

No.

7

Search & Rescue Force (SAR)

# AIR AMERICA

## UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND



A SYMPOSIUM ACKNOWLEDGING AND COMMEMORATING  
AIR AMERICA RESCUE EFFORTS DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

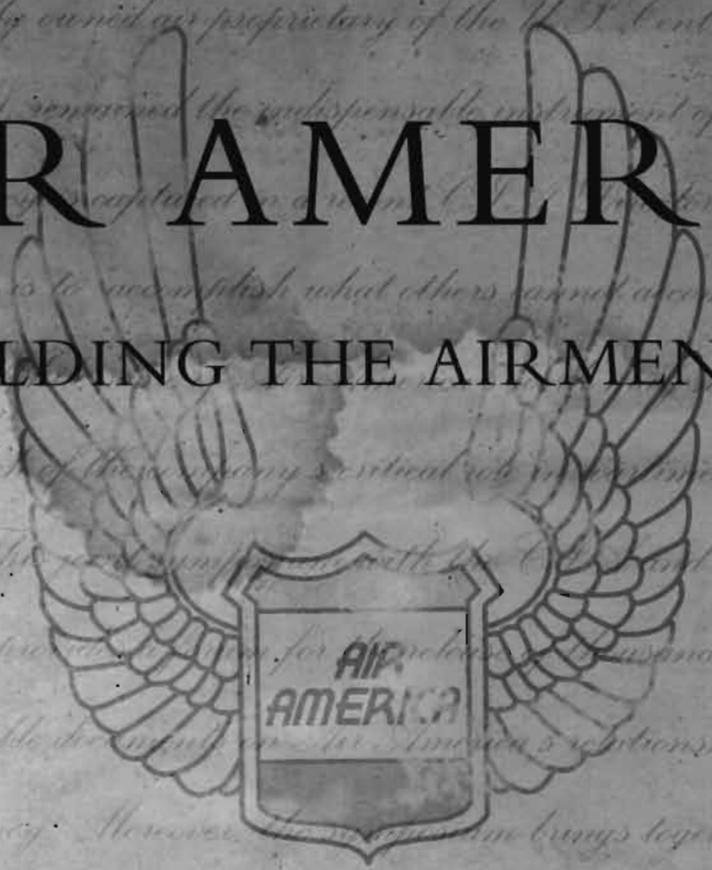


CENTER  
STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

UT DALLAS

# AIR AMERICA

UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND



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The Historical Collections Division (HCD) of the Office of Information Management Services is responsible for executing the CIA's Historical Review Program. This program seeks to identify, collect, and review for possible release to the public significant historical information. The mission of HCD is to:

- Provide an accurate, objective understanding of the information and intelligence that has helped shape the foundation of major US policy decisions.
- Improve access to lessons learned, presenting historical material to emphasize the scope and context of past actions.
- Improve current decision-making and analysis by facilitating reflection on the impacts and effects arising from past decisions.
- Uphold Agency leadership commitments to openness, while protecting the national security interests of the US.
- Provide the American public with valuable insight into the workings of their Government.



CENTER FOR THE  
STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

The History Staff in the CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence fosters understanding of the Agency's history and its relationship to today's intelligence challenges by communicating instructive historical insights to the CIA workforce, other US Government agencies, and the public. CIA historians research topics on all aspects of Agency activities and disseminate their knowledge through publications, courses, briefings, and Web-based products. They also work with other Intelligence Community historians on publication and education projects that highlight interagency approaches to intelligence issues. Lastly, the CIA History Staff conducts an ambitious program of oral history interviews that are invaluable for preserving institutional memories that are not captured in the documentary record.



## The History of Aviation Collection at The University of Texas at Dallas

The symposium, "Air America: Upholding the Airmen's Bond," comes on the heels of a decades-long effort to declassify approximately 10,000 CIA documents on the airline. These papers—many of which have never been seen by the public or scholars outside of the CIA—will join the History of Aviation Collection (HAC) at the Eugene McDermott Library at The University of Texas at Dallas.

It is a special honor that the Civil Air Transport (CAT) and Air America associations, whose members are former employees of the airline and their relatives, asked the CIA to give these papers to UT Dallas. The decision reflects the strong relationship that already exists between the CAT and Air America associations and the library's Special Collections staff. In 1985 the HAC became the official repository of the Civil Air Transport/Air America Archives and CAT/Air America survivors raised \$15,000 for a large memorial plaque featuring the names of the 240 employees who lost their lives as civilians during their service in Southeast Asia. In 1987 the plaque was dedicated at McDermott Library during a solemn ceremony.

The History of Aviation Collection is considered one of the finest research archives on aviation history in the U.S. It comprises:

- 18,000-20,000 cataloged books
- 4,000-plus magazine and periodical titles
- 500,000 photographs and negatives
- 2,000 films
- 4,000 boxes of archived materials

In 1963 George Haddaway, founder and managing editor of Flight magazine, donated

his files and a collection of rare first edition aviation books to UT Austin. In 1978 the million-item collection of Vice Admiral Charles E. Rosendahl was added to the HAC but facilities in Austin were inadequate to properly hold it. The collection moved to UT Dallas because it had considerable space in its new McDermott Library.

In an effort to relieve the library's Special Collections of its growing artifacts and to provide better public access, UT Dallas made a long-term loan of most of the Rosendahl artifacts to launch the Frontiers of Flight Museum at Love Field in Dallas.

The prominence of the Rosendahl holdings attracted members of the CAT/Air America associations to select the HAC for their official archives and memorial. This prestige further boosted the HAC's significance and research value to students and scholars and prompted additional significant donations.

Upon the death of WWII hero Gen. James H. "Jimmy" Doolittle in 1993, the library received his personal correspondence, film and photographs and copies of his scientific research papers, as well as his desk, chair, uniform, and Medal of Honor. This represents the only major collection of the general's memorabilia and personal files outside federal facilities such as the Library of Congress.

