

by TOM SCHUSTER

THE CIA'S WAR WITH RED CHINA AND OTHER ASIAN LANDS

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THE OLD WORLD WAR TWO C-46 bounce and yawed in the violent turbulence as its twin engines strained to maintain 160 knots. Its American pilot gripped the controls with every ounce of strength he could muster, and his eyes ached from the strain of searching the darkness to avoid the towering Himalayan mountains on each side.

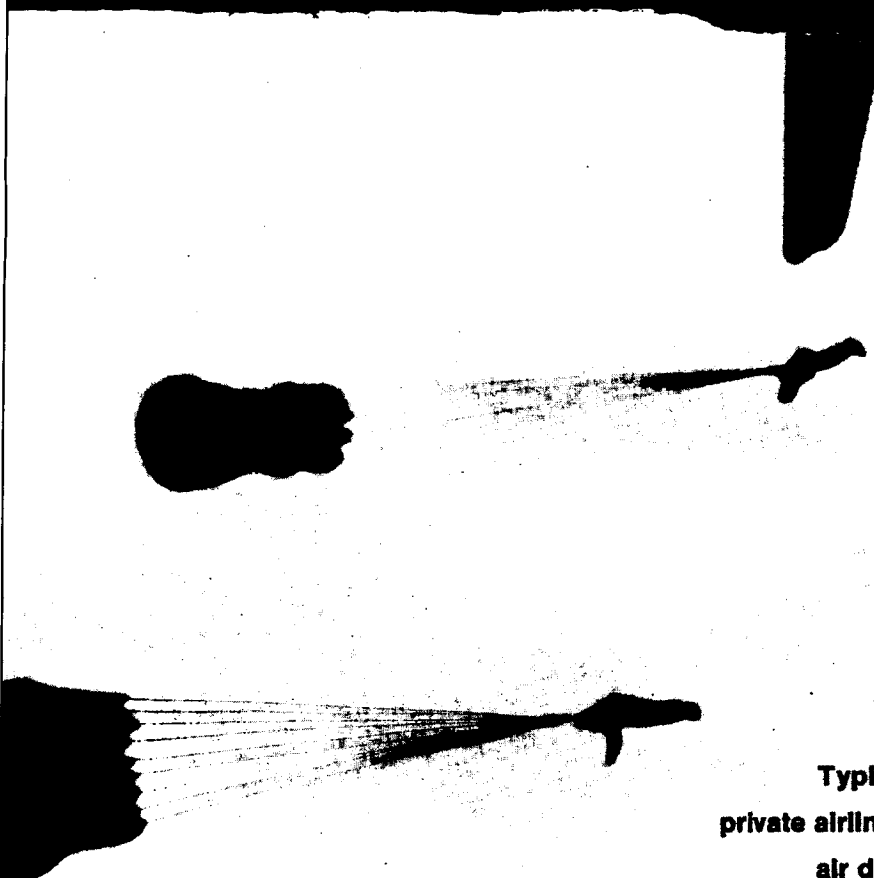
They'd taken off from a secret base over three hours ago and were threading their way east of the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, long occupied by the forces of Red China. Their mission: drop agents and supplies to a band of Tibetan guerrillas who were still fighting the Communists.

The copilot, sweating over the air chart in his lap, tried to guide them to the drop zone that a mysterious American "civilian" at their base had earlier described. "Hold your course," he yelled. "Another two minutes should put us right on."

The pilot reached up, flicking on the "get-ready" light to alert the Tibetan agents who'd be jumping, and the plane crew who would kick the supplies out. "Go!" he yelled and switched on the buzzer.

Just as the last chute opened, the old plane was suddenly rocked by deadly Communist 37mm antiaircraft fire and the pilot cursed to himself, "Goddam—ambush! Somebody talked . . . the bastards were waiting for us."

