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*"An employee's perspective"*



# **Air America**

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They literally came from all walks of life this CAT/Air America bunch. The bulk of the flight crews had been trained by the military, but not all. Some came as crop dusters and water bombers from the forest fires in the northwest, and many of those had seen war on the ground in Korea and Vietnam. Several bore visible scars from past skirmishes and a few had been prisoners of war. The airfreight specialists, kickers they were called, were former Special Forces and tough as nails. But several were smoke jumpers, tempered by fire and equally hard. Most, if not all, of the flight mechanics were combat veterans. They lived with their aircraft in the field and were accustomed to the smell of blood from the fresh killed meat they loaded and carried to the battlefield and that of the wounded and dead they carried back. Air America's ground operations personnel, the operation specialists, intelligence gatherers and maintenance supervisors had years of training and on-site experience with both the military and civilian employment. And that was just the Americans. Thousands of indigenous personnel, both male and female, worked years for Air America and were essential for day to day operations and some were flight crew personnel in Thailand and Vietnam. Third country nationals, Chinese and Filipinos, filled important slots in operations on the ground and in the air as flight crews. They too, like the Americans, found violent death was often the reward for their service.

Why would anyone commit his or her working life to paramilitary operations in war torn Southeast Asia for a civilian airline? You couldn't get life insurance. You squandered the best years of your life toward a career with no retirement and a foundation of sand. What was the motivation to remain year after year in a place where death was cheap and life was spent on the edge? Was it an addiction to adrenaline rushes? The money? Or, was it the mystique of the orient and its exotic ambiance coupled with a desire to find who you were against the odds of war?

Perhaps, it was all of that and more. Asking those who served, you sometimes received a quick answer and then a pause as if not sure that answer was quite correct, or just a blank stare and a search for words. Those who didn't serve, the historians, strive to write about the reasoning and most are just as often usually wrong. Could it be just a road you take by chance or destiny? Then, how do you explain the common thread among them of no regrets and a knowing deep within that is self evident, but yet so obscure it cannot be defined? I suggest that underneath it all was pride in America. This country is not supposed to mean something...it does mean something. And, its not just freedom, liberty and justice, and the end cannot always justify the means. America is the means. That's what we are about and that's why you will see Americans then and now willing to place their life on the line for this great country. Those Americans, who perform those duties for their country, are called veterans and they should be recognized accordingly.

Air America was born as Civil Air Transport, but that simple statement does not completely explain the history. Hugh Grundy wrote, "*There were actually two CAT's.*"

One CAT commenced as CNRA Air Transport (CAT), the Chinese counterpart of UNRA who delivered rehabilitation goods to the shores of China. An inadequate transport system, weakened by national and civil war, resulted in major reliance on air transport for distribution of relief goods internally. CAT filled that role, carrying relief goods inland and ad hoc commercial goods back out. The airline's name changed to Civil Air Transport when the program ended, thus retaining the already well established, (CAT).

It then became Civil Air Transport CAA MOC, a Chinese airline operating as an instrument of the Republic of China Civil Aviation Authority, Ministry of Communications. This was a unique bridging arrangement and concession to permit an airline owned by foreigners to fly under the Chinese flag, when Chinese law required majority Chinese ownership. This setup continued until 1954 when the ROC enacted new legislation, "The Statute for Foreign Investment<sup>700</sup> providing means of foreign investment. Following that, Civil Air Transport (CAT) was reorganized to comply with the new laws, including majority ownership by Chinese citizens but with limited resources. Civil Air Transport (CAT) obtained, via contract with Asiatic Aeronautical Company Limited (AACL), a new Chinese company invested under the new laws by CAT Incorporated (CAT) most of the aircraft, personnel and other support services needed for it's airline operation.

The other CAT was CAT incorporated, an American Carrier, a Delaware Corporation, mainly engaged in performing US Government contracts. Most Directors and most Officers were common. Operations and aircraft intermingled. The two entities and their activities often were confused, not only by outsiders, but by employees as well."

Mr. Grundy went on to say, "Having experienced so much trouble with keeping accounts straight while serving as Chief Engineer and VP, at Tainan, one of my early undertakings upon being elected President was to choose a new name, AIR AMERICA, and propose to higher ups and our Boards that CAT Incorporated be so renamed in an effort to reduce confusion. The proposal saw early approval, but it took several years to research name conflicts, resolve problems (American Air lines objected initially but later relented) and implement the name change. In choosing the name, Air France, A CAT interline partner, was a model for a short, descriptive, easy off the tongue, easily remembered name.

While proposing the name change to Air America I also proposed that the rather long "tongue twister" name of Asiatic Aeronautical Company Limited be changed to the shorter, easier to say, write and remember AIR ASIA. That also was approved and implemented. The simple name change to Air America gradually but largely eliminated the confusion, but never totally corrected it."