Now with the newly declassified CIA documents, the History of Aviation Collection has strengthened its position as holding the premier archive on Civil Air Transport and Air America.



The Airmen's Bond  
Keith Woodcock  
Donated Courtesy of the Air America Association Board

The Airmen's Bond depicts the heroism of an Air America UH-34D crew conducting the rescue of two US Air Force A1E attack aircraft pilots. Overhead, a "Raven" forward air controller flying an O-1 observation plane directs two Air America-piloted T-28Ds in strafing runs against advancing Communist forces. The rescue takes place on the Plaine des Jarres, a critical Communist supply route in the high plateau of north-central Laos. From 1964 to 1965, when the US military had few SAR aircraft in the region, Air America rescued 21 American pilots.

## AIR AMERICA: UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND

Quietly and courageously throughout the long and difficult Vietnam War, Air America, a secretly owned air proprietary of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), remained the indispensable instrument of CIA's clandestine mission. This legacy is captured in a recent CIA Director's statement that the Agency's mission is to "accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others cannot go." While some of Air America's work may never be publicly acknowledged, much of the company's critical role in wartime rescue missions can now be revealed. This joint symposium with the CIA and The University of Texas at Dallas provides a forum for the release of thousands of pages of heretofore unavailable documents on Air America's relationship with the Central Intelligence Agency.

Moreover, the symposium brings together many Air America veterans, a number of men rescued by Air America, and the CIA "customers" who often placed their lives and missions in the hands of this once-secret air proprietary.

Air America crews were not required to monitor military emergency radio calls, fly to the location of military personnel in distress, or place their lives at risk of enemy ground-fire and possible capture. They received no extra compensation for rescue work and sometimes lost wages for their efforts. However, in their flying community it was enough to know that a downed aviator was in trouble and that airmen should always come to the aid of other airmen. It was simply the Airmen's Bond.

Great job, am...  
decided to...  
with the...  
**PRE-FLIGHT CHECKLIST**  
to get...  
important...



[1947]

31 January 1947  
CAT makes its first official flight. A C-47 piloted by Frank Hughes and Doug Smith takes off from Shanghai to Canton.

16 January 1950  
The city of Mengtze, China falls to Communist forces. Bob Buol, Jose Jawbert and Lincoln Sun are captured.

10 July 1950  
CAT Incorporated (CATI) and Airdale Incorporated are organized under the laws of the State of Delaware. Airdale Incorporated was to be a holding company for CAT Incorporated.

15 September 1950  
CAT begins Operation Booklift, a massive airlift operation in Korea to support UN forces

26 March 1959  
Air America, Incorporated created by change of name of CAT Incorporated.

February 1961  
Air America directed to take over United States Marine Corps operations in Udorn, Thailand.

9 March 1961  
President John F. Kennedy directs the CIA to run a secret war in Laos. Air America becomes intimately involved.

August 1966  
LS 85 established. Located on top of Phou Pha Thi mountain, the United States set up a Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) station used to guide air strikes on North Vietnam.

8 September 1948  
CAT inaugurates its first scheduled flight from Shanghai to Nanking-Wuchang-Chengchow-Sian-Lanchow.

24 September 1948  
CAT's first international flight. A C-46 airlifts 4,482 pounds of tin from Kunming to Haiphong.

29 November 1952  
Norman Schwartz and Robert Snoddy are shot down and killed while flying a covert mission over China to pick up a Chinese Agent.

6 May 1953  
CAT begins a six week emergency drop to support French troops in French Indochina.

September 1960  
Air America begins airlift to General Phoumi at Savannakhet, Laos, flying in 1,000 tons a month.

20 December 1960  
Fourteen USMC H-34 helicopters delivered to Air America.

2-5 August 1965  
Gulf of Tonkin Incident  
22 May 1964  
T-28 program begins. Air America pilots fly Laotian T-28s in support of Search and Rescue operations.

November 1964  
First large-scale search and rescue effort of the Indochina war.

28 April 1967  
Second defense of Lima Site 36.



AIR AMERICA



June 1971

Battle for Skyline Ridge begins. Air America airlifts troops, supplies, and conducts Search and Rescue missions.



17 December 1971

Plaine des Jarres (PDJ) falls.

1 March 1975

North Vietnam launches Campaign 275, the all out invasion of the Central Highlands. Within two weeks, South Vietnam President Thieu orders the Highlands abandoned.

23 March 1975

Air America evacuates key personnel from Hue and Quang Nhai.

28 March 1975

Evacuation of Da Nang begins.

21 April 1975

South Vietnamese President Thieu resigns.

28 April 1975

North Vietnamese offensive against Saigon begins with an air strike on Tan Son Nhut air base.

29 April 1975

Ambassador Martin orders the emergency evacuation of Saigon. Air America helicopters evacuate personnel to aircraft carriers off shore throughout the day. The last helicopter out, piloted by Robert Caron with crew member O. B. Harnage, takes off from atop the Pittman Hotel.

5 May 1975

CIA Director William Colby stated: "The withdrawal from Vietnam draws to a conclusion Air America's operational activities . . . Air America appropriately named has served its country well."



12 January 1968

Air America's first and only air-to-kill. Four North Vietnamese AN-2 Colts approached Site 85. Two of the aircraft attacked while the other two circled off in the distance. An Air America Bell 212 was asked to assist. Faster than the Colts, the Air America helicopter flown by Ted Moore, flew next to one of the aircraft while his flight mechanic, Glenn Woods, fired on the AN-2 with his AK-47. After downing the first plane they caught up to the second plane, shooting it down in the same manner.

11 March 1968

Lima Site 85 falls. Air America helicopter crews fly to the site repeatedly to evacuate personnel.



Mid-December 1974

The North Vietnamese launches a winter-spring offensive against Phuoc Long Province to test the United States willingness to respond to this peace agreement violation.