But he managed to drop down and contour fly the valley floors, below the Red radar, and just after dawn they landed back at their base. They climbed from the plane, their gray uniforms soaked through with sweat, and the pilot

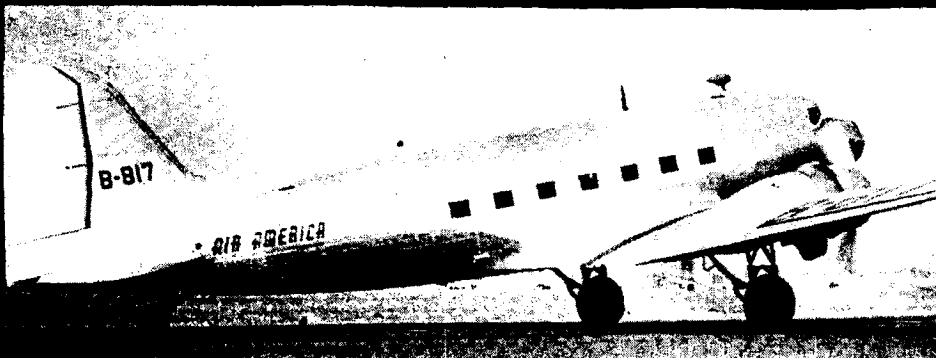


muttered for the thousandth time, "There's gotta be an easier way to make a buck." The C-46 was ancient, but its skin had been polished to shine like a mirror. Back toward the tail were small blue letters that spelled out "Air America." The only other identifying marks were the fresh 37mm holes in the left wing panels.

Throughout Asia, people have come to recognize these strange aircraft and their even stranger American pilots. Especially the pilots. You learn to spot them wherever you are. They're the guys in the gray Air Force-type uniforms, crushed caps, cowboy boots, with pistols hanging at their sides. They can be found raising hell in the Suzy Wong section of Hong Kong or racing motor bikes along Tu Do Street in Saigon or joking with the girls at the Vieng Rattay Club in Vientiane. They're the pilots of the cloak and dagger Air America, one of the world's least known airlines. Many are "old China hands" who first began flying for the "outfit" back when mainland China belonged to Chiang Kai-shek. They're the last of that breed known as soldiers of fortune, and these devil-may-care mercenaries will

continued on next page

Typical flights by these daredevil pilots of the CIA's private airline read like a page out of Terry and the Pirates: air drops of ammo, artillery spotting, parachuting in agents or saboteurs, flying a fresh group of concubines to a lonely Asian warlord, transporting a secret prisoner or plucking an important refugee from under Communist noses!



"It looks like any other plane, but that Air America marking spells one thing: CIA."

CIA'S WAR

continued

literally fly anything, anywhere, anytime—if the price is right. And they earn every penny of their tax-free paychecks.

"Sometimes no one can tell if a site is closed or open," one of them explains. "You get there and circle the place, looking for any suspicious sign. If no one shoots, you take your chance and land and keep the engines running until a friendly face shows up."

The planes are usually unidentified except for the discreet "Air America" markings, but they've been around long enough to earn the nickname "CIA Airlines" because of the type of jobs they take.

Officially, Air America is a private airline operating in Asia under charter to the U.S. government, but the bulk of its operations are, to say the least, closely connected with the CIA's spook operations. Officials say only that the outfit does "government contract flying," and when one of their planes is shot down, the release typically reads, "Names are being withheld by authorities until the next of kin are duly notified. Spokesmen declined to disclose the plane's point of origin or destination."

Behind all this official double-talk is the most colorful, mysterious and romantic airline in the world, complete with enough shady deals, "dragon ladies," and international intrigue to keep their sheet-metal repairmen busy patching bullet holes. Try as they may to remain secret, more is becoming known about these airborne soldiers of fortune. Air America's very size makes it difficult to conceal. It is one of the world's largest airlines, ranking between National and Northeast in number of planes and personnel. All told, it operates some 200 aircraft, employs about 600 pilots and, in an average year, these daredevils will haul 27,000 people and 6,000 tons of cargo, as well as air drop millions of dollars worth of supplies to anti-Communist troops behind enemy lines all over Asia.