In 1945 China was in turmoil and engulfed in internal strife after Japan surrendered. There were several civilian airlines operating then and just as many historical records written about their exploits. Very few of them talk about the people who operated the equipment and their rationale for being there.

General Claire Chennault was the father of CAT. His motivation was clear and well documented, but none of the written records completely explain this man. One gets the impression that he did not believe the ending of that terrible war stopped the hostility, resentment and

misunderstanding. In his mind the job had not been completed and there was plenty of work to be done to achieve balance. History later proved him correct. It's still doing it today.

The United States backed Chaing Kai Chek and he eventually fled to an island off the China coast where a nation of free China was established. CAT was broke, but had potential and gained the attention of the Central Intelligence Agency, who needed a secret air arm for their intelligence gathering activity. CAT was purchased in 1950. The name was changed to Air America in 1959 and their operations migrated to Southeast Asia along with an escalating war, first with the French and then with America that proved to be costly and controversial. Felix Smith, CAT and Air America pilot, wrote in his book *China Pilot*, "*For whom there were no bugler's taps or names inscribed in stone. Their bones rest in alien ground unwet by tears.*" Felix's book is an excellent story about the beginning of CAT and the legacy that followed. His words epitomize the general attitude of how most CAT pilots viewed their plight and what America's thoughts were about their work.

A large portion of the fixed wing pilots were retired military, but still young enough to fly. The rotary wing crews were generally younger. Most were products from the Vietnam War and had served their time and been mustered out. Most were strongly opinionated, some silent and some vocal, and if you were forced to decide on a single common characteristic it would be their sense of pride and patriotic duty for America. It was not uncommon for crews to argue heatedly about differences in opinion on a variety of issues, including the war itself. But when it was time to do the job all that ceased and the crew became a single professional unit. That too still happens today.

Humor expressed about the idiosyncrasies of the war in Vietnam and Laos were numerous and often, yet most Air America employees had absolute values concerning right and wrong. They tended to look at issues in a polarized view as either black or white with few in between grays. In other respects they were as different as day and night. A bond runs among those who had served together in a war zone. The wars, including the civil war in China after WW2, Korea, the French war in Indo China and the war in Vietnam and Laos during the 60s and 70s that CAT/Air America were involved with, represented logistical and operational nightmares. Sun Tzu, in *The Art of War*, said "*Since ancient times there has never been a war that did not have a political character... war cannot for a single moment be separated from politics.*"

The Central Intelligence Agency, perhaps with an understanding of Sun Tzu's concept, realized the leaders of CAT/Air America had to be chosen carefully. The Agency chose wisely. Mr. Hugh L. Grundy had years of experience necessary to set up the vast maintenance network within Air Asia Company LTD and Air America. Vast is not really the right word and even huge does not adequately describe the complexity of this enterprise. Equally important, and essential, Grundy had a unique knack of being able to join Americans, Chinese, Filipino, Thai, Lao and Vietnamese into a single unit with integrity and absolute success. This year he will be inducted into the Kentucky Aviation Hall of Fame and has already been recognized and honored by the United States House of Representatives and recorded in the Congressional Record for his accomplishments with CAT, Air America and Air Asia Company LTD.

The Vice President of Operations over Air Asia, remnants of CAT, and Air America, was granted to Mr. Robert E. Rousselot, and again they chose wisely. The personality and background differences were vast, yet Rousselot recognized the common thread and never asked anyone to do something he would not do himself. People tend to work harder for leaders like

that, and working hard was what America needed. This year, 2003, Mr. Rousselot will be inducted into the Oklahoma Aviation Hall of Fame. This is a very prestigious honor and well deserved. Together, and with a hand-selected staff, these two gentlemen successfully operated, at that time, the largest airline in aviation history, and often in areas the military could not go. The Agency, known for its stingy behavior regarding awards and recognition, gave each a citation for their effort. The award itself is miniscule, but speaks volumes when you realize that out of thousands only two received the recognition as individuals. These two, and these two only, and that tells you more than pages of words. They are truly historical icons for a very unique organization.

CAT/Air America lasted for more than 20 years starting in the 40's crossing the Shanghai River and ending on a Saigon rooftop in 1975. There have been scores of attempts to describe the men, women and children of CAT/Air America through books and articles by those who lived the experience. This may never be completely explained. No one wishes to be eulogized as being perfect. That would be impossible for any professional unit. But it would be unfair, and factually untrue to characterize CAT/Air America as a band of malcontents, misfits and undesirable persons. It would be equally untrue to say they were not veterans of foreign wars for America, because they were all of that. Some years ago an aggressive program to promote the preservation of documents and pictures representing Air America's history was instituted. That concept has now become a virtual reality thanks to the University of Texas at Dallas and Texas Tech University. There, with individual collections, the truth about CAT/Air America is evident with documented proof.

Allen Cates