[2001]

2 June 2001

Director, Central Intelligence George Tenet issues a commendation to Air America personnel.



## AIR AMERICA FACTS

- In 1970, Air America had 80 airplanes and was "The World's Most Shot at Airline."
- Air America lost 240 pilots and crew members to hostile fire.
- Captain Weldon "Big" Bigony, a native of Big Spring, Texas, was one of the first pilots hired by CAT.
- In July 1950 the CIA formed the Pacific Corporation (not its original name) and a month later purchased CAT to use in clandestine missions to fight communism in the Asia theater. The price was under a million dollars—a real bargain for a company with a book value of three or four times that amount.
- Before the fall of Dien Bien Phu to the Viet Minh on 7 May 1954, CAT pilots flew 682 airdrop missions to the beleaguered French troops.
- Following the signing of the Geneva Accord on 21 July 1954, it also supplied C-46s for Operation Cognac, during which they evacuated nearly 20,000 civilians from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.
- During 1970, Air America airdropped or landed 46 million pounds of food stuffs—mainly rice—in Laos. Helicopter flight time reached more than 4,000 hours a month in the same year. Air America crews transported tens of thousands of troops and refugees.
- In Vietnam, according to Robbins, AAM had about 40 aircraft and served about 12,000 passengers a month, among whom were USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) people, missionaries, military personnel, correspondents, government officials and nurses.
- Air America took on a greater and greater burden of support for military operations, as reflected in its contracts with the Department of Defense, which increased from about \$18 million in 1972 to over \$41 million in 1973.
- During the final weeks of the war, AAM helicopter crews evacuated some 41,000



American civilians, "customers," diplomatic personnel, AAM personnel, and South Vietnamese civilians from Saigon before advancing North Vietnamese communist forces arrived.

- Air America aircraft carried all sorts of cargo and equipment, food, mail, cement, roofing material, sedated animals, and gasoline.

#### INTRODUCED IN 1964: SAR MISSIONS FOR THE US MILITARY

The first occasion to rescue a downed US military pilot came on 6 June 64, when US Navy Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann was shot down in his RF-8A Crusader from the USS Kitty Hawk over the north-eastern corner of the Plaine des Jarres, that is near Khang Khay in the Ban Pha Ka (LS-40) area.

- With North Vietnamese troops more and more pressing their invasion of the South in the early seventies, Air America was ever more called upon to help evacuate refugees. As the South Vietnamese Minister of Labor said in his Citation dated 12 June 72: "In addition, during the past two years, Air America has participated in major refugee movements. A total of 14,717 Vietnamese refugees who were in Cambodia during the year 1970, and subsequently arrived in Vung Tau, were transported from Vung Tau by Air America to Bao Loc and Ham Tan, South Vietnam for relocation. Later, in 1972, Air America again participated in refugee movements. A total of 1,317 refugees were flown by Air America from Quang Tri to Phuoc Tuy, and 4,324 refugees were transported from Hue to Ban Me Thuot and Vung Tau City. Since that time additional relocations have been possible through the support rendered by Air America."

#### EVACUATION FROM THE PITTMAN BUILDING

- The most famous evacuation flown by Air America on 29 April 75 was one from the Pittman Building at Saigon, although most people who saw the world famous photo taken by UPI photographer Hubert van Es probably thought that it was a US military helicopter on top of the US Embassy—it wasn't.

- At the end, during this dramatic evacuation of Saigon, more than 7,000 refugees — 1,373 Americans, 5,595 South Vietnamese, and 85 third-country nationals — were airlifted to the 40 ships of the U.S. fleet lying before the coast of South Vietnam.

- Air America's crews did a tremendous job in hauling more than 1,000 passengers to the Embassy, the DAO, or to the ships.
- Air America was supposed to have 28 helicopters that day, out of which six were stolen by Vietnamese, one had rocket damage, one out of service for an engine change, and four were conducting evacuations in Can Tho. David B. Kendall had to ditch his helicopter alongside the ship Blue Ridge.



## Symposium Overview

by Dr. Tim Castle

### THE WAR IN LAOS

When President Kennedy decided in 1961 to forcefully resist rising communist aggression against the remote but strategically located Kingdom of Laos, the CIA and Air America were ready. Flying in a mountainous land-locked country with few roads, continually shifting weather conditions and virtually no navigational aids, Air America crews routinely conducted hazardous resupply missions to hundreds of government outposts. This aerial lifeline provided essential assistance to the Royal Lao and U.S.-directed forces battling North Vietnamese and Pathet communist troops.

Air America crews became expert in the terrain and unique flying conditions of Laos, but they were not immune to enemy ground fire and the perils of being shot down over enemy-controlled territory. They soon created their own search and rescue (SAR) force, comprised of UH-34D helicopters and T-28D attack aircraft, and began to respond to their own emergencies. As more U.S. military aircraft began flying missions over Laos (and later North Vietnam), Air America also took on the primary responsibility for rescuing all downed U.S. aviators. In 1964-1965, when the U.S. military had few SAR aircraft in the region, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) reports that Air America rescued 21 American pilots.

Although the USAF did not continue to publish further statistics on Air America rescues and the CIA never tracked such data, anecdotal information and occasional formal letters of commendation suggest that Air America crews saved scores of American airmen. One such letter, written by Major General DeWitt

R Searles, USAF, stated "I wish to convey my personal appreciation and commendation to two of your helicopter crews for their exceptional aerial skill in the rescue of the crew members of an RF-4C, Bullwhip 26, on 20 January 1972." General Searles went on to name Lee Andrews, Nicki Fillipi, Ron Anderson, John Fonberg, William Phillips, and Bob Noble for their "truly outstanding" efforts. "In spite of a known 37MM high threat area and small arms fire," said the general, "these crew members disregarded their own personal safety to perform a heroic rescue. The quick response to the distress call and actual recovery in near record time were unquestionably instrumental in saving the lives of the USAF RF-4C crew members."