"We air drop so much rice in Laos," says one of the pilots, "there's a whole generation of Meos who are going to be surprised when someone tells them rice doesn't grow in the sky."

Another Air America pilot told this author in a Danang bar one night, "Hell, we were doing the dirty work over here before Uncle Sam would even admit there was a Vietnam. Back in the early Sixties, we used to fly search and rescue missions into North Vietnam with old Sikorskys and nothing but an M16 for protection.

Now that the Air Force is doing it, they think they need all kinds of armor plate and fighter cover. Of course, they were all bonus flights for us. We were paid pretty well."

The pilots average \$25,000 a year, tax free, for their hair-raising work and claim, "So long as we get paid, we don't care what the customer puts in the back or where we have to haul it."

A list of "typical" Air America jobs reads like a page out of Terry and the Pirates—air drops of ammo, artillery spotting, insertion of saboteurs and agents, flying a fresh group of concubines to a lonely Asian warlord, transporting super-secret prisoners, refugee hauling (often plucking them from under Communist noses) and, recently, lifting Thai troops into Laos to reinforce the Meo General, Vang Pao.

If it all sound like an unusual role for a "civilian" airline, remember, that Air America's father was the famous Civil Air Transport founded by Flying Tiger General Claire Chennault.

Chennault originally went to China to forge an air force for Chiang Kai-shek and formed the Flying Tigers to fight the Japanese before the United States got involved in World War Two. The deal was simple—join up as a mercenary, get \$600 a month and \$500 for every Jap plane you shot down. After America entered the war, most of the Tigers joined Chennault's 14th Air Force, swapping their Chinese insignia for Uncle Sam's and ran up a kill ratio of about 16 to 1.

After the war, Chennault retired from the service and returned to China as a civilian. There, the real war was just beginning as Chiang and Mao began their massive battle for control of the country. Chennault saw that the Nationalists needed dependable air transportation more than anything else, and he quickly stepped in to fill the gap. With Chiang's blessings, he gathered a small group of his ex-Flying Tigers in his office at Shanghai's Broadway Mansions Hotel, and Civil Air Transport was born.

Quickly dubbed CAT, his planes became a familiar sight throughout China, and even today the stories of his pilots are legendary. To keep beleaguered Nationalist troops supplied, most of the CAT routes were flown over Communist-held territory, and all the CAT men were on the Communists' list of wanted war criminals, with a price on their heads (Bob Buol was captured by ChiCom troops and held prisoner for five years. Six months after his release, he died a broken man).

By 1948, CAT was hauling more cargo than any other company, but under con-

ditions that would shock any ordinary airline. For instance, every time CAT planes flew in the vicinity of Port Arthur, they were buzzed and fired on by Russian planes. Ironically, they were American-made Bell P-63s given to the Russians during World War Two under Lend Lease. In return, the CAT boys would take on a load of 500-pound bombs and "just happen to lose" them over enemy land.

There was no such thing as standard procedure, and the pilots learned to survive any way they could—like the time Captain Bob Rousselot lost an engine on his C-46 over the mountains of central China. He ordered his crew to kick the cargo out to lighten the plane enough to gain altitude on his sivil good engine. Out went over 40 bales of Chinese currency, worth \$4,000,000.

Felix Smith used to fly out of Shanghai's Hungjiao airport, hauling medicine to Kuming in the interior. He regularly returned with .50 caliber machinegun holes in his wings and fuselage, a tribute to the skill of Mao's gunners.

Stuart Dew was piloting his C-47 to Lanchow in northwest China when it became so cold that his engines simply froze solid on him.

But the favorite story among CAT pilots concerns Sterling Bemis of Melrose, Mass. Running into a blinding sand storm over an unexplored area of the Gobi Desert, he was blown off course and ran out of gas. Forced down, he figