air America, its pilots say, facilitated that good, whether it meant bringing in cement for buildings or rice for impoverished villagers to eat.

Air America did its fair share in rotating many of America's soldiers out of Indochina and back home as well.

"One time I was up at Dong Ha on the 17th Parallel and flew a bunch of Marines out. They were crying, saying 'I'm going home.' Man they were so grateful," Clark recalls.

Along with the pain and suffering that war brings, unbelievably, there is, combatants are quick to point out, always a degree of humor that exudes from the camaraderie developed in combat situations. Air America personnel were no different in that regard.

Wingrove, in Southeast Asia as early as 1959, proved that point many times over. While still a U.S. Army pilot, he was charged with flying around Laos in a "well-used" Piper Apache the late volunteer Dr. Tom Doolcy, who later wrote three books about the care he administered to

the indigenous tribes of Southeast Asia during the French Indochina War. The plane had been a gift of the citizenry of St. Louis, Mo.

Wingrove, who joined Air America in 1965 and stayed with the outfit until 1974, can move from thoughts of the doctor to laughter in no time.

"I flew pigs from one village to the next in Vietnam for one whole week," he says over a bottle of Ba Muoi Ba (33) Beer, the likes of which GIs drank in Vietnam. "Every damn take-off, it never failed. By the time I would get to the end of the runway, they would crap everywhere. The next week I flew rice around. I'll be damned if, right after that, rice didn't start growing right there in the floorboards of the plane."

But Wingrove's treasure chest of stories does not stop with himself.

"Anybody ever tell you about Shakey Calhoun?" he asks. "Shakey was a C-47 pilot. He smoked. In 1967 you weren't anybody in Air America unless you had a gold Rolex. They were 950 bucks in those days. One day he took off his watch to admire it, got a cigarette, reached in his pocket and got a book of matches with only one match. He lit the cigarette and tossed his Rolex right out the window of his plane. The last time I saw him he said he was going to bronze that match and put it on his mantle for stupidity's sake."

When the laughter dies down and another round of 33 is ordered, even Wingrove gets serious. "There was one thing you never got used to," he says. "Getting shot at."

Even though the general reputation that followed Air America pilots home after their tours ended was shrouded in mystery, at least for Clark and Mish, nothing they did to their knowledge was termed classified. Since Wingrove flew out of Laos, he cannot say the same.

Also, as with the regular GIs, nothing they did put them in any different stead with their families when they returned.

"There was no connection," said Mish. "We'd be sitting there watching the evening news and it was all Vietnam. I'd say, 'that's where I was last week. I might be acting a little squirrely now cause I'm going back.' There was no recognition or acknowledgment. It was really strange. They just didn't get it."

What was it then, that enticed this remarkable crew of men, all now middle-aged or seniors, to take the risks that they did in the name of Air America?

"As far as I was concerned, it was just as challenging as flying combat in the Air Force. When you cracked that 300-foot ceiling, when there was no real good ILS (instrument landing) or landing strip, when you took a load in on a real short runway, it felt pretty good. I told myself 'man I did something,'" said Clark.

(Air America pilots were notorious for bringing their aircraft in safely, landing on runways so short or at such high altitudes that it defied logic that they could walk away from the planes).

"One good thing about flying over there was that, if you lived through the first year or so, you really got proficient because you flew hundreds of hours. I looked at my old logbook the other day. Twenty-one legs in the {Mekong} Delta in eleven hours," he said.

"We were a one-man band too," added Mish. "Do the paperwork, run the passengers' manifest, put oil in the engine. Can you imagine that? In a bleepin' war zone?"

In all, Air America lost some 242 personnel in Indochina. Yet you will find none of the names of those who gave their lives on the wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. That was because of the unofficial nature of their work, and because the CIA employed them as civilian pilots, though most of them had previous military backgrounds.

I don't know if our KIAs not being recognized angers me or not," said Clark. "We were civilians who got paid well and knew what we were doing."

"Again, we could always go home whereas those guys couldn't," Clark emphasized.

They gain some solace in the fact that there is a memorial to those lost at the University of Texas at Dallas. It is there that the Air America Archives are housed.

In spite of that, for many AA flyers and ground crew, there remains something about their time in Indochina that never leaves them; that even causes them to look back, not only humorously through war, as Wingrove can, but wistfully.

"I loved it," said Clark, whose first wife and daughter were actually nearby in Hong Kong and Bangkok during his time in Vietnam. Ironically, his second wife is a Vietnamese national with whom he had worked at the Defense Attaché Office of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon after 1973 when he was grounded for high blood pressure. They happened to meet again by chance in 1975 at Camp Pendleton, Calif. where the first wave of Vietnamese refugees was sent after Saigon fell to communist forces on April 30 of that year.

Clark left Vietnam two weeks before the fall, but feels glad that Air America's aircraft were able to pull as many Vietnamese who had been loyal to the U.S. out during the last weeks.

"At the very end we were able to get out people who we thought would be at risk. C-141's were bringing tons of equipment into Saigon, dumping it and going back to Clark Field (the Philippines) empty. So we were able to get some of those people on those planes.

He was on one when he left Vietnam for Guam on 14 April.

"I rode in a C-130 with no seats, all the baggage was in the back, hundreds of refugees knee to knee. Hundreds. We were so overloaded we were glad to get to Guam."

But Clark's connection with the first wave of Vietnamese refugees did not stop there. He stayed with them until touching down at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, Calif. and was bussed alongside them to Camp Pendleton where the famous Tent City was erected.

He and others left behind an incredible legacy.

"Some of the guys up in Laos were there over ten years. What an amazing career. Ten years of getting shot at every day," reflected Mish

In fact, one of the oft-reprinted images of the fall of Saigon is the last rotor-winged aircraft out of South Vietnam before the communist encroachment. It is that of a gray-colored Huey, atop a building, rotor at bay while frantic Vietnamese are climbing a ladder to its launch pad, scrambling to board her. The building, often mistaken for the rooftop of the U.S. Embassy, in fact, was that of the Air France office. One unmistakable fact, however, is that it was an Air America helicopter flown by an Air America pilot, whose identity is still being debated. He did not have to be there yet chose to.

Today, former Air America personnel and their families are lobbying the U.S. Postal Service in hopes of getting that famous photo issued as a stamp in recognition of their deeds, not only in Indochina, but after World War II and during Korea, when they flew as Civil Air Transport. CAT was an airline whose own roots sprang from Flying Tigers General Claire Chennault. Anyone interested in learning more about Air America can log onto the web site of the Air America Association: www.air-america.org.