In order to more fully understand these events, Donald Boecker, a U.S. Navy pilot shot down over northern Laos in 1965, will share the stage with one of his rescuers, Air America pilot Sam Jordan.

In early 1968 Air America pilot Ken Wood and his flight mechanic Loy "Rusty" Irons carried out one of the most unusual and daring rescues of the entire Vietnam War. Project "Heavy Green" was a top secret U.S. Air Force radar bombing facility located at Lima Site 85, a mile-high Laotian mountaintop a mere 120 miles from downtown Hanoi. The military program was manned by sixteen Air Force technicians working under cover as civilian employees of the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation. On the evening of 10 March 1968 the North Vietnamese launched a furious mortar, rocket, and artillery attack on Site 85's CIA operations area and the Air Force facilities. Concurrently, a sapper team climbed the steep western cliffs

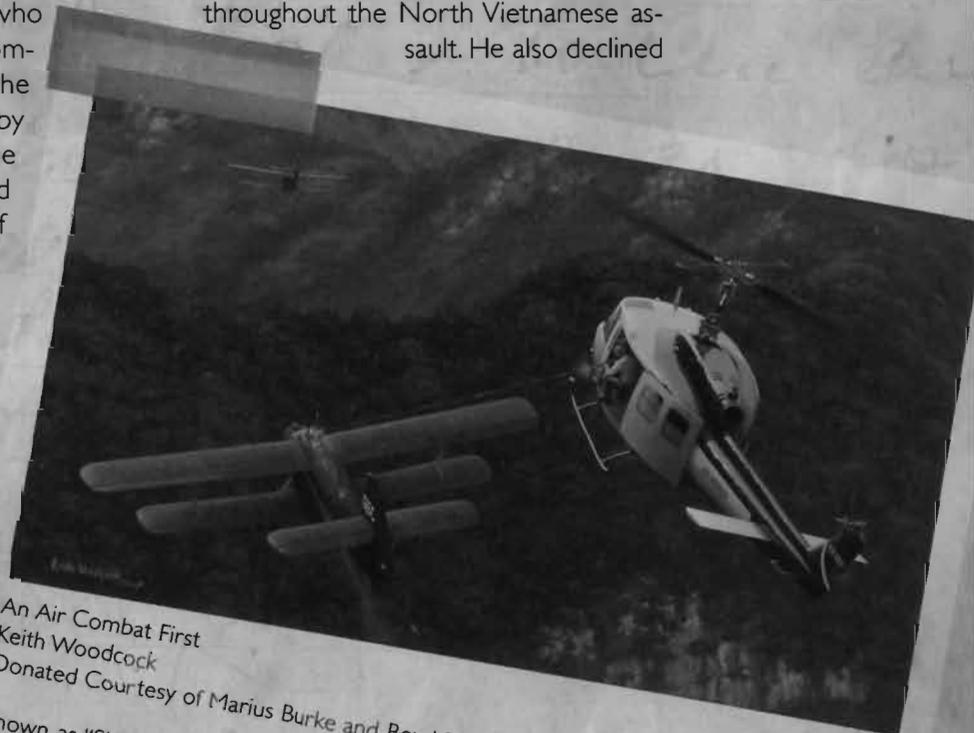
just below the radar buildings. In a pre-dawn attack the sappers surrounded the technicians and used automatic weapons fire and rocket-propelled grenades in an attempt to destroy the facility and kill all of the Americans.

Wood and Irons, responding to a signal from a military survival radio, flew to Site 85 and courageously hovered over a group of radar technicians trapped on the side of the cliff below the radar facility. Irons quickly dropped a hoist to the men and pulled them aboard the unarmed and unarmored Huey helicopter. After forty-one years of secrecy, the CIA is now acknowledging Air America's role in the rescue of the "Heavy Green" members - Stanley Sliz, Richard Etchberger, Willie Husband, and John Daniel. Etchberger, who heroically defended his injured comrades until they were placed on the helicopter, was mortally wounded by enemy fire as the Huey withdrew. The communist assault on Site 85 resulted in the single greatest ground loss of U.S. Air Force personnel for the entire Vietnam War. Ten "Heavy Green" technicians remain unaccounted for from this attack.

Chef Master Sergeant Richard Etchberger was secretly and posthumously honored in late 1968 with the Air Force Cross. In a recent development, however, the Pentagon is reviewing Etchberger's actions for possible award of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

CIA also acknowledges the actions of two paramilitary officers at Site 85. Howard Freeman and John Woody Spence, working and living at an operations area sev-

eral hundred yards below the radar buildings, faced the communist barrage with great courage and determination. At first dawn, heedless to the presence of enemy soldiers and the continuing risk of mortars, rockets, and artillery fire, Freeman led a rescue party of Hmong irregulars to the radar facility. While searching for the technicians he came under enemy gunfire and suffered a serious leg wound. Armed only with a shotgun and some phosphorous grenades, Freeman defended his team until forced to withdraw. In honor of his heroic actions Howard Freeman was awarded CIA's Intelligence Star. At the operations area Woody Spence suffered a severe hearing loss during the bombardment, but continued to maintain critical radio communications throughout the North Vietnamese assault. He also declined



An Air Combat First  
Keith Woodcock

Donated Courtesy of Marius Burke and Boyd D. Mesecher

Known as "Site 85," the US radar facility perched atop a 5,800-foot mountain in northeast Laos—less than 150 miles from Hanoi—was providing critical and otherwise unavailable all-weather guidance to American F-105 fighter-bombers flying strike missions against Communist supply depots, airfields, and railroad yards in North Vietnam. An Air Combat First captures one daring action by Air America pilot Ted Moore and flight mechanic Glenn Woods responding to a North Vietnamese air attack on the site which gained them—and Air America—the distinction of having shot down an enemy fixed-wing aircraft from a helicopter—a singular aerial victory in the entire history of the Vietnam War.

evacuation from his post until sensitive equipment and documents were properly safeguarded. Mr. Spence was honored with the CIA's Certificate of Distinction.

Air America flight mechanic Rusty Irons, former CIA paramilitary officer Woody Spence, and Heavy Green technician John Daniel will provide their recollections of this singular rescue.

The Laos panel provides a remarkable opportunity to hear from both perspectives—the rescuers and the rescued.

#### THE FALL OF SOUTH VIETNAM

The swift collapse of the South Vietnamese government in March and April 1975 caught many by surprise. According to an official U.S. Air Force history "USAF airlift planes and personnel had long since been withdrawn from South Vietnam, and the only reliable airlift available in the country was Air America. The helicopters and smaller aircraft of this company were invaluable for removing people from remote locations." While all of their work in South Vietnam was extremely challenging in this time of great political and military chaos—manifested in ever decreasing levels of security—Air America's efforts in Da Nang and Saigon are especially noteworthy.

"Da Nang was a shambles when we arrived," recalled Air America pilot Marius Burke. "Aircraft, tanks, trucks, etc., were abandoned all over the area. The aircraft apparently were out of fuel." No matter, Burke and other Air America personnel got down to the risky business of moving evacuees to safe areas. Operating out of perilous landing sites and hand-pumping fuel from 50-gallon drums into helicopters that could not be shut down, Air America responded to

increasingly urgent requests from CIA and State Department officers. All the while Air America personnel were constantly receiving a mix of pleas, verbal threats, and sometimes gunfire from agitated South Vietnamese government officials, military personnel, and local citizens determined to find a way out of the city.

In Saigon, the final refuge for all fleeing the North Vietnamese invasion, Air America faced enormous challenges. Initial evacuation planning did not anticipate the almost total disintegration of the Vietnamese security forces and the chaos that quickly engulfed the city and panicked the local and expatriate population.

CIA officers, determined to get "at risk" Vietnamese out of Saigon, directed some of these individuals to drive out into the countryside. One Air America pilot described 28 April 1975 as follows, "Our customer 'Max' rode with us. Our mission was lifting Vietnamese from various locations in the Vietnam Delta to a U.S. Navy ship located just offshore of the mouth of the branch of the Mekong river on which Can Tho is located. Our method as arranged by the customer was to extract people from various random pickup points. This method worked very well and attracted little, if any, attention."

On 29 April 1975 an Air America helicopter pilot spent the entire day shuttling passengers to various evacuation points. Arriving at the Embassy tennis courts his aircraft was filled with people and he flew to the USS Blue Ridge, "offloaded, refueled and went back to Saigon whereupon I landed at the Embassy roof and picked up another load heading for the Blue Ridge. Arriving at Blue Ridge it had a full deck

so I was landed on a ship called Fireball. I returned to Saigon after refueling on Fireball and picked up another Embassy roof load this time going to the Fireball again and refueling." The pilot made many more roundtrips that day and finally landed on the USS Duluth at about 1900.

Air America fixed wing aircraft were also a critical means of evacuation. But the ever present danger of being overwhelmed by desperate Vietnamese civilians and military personnel required skill, courage, and sometimes deception. A C-47 pilot reported that on 29 April 1975 he departed Tan Son Nhut airfield with 33 passengers (Air America employees and families, mixed VN, Chinese, American and Filipino) plus a crew of two." Shortly after takeoff a fire developed in the right engine and the aircraft was forced to land at Con Son island. Fourteen of the passengers were then ferried by Air America helicopters to nearby ships. Surrounded by hordes of Vietnamese arriving from the mainland, the crew decided "it was not feasible to top off our fuel due to the possibility of being mobbed by VN evacuees if the airplane appeared to be preparing for departure. With the aircraft apparently disabled no one bothered us." Eventually the aircraft was repaired and, with a speedy departure, was soon on its way to Brunei with the remaining Air America employees.

One of the most iconic photographs of the Vietnam War was taken on 29 April 1975, just hours before the jubilant North Vietnamese Army seized the South Vietnamese capital. The image, captured by Dutch photographer Hubert Van Es, shows scores of people climbing a narrow wooden ladder in the frantic hope that they would be rescued by a small helicopter perched on a rooftop

just above them. Standing near the helicopter a tall man leans forward with his hand extended to the frantic crowd. Released by United Press International with a mistaken caption that identified the location as the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, the picture instantly became a withering symbol of America's ignominious departure from Indochina. In fact, the Bell 204 helicopter belonged to Air America. The landing pad, one of thirteen rooftop evacuation points selected in consultations between Air America and a Special Working Group at the U.S. Embassy, was located atop CIA employee living quarters at the Pittman Apartments on Gia Long Street. And, the man reaching out to those on the ladder was CIA air operations officer O.B. Harnage.

Through all the years of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, Air America pilots and their support personnel accepted the grave danger and extreme flying challenges with great alacrity. Called upon one last time in the final days before the collapse of the South Vietnamese government, Air America personnel braved the Saigon skyline to carry thousands of evacuees to the safety of nearby countries and U.S. ships in the South China Sea. They conducted themselves in the finest tradition of their motto "Anything, Anytime, Anywhere, Professionally." In praise of their efforts, U.S. Air Force investigators concluded "Only God knows the numbers of sorties which Air America flew in the final month in Vietnam. [We]... estimate that over 1,000 were flown, perhaps many more."

The South Vietnam panel includes Air America pilots Marius Burke and Ed Adams, former CIA officer Robert Grealy, and noted academic and USAF combat rescue pilot, Dr. Joe Guilmartin.

## The Airmen's Bond: A Rescue Pilot's Perspective

by Dr. Joe Guilmartin

Professor, Ohio State University

As a helicopter pilot, I was involved in Air Force rescue operations in Southeast Asia very near the beginning. I flew my first combat sortie over Laos in early October of 1965, a staging flight by a pair of H-43s to Lima 20 where we refueled, then on to Lima 36 north of the Plaine des Jarres where we pulled alert for two days. Our billeting arrangements were provided courtesy of Air America and were organized by the Customer, Mike, a tall rawboned fellow whose personal weapon of choice was a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle), a fact I discovered one afternoon when he went charging off into the jungle to recover an Air America Helio pilot who was said to have gone down short of the runway—incorrectly as it turned out. Mike also provided local intelligence. Air America pilots and kickers gave us tips on the weather and flying techniques to deal with it. Our logistic support was also provided by Air America: fifty-five gallon drums of JP-4 brought in by Caribou and an occasional maintenance man and replacement parts flown up from Udon by Porter or Helio when our helicopters broke.

The H-43 was a marginal operation: no armor, no armament beyond our personal M-16s, no self-sealing tanks and a radius of action of only seventy-five miles. It was good to know that other Americans were flying in our area of responsibility.

Mercifully, I was never called upon to attempt a combat rescue in the H-43 before my unit received its definitive equipment, Sikorski HH-3E "Jolly Greens" with self-sealing tanks, a thousand pounds of Titanium armor plate and a hydraulic rescue hoist with 250 feet of cable. We still had no armament beyond our personal M-16s, but at some point the powers that be provided us with the services of an Air Commando A-1 squadron at Udon to provide search capability and fire support, as indeed they did and to good effect. I and my fellows were well aware that our Air America comrades-in-arms had made combat rescues, above and beyond their contractual obligations with at least nominally unarmed H-34s and none of the advantages that our specialized equipment gave us.

Whatever problems Air America had, a lack of aggressiveness in coming to the aid of a distressed airman was not among them. I have vivid recollections of a pickup in late 1965 toward the end of dry monsoon. I and my crew were "high bird"—backup helicopter; we always committed in pairs, another advantage Air America rarely enjoyed—when a Royal Lao Air Force T-28 pilot bailed out off the northeast end of the Plaine des Jarres. I watched with mounting frustration as the low bird aircraft commander dithered, refusing to go in for the pickup before our A-1s



arrived without specific authorization. The survivor had gone down in an area of low hostile activity; but as we had learned, orbiting aircraft soon attract the enemy. While I was screwing up my guts to jump my chain of command and commit, an Air America H-34 appeared out of nowhere, swooped in for the pickup, made it, and departed, no fuss, no muss, no bother.

I left Southeast Asia in July of 1966, not to return for another nine and a half years. In the interim, I taught combat rescue tactics as an instructor pilot and in the classroom and wrote about them as an analyst and historian. Along the way I came to the conclusion that in terms of demands on pilot and crew, combat rescue is the limiting case in aerial warfare. Raw courage and superior stick and rudder skill—or should I say cyclic and collective skill?—are essential, but not enough. Unlike delivering ordnance or cargo, the objective is human life, and contributing one more downed aircraft to the enemy scorecard, however admirable in terms of courage, is counter-productive in the extreme. At the same time, a failure of will or excess of caution that leads to a missed pickup is just as bad, particularly in its psychological impact and never more so than when the objective of the failed rescue was a fellow aviator. The successful rescue crew must walk a fine line between courage and caution.

The conceptual challenges of combat rescue are daunting as well. Beyond keeping on top of the aircraft—better still, ahead of the aircraft—in four-dimensional space, the fourth dimension being time, the rescue crew must keep apprised of the situation on the ground: the survivor or survivors' medical condition, their proximity to enemy forces and the capabilities and limitations of those forces, not to mention mundane but essential pa-

rameters such as the wind, density altitude and terrain factors. That is surely the limiting case in situational awareness and span of control. Finally, the rescue crew rarely has the luxury of knowing critical mission parameters, including the survivor's location, prior to launch. More often than not, planning and execution are of necessity done on the fly. Success requires a special kind of airmanship, one that Air America pilots, crews and support personnel repeatedly demonstrated.

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### Anything, Anywhere, Anytime, Professionally.

—Air America's Slogan

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I next operated in the same airspace as Air America during the final hours of the Vietnam War, in the 29 April 1975 Saigon evacuation. To make good the lack of Marine Corps H-53s—one of two CH-53 squadrons that participated in the 12 April Phnom Penh evacuation had returned to Hawaii—and twelve Air Force H-53s, ten Special Operations CH-53s and two Rescue HH-53s were deployed from Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, to the attack carrier USS Midway. As the senior Jolly Green, I led the two HH-53s.

Backing up a month and a half, after the war in Laos had closed down in 1974, Air America retained a presence in South Vietnam, notably in the form of some twelve UH-1B/D "Hueys" plus an additional sixteen H models on loan from the Army operating in support of the ICCS (International Commission for Control and Supervision), the Embassy, the CIA and USAID. That wasn't much given the enormity of the task that was to be thrust upon Air America. More critical still, when

the situation turned critical, Air America had only seventy-seven pilots, including fixed-wing pilots, in country.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in early March as the South Vietnamese military position crumbled in the face of a massive North Vietnamese invasion backed by heavy armored forces operating under an umbrella of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and anti-aircraft artillery, Air America Huey crews helped to evacuate US personnel from locations up country in the face of conditions that approached total chaos. The extraction of the last Americans from Da Nang on 29 March was particularly perilous. It was clear at this point, or should have been, that South Vietnam was doomed and that the remaining Americans and

friendly foreign nationals would have to be evacuated, along with South Vietnamese deemed to be particularly at risk in the event of a communist victory. Concrete plans had been undertaken in support of a helicopter evacuation using Marine Corps helicopters to shuttle evacuees from the main collection point in the old

MACV compound at Tan Son Nhut Airport to US Navy ships standing off the

coast. Potential evacuees were billeted in scattered locations around Saigon, and Air America personnel working in conjunction with military members of the Defense Attaché Staff had marked out rooftop helipads suitable for use by Air America Hueys as a means of moving evacuees to the collection point. The problem was the Ambassador. The Honorable Graham Martin, utterly committed to the South Vietnamese cause, exhausted and in ill health, obstinately refused to abandon hope in a negotiated settlement and resisted taking overt steps in support of an evacuation to avoid causing panic. Even after the South Vietnamese Army had fought and lost its final battle, at Xuan Loc on the eastern approaches to Saigon, on 20 April, the Ambassador equivocated. Not until late in the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>, in the wake of a North Vietnamese air strike on Tan Son Nhut Airport the day before and an avalanche of communist rockets that hit Tan Son Nhut shortly after midnight, did the Ambassador give the order to execute.

