



Photo provided by Allen Cates

Children gather near Allen Cates' aircraft during an Air America supply mission in Southeast Asia in 1968.

Air America

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America helicopter atop the U.S. Embassy in Saigon about to whisk desperate refugees to safety in 1975, Cates pointed out.

"Most people are not even aware that it was a civilian aircraft," Cates said.

Cates was discharged from the U.S. Marine Corps in 1966, and he signed up with Air America, flying C-47 transport planes before moving to helicopters out of Udorn, Thailand.

He didn't know at the time that Air America was owned by the Central Intelligence Agency, but he said he found out when he signed up for flights into northern Laos and North Vietnam.

For that mission, he had to sign a 10-year secrecy agreement.

Laos was a neutral country during the

Vietnam War, and the U.S. military officially was not allowed to fly there, but Air America could go there to pick up refugees and deliver food and medical supplies, he said.

"That's what Air America was all about, helping people," according to Cates.

The association is trying to persuade the U.S. Postal Service to issue a stamp commemorating Air America's role in the Vietnam era, and the 243 employees killed.

Cates credited fellow Air America employee L.J. "Jason" Broussard for eventually persuading him to settle his family in Lafayette where he started an oil field service company, Setac.

Cates and Broussard are hosting the Lafayette reunion.

Cates said he stopped flying after returning to the United States. But not Broussard.

"I like it as much as I ever did," he said.

Broussard said Air America was a dream-come-true for an aviator wanting to fly a variety of aircraft.

"If you liked adventure and moving around, it was a great job," he said.

He now flies crop dusters and for United Parcel Service. Even an accident that left him badly burned didn't keep him out of the sky "as soon as I got out of the wheelchair."

Broussard expects more than 300 people to attend the reunion.

"They're expecting one of the largest turnouts ever," he said.