

W. Mr. Kroll

Charter Airline Resents C. I. A.

By ARNOLD ABRAMS

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Having their company dubbed the "C. I. A. Airline" riles some executives of Air America, the private charter firm whose bases happen to be in Southeast Asia's better war zones.

They insist their firm is no different from any other charter airline. "We are willing to carry cargo anywhere in this region for any customer

who can pay," says one executive.

But Air America has just one customer: the United States government. And it primarily services the Agency for International Development and Central Intelligence Agency.

NEVERTHELESS, executives at the firm's subsidiary offices here emphatically deny that Air America is

(Arnold Abrams is The Times' correspondent in Southeast Asia.)



an "arm" of the C. I. A.

"Our customer gives us an order and we fill it," says a spokesman. "That's all there is to it. We carry cargo. We don't ask questions."

Those cargoes can be quite exotic: ranging from arms and ammunition to rice bags, live pigs, special agents, troops, refugees and opium, the chief cash crop of Meo hill tribesmen in Laos.

One recent order involved ferrying several hundred Thai "volunteers" into Laos to help defend the besieged C. I. A. stronghold at Long Cheng, about 100 miles north of the capital.

A VARIED Air America fleet of about 170 planes carries cargo from bases in South Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, the Philippines and Japan.

In Taiwan, the firm owns the largest aircraft maintenance and repair facility in Southeast Asia. It did \$8 million worth of repair work last year on United States aircraft operat-

The repair facility, which employs 3,700 workers, is on property owned by Air Asia, a subsidiary of Air America. The property adjoins Tainan airbase, a center of American intelligence activities on Taiwan.

Not surprisingly, the nature of many Air America missions often leads to bizarre incidents. This firm, for example, may be the only private charter company in the world to have

downed an enemy plane.

It happened somewhere over Northern Laos in January, 1968. The battle started when an Air America crewman looked out the open door of his helicopter and saw a Russian-made Antonov 2 — an obsolete, single-engined aircraft — cruising by.

THE CREWMAN grabbed a carbine and fired a full clip at the Communist craft, presumably part of the diminutive North Vietnamese air force. The enemy plane plummeted to earth.

Company officials in Taipei do not confirm or deny the "kill"; they just wink. "I could give you factual stories a lot more implausible than that," says one.

Many of Air America's approximately 600 pilots and crewmen are former United States Air Force personnel flying for reasons ranging from purely mercenary to wildly romantic.

Both needs can be satisfied with Air America: the money is good (some pilots earn over \$25,000 a year) and adventure is plentiful.

Air America is owned by a holding company, the Pacific Corp., with offices in Washington, D. C.

THE BOARD chairman is Felix B. Stump, a retired admiral who was commander-in-chief of United States Pacific forces before retiring from military service in 1958.

The airline's origins go back to 1941, when the late Gen. Claire Chennault organized the Flying Tigers, a paramilitary group supporting Chiang Kai-shek's forces against the Japanese.

The Flying Tigers gained fame and some fortune during World War II, when they flew supplies into China over the Burma "hump."

After the war, Chennault founded Civil Air Transport, forerunner of Air America and still operating as a cargo carrier in Asia.

Label

Flying Tigers, supplied the Nationalists during the Chinese civil war. When Chiang fled the mainland in 1949, CAT followed him to Taiwan. Air America was established 10 years later.

United States withdrawal from Vietnam already has cut back Air America operations there, but company officials do not seem unduly worried.

"THERE'LL STILL BE plenty of business in Southeast Asia," says one executive.

The C. I. A. label will continue to rankle, however.

"Air America does not engage in espionage and is not part of the C. I. A.," says John A. Bottorff, regional director of Air Asia, "and I frankly resent being considered some kind of secret agent or spy."

Bottorff, 47, handles public relations as part of his Air Asia duties. He is a veteran hand who came to this region in 1944 as a United States government employe with a specialized function.

That function? He was an intelligence agent — with the O. S. S., forerunner of the C. I. A.

APPROVED FOR
RELEASE DATE:
24-Sep-2009

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