Aside from headlines and photographs, the Saigon Evacuation received only cursory attention from the American news media. David Butler of NBC Radio was the only American media bureau chief in Saigon when the city fell, and while his account of the evacuation is both accurate and exemplary it did not appear in print for ten years.<sup>2</sup> Media coverage left the impression that while the evacuation was chaotic—photos of Vietnamese climbing over concertina wire to get into the Embassy for

<sup>1</sup> William M. Leary, "Last Flights: Air America and the Collapse of South Vietnam", *The George Jalonick II and Dorothy Cockrell Jalonick Memorial Distinguished Lecture Series* (Dallas: The University of Texas at Dallas, August 13, 2005, published by the Special Collections Department of the Eugene McDermott Library), 3.

<sup>2</sup> David Butler, *The Fall of Saigon: Scenes from the Sudden End of a Long War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

evacuation were coin of the realm—it was unopposed.

It was not, as testified to by a widely-published but inadequately-captioned photo showing a Soviet-manufactured SA-7 heat-seeking missile passing through the rotor plane of a Marine Corps CH-53. From my own recollection of radio traffic at the time, confirmed by subsequent research, a North Vietnamese 57mm anti-aircraft battery was firing at the incoming stream of helicopters from offshore Navy decks at around 1500, only to be silenced by a strike by a flight of Air Force "Iron Hand", anti-radiation F-4 fighter-bombers. There were three active SA-2 radar-guided surface-to-air missile sites to the north and northeast of the city, and while they never fired, they were in place.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that the North Vietnamese infiltrated SA-7 teams into the city and at least a limited number of 12.7mm heavy machine guns on anti-aircraft mounts as well. I say this advisedly as Jolly Green gunners silenced at least two 12.7mm positions and perhaps three on our run in to the DAO compound at about 2130. Helicopters descending into the compound from the east were fired at throughout the operation by a 37mm battery to the west that, providentially, was unable to depress far enough for a successful engagement.

Into this cauldron stepped Air America, under circumstances that were anything but favorable. For openers, between communist rocket fire and an over-zealous fire marshal who relocated the only refueling truck, there was no fuel. In consequence, the Hueys were limited to

three to five shuttle runs between rooftop helipads and the DAO Compound or Embassy before flying out to sea to refuel on Navy ships. Of twenty-eight Hueys that should have been available, six had been stolen by Vietnamese, one was hit by rocket fire, one was out of service for an engine change and four had been sent to evacuate Can Tho to the south. During the course of the day, accidents and mischance reduced the number of available Hueys to thirteen.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the day and into the evening—the Ambassador's delayed decision ensured that the evacuation would go on into the night—Air America Hueys flown by a single pilot shuttled across the city, carrying as many as a dozen evacuees in an aircraft rated for eight passengers. It was perhaps Air America's finest hour. Loading up evacuees, many of them panicked and of uncertain identity, from ad hoc pads, and in some cases unsurveyed rooftops, without any semblance of ground control entailed a constant risk of being overloaded or interference with the flight controls, and that was only the beginning. Nor was it all rotary wing: in early afternoon, an Air America supervisor brought out what he estimated as over 150 evacuees on a C-46, no doubt a veteran of the Hump airlift, dodging debris and abandoned aircraft on take off.

<sup>3</sup> Author's recollection. On our initial run-in to the DAO compound at about 1500 hours, my RHAW (for Radar Homing and Warning) scope displayed radar emissions from three SA-2 sites, all well within range.

<sup>4</sup> Leary, *Last Flights*, 10-11.



Just how many evacuees made it out who would have been left behind were it not for Air America Huey crews and their support personnel is beyond reconstruction. The official total of evacuees brought out to the fleet by helicopter is 7,815, a figure that is surely low.<sup>5</sup> Of those evacuated by military helicopter, a substantial number would never have made it to the collection points without Air America. How many is a matter of speculation, but the number is surely well over a thousand and excludes those brought directly to Navy ships. It is perhaps fitting that the iconic photographic image of that awful occasion is that of an Air America Huey crew loading Vietnamese refugees from an improvised helipad atop the roof of the CIA deputy station chief's apartment.<sup>6</sup>

John F. Guilmartin, Jr.  
Columbus, Ohio



<sup>5</sup> Ray L. Bowers, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Tactical Airlift* (Washington, DC: The Office of Air Force History, 1983), 644, n. 31. How the figure was derived is not specified, but was apparently on the basis of numbers reported to ABCCC (Airborne Battlefield Communications, Command and Control), the airborne control agency, by military helicopter pilots. If that is the case, it is surely low. As the evacuation progressed, frequencies became saturated and it was clear that ABCCC wasn't controlling. Many crews simply stopped reporting.

<sup>6</sup> Fox Butterfield with Kari Haskell, "Getting it Wrong in a Photo", *The New York Times* (April 23, 2000), 5.

# RESCUE FLIGHTS: EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE



AN-2 Throttle

On 12 January 1968, recognizing the threat posed by "Site 85," the People's Army of Vietnam vowed to destroy it. On 12 January 1968, four North Vietnamese AN-2 Colt biplanes headed for Site 85. One pair began low-level bombing and strafing passes while the other pair circled nearby. Air America pilot Ted Moore was flying an ammunition-supply run to the site in his unarmed UH-1D "Huey" helicopter when he saw the biplanes attacking and took chase of the first Colt. Flight mechanic Glenn Woods pulled out his AK-47 rifle and began firing at the lumbering biplane. The pursuit was relentless, continuing for more than 20 minutes until the second Colt (hit by ground fire) joined the first in an attempt to escape back into North Vietnam. Both attacking Colts suffered severe bullet damage and crashed before reaching the border. Fearing a similar fate, the two unengaged Colts retreated unharmed. This throttle is from one of the downed AN-2s recovered after the battle.

