

ALLEN CATES

February 12, 2004

Mr. James D. Johnston

Executive Secretary

DoD Civilian /Military Service Review Board

SAF Personnel Council

1535 Command Dr., EE Wing, 3rd Fl.

Andrews AFB, MD 20762-7002

Dear Mr. Johnston:

William A. Zeitler & Cornelio N. Pascual were flying a UH34D on 18 August 1964 in Laos as employees of Air America, Inc. (J. Leeker, *Air America Aircraft, UH34D*) Billy is a former Army pilot and as per usual was the single pilot on H-19 that day. Mr. Pascual, the flight mechanic, was an older man by our standards back then. He was a Filipino, a WW2 hero and well respected, according to AAM pilot Dick Casterlin, who knew him well. The attached message from Base manager Dave Hickler to Hugh Grundy, the President of Air America Inc. tells some of the story, but not all of it. Actually, this kind of activity was routine all through the mid and late 60's, as well as the early 70's where most of the AAM KIAs occurred. And while that is pertinent to the scope of my application, it is the date this incident occurred and the people present that make's it interesting. Jet aircraft had never been used in Laos for air support prior to this date. The Tonkin Bay resolution was issued just a few days earlier. Note this statement from Hickler's letter. The Air Attaché was at the control point --our OD radio room--as well as other concerned individuals. Ambassador Unger soon arrived with his staff. He was briefed by Col. Tyrrell, Air Attaché, and his designated air rescue chief and coordinator. The Ambassador then came to our OD radio room for further briefings and info from our FIC and OM staff. The United States Air Force was more involved with AAM operations than many realized and we were definitely under Air Force control. According to Dick Casterlin, Air America Captain Billy Pearson (now deceased) flying another UH34D picked up the crew of the Air Force plane that went down that afternoon

The T-28 that had been shot down had a foreign pilot. The T-28 program using AAM Americans was extensive, but only lasted a couple of years, but the SAR activity using AAM helicopters continued until operations closed in 1974. Former AAM T-28 pilot John Wiren verified that napalm was used during the rescue and that this was the first use in Laos to his knowledge. Air America pilots piloted the other two T-28s involved also,

but I can't find confirmation on their names. Billy was trying to rescue the downed T-28 crew when he was shot in the foot. You need both feet and both hands to fly a UH34D and getting shot in the foot while in a hover in an elevated terrain environment would probably result in loss of control and a crash, which is what happened. The aircraft could have experienced catastrophic damage from the ground fire also. No one knows if Mr. Pascual was alive or dead when the aircraft exploded. As I mentioned in previous letters the UH34D, a U.S. Marine Corps helicopter on loan to Air America, had a magnesium skin and used 115/145-octane fuel to run a 1525 HP hot rod engine. There is no way to stop the fire until all is consumed once it has started.

Billy was not seriously burned, but suffered flash burns along with his gunshot wound and was in shock. The burns were serious enough to leave scars that are visible today. Mr. Pascual died in the helicopter and he is listed on our Memorial Plaque as a KIA. AAM Captain Jack Connors and F/M Stan Wilson in H-20 rescued Billy later that afternoon. There was some escape and evading involved and being on the ground in enemy territory is a harrowing experience. I know, because I've been there myself, but Billy was alone and I was with others. Billy recovered physically, but the trauma caused him to ask for and accept a transfer to fixed wing aircraft later. It wasn't the combat activity that caused him to transfer, and if it was, then it was a mistake, because the Caribou program involved several "Black" operations and were often hit by enemy fire during drop missions and perhaps more than the helicopters. Rather, it was the remaining over night up country in primitive conditions requirement for helicopter operations that triggered the transfer. But, many pilots involved in traumatic situations can often escape the dread and remembrance simply by changing aircraft...even if the mission is more dangerous after the change. Billy Zeitler characterizes this operation as a failed mission, and regarding the initial idea being the rescue of the foreign T-28 pilot that is true, but there is another aspect here that demands respect. Captain Zeitler was under orders to assist when needed, but he was not assigned this specific mission by higher authority and he had the option of turning it down if the danger was too great. He accepted it because he was in the area, was trained for the job, and more important, it was the right thing to do. Those who really know what a SAR mission is like and what can happen are fully cognizant of the hazards and Billy knew full well what could happen. It takes character to put your fear behind you and take on that kind of responsibility. Billy Zeitler deserves the Purple Heart and all the benefits that go with it because he was willing to make a calculated risk using his talent and expertise to help a man he never met. That's bravery above and beyond the norm. Looking at what I sent you previously it appears that I did not send you Dr. Leeker's report on Air America's Caribous and it is included with this letter.

Dick Casterlin informed me about a State Department web site that had recorded letters and dispatches from various Air Force and Ambassador level personnel in Laos during the years 1964 through 1968. Air America is discussed in several places in these records. I included all of the records to keep everything in context and high lighted the portions referring to Air America. It is interesting to note that no other civilian company is mentioned and it is obvious that the United States Government and the United States Air Force used Air America as a paramilitary force to conduct military operations in Laos with support running in both directions. I wish such a report were available for the

following years when the war in Laos intensified greatly. Other than what has been previously submitted a report such as this for those years does not exist to my knowledge.

The other day I received the speech Mr. Rod Smith with the C.I.A gave at the 2001 Las Vegas reunion when the Unit Citation was awarded. I am including the written version because of his explanation concerning Air America's mission that is clearly military in nature. Specifically, I bring to your attention that portion of his speech where he characterizes Air America as a "National covert air force at war." I believe this attitude reflects our true nature and the intent the United States Government had for Air America to support the United States Armed Forces in South East Asia.

This information is respectfully submitted as additional proof of my claim that employees of CAT/Air America Inc. fall under the purview and intent of public law 95-202 and DoD Directive 1000.20.

Yours truly,


Allen Cates