Note: Please see the DVD for a complete list of Expressions of Gratitude.

MEMORANDUM

June 10, 1972

TO: All American Employees of the Mission  
FROM: The Ambassador *AWJ*

I would like to share with you a letter that I received from our President:

May 19, 1972

Dear Mr. Ambassador:

The communist dry season offensive in Laos has been blunted this year, largely through the tireless efforts of your Mission. You have done a tremendous job under difficult conditions and I want to express my deep appreciation, on behalf of the American people, for the distinguished leadership you have displayed in this critical situation.

With warmest personal regards,

Sincerely,

Richard Nixon

I have written to the President:

June 8, 1972

Dear Mr. President:

Your most thoughtful and generous letter of May 19 addressed to me is a tribute to the men and women of this Mission who showed such devotion to duty during a very difficult five months.

It is therefore with great pride and gratitude to you, Mr. President, that I have taken the liberty of transmitting your views to the American members

of the Mission, and to the employees of Air America and Continental Air Services who carried out with such gallantry their responsibilities to our government.

The vast majority of Americans in Laos are one hundred per cent behind all your efforts to achieve world peace. We admire your courage. All are proud to be Americans, and that you are our President.

Very respectfully,

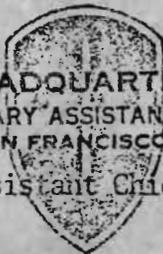
G. McMurtrie Godley

AMB:GMGodley:jsw

11 MAR 19

HEADQUARTERS  
UNITED STATES MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM  
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96222

Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, CORDS



MACCORDS-MSD

28 FEB 1968

REC'D WAS MAR 8 1968

Mr. Merrill Hulse, Base Manager  
Air America, Incorporated  
Tan Son Nhut Airport  
Saigon, Vietnam

Dear Mr. Hulse:

I am taking this opportunity to express my appreciation to Air America for the exemplary performance of its personnel in making available crews and flying aircraft under extremely trying circumstances to support the United States Government during the recent Tet offensive.

I am certain that the effort put forth by your people in many cases was instrumental in saving lives and helped to turn the tide in our favor. I commend you highly for your efforts and thank you on behalf of CORDS for a job exceptionally well done.

Very truly yours,

*L. Wade Latham*  
L. WADE LATHRAM  
ACofS, CORDS

*Received March 5, 1968 jw*

MSDR (2) ✓  
VPTS  
VPFO  
VFCA  
SLC  
TC  
AVP

*4 - 3/11/68*

AIR AMERICA

FROM: Department of the Air Force  
Headquarters 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (PACAF)  
APO San Francisco 96237

*in order*  
*[Signature]*

REPLY TO ATTN OF: CC

8 September 1971

REC'D WAS SEP 20 1971

SUBJECT: Rescue of Downed F-4 Aircrew

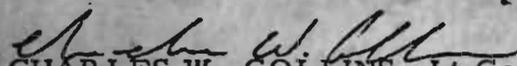
TO: Base Manager, Air America, Inc.  
c/o Air Force Liaison Officer  
Box 62, APO San Francisco 96237

1. On 2 September 1971, one of the aircrews of the 13th TFS "Panther Pack" received battle damage to their aircraft and crashed in a ball of flames. Fortunately, both crew members were able to eject prior to impact, but they were both injured. Incapacitated and helpless on the ground, in the northern part of the Plain of Jars in Laos, they were in imminent danger of capture or death from hostile forces surrounding them. Two Air America helicopter crews saved their lives by landing in the open field to pick them up, even though under enemy fire.
2. A Bell 205, crewed by Mr. Ted Cash, Mr. Wayne Lannin, and Mr. William Parker, rescued Captain Ron Fitzgerald, the Weapons System Officer of the fighter. Both Mr. Lannin and Mr. Parker risked their lives by exposing themselves directly to enemy fire to hoist the injured Captain Fitzgerald aboard the helicopter.
3. An H-34, piloted by Mr. Don Henthorn, landed to pick up Major Jim Compton, the Aircraft Commander of the downed fighter, while a crew member, Mr. Ernie Cortez risked his life by exposing himself to hostile ground fire to lift Major Compton into the helicopter.
4. The two helicopters took off in a hail of enemy fire and airlifted the injured Panthers to a landing site nearby where they were transferred to an Air America Porter aircraft. They were then airlifted to a staging base, where they were attended by a surgeon and subsequently were returned to Udorn RTAFB aboard an Air America C-123.
5. The deep gratitude felt by the 13th TFS towards the valiant Air America crews who saved our comrades is difficult to express. There is no doubt that their prompt, heroic action saved two lives that day. We will long remember and be grateful for their actions. We all hope that we may be of help if Air America crews ever face a similar test.

*4- 9/20/71*

6. Letters are never as warm as a drink and a handshake. The 13th TFS, therefore, cordially invites Messrs. Cash, Lannin, Parker, Henthorn, and Cortez to be our guests at a going-away "Sawadee Party" for some of our men who are completing their combat tours in Southeast Asia. The party will be held on 18 September at 1900 hours in the main banquet room of the Udorn Officers' Open Mess. The "Panther Pack" is looking forward to thanking all of these men in person.

7. To all of the personnel of Air America, the 13th TFS "Panther Pack" sends a "Well Done" with admiration for the fine work done day after day in support of our allies in Southeast Asia. Keep up the good work!

  
CHARLES W. COLLINS, Lt Colonel, USAF  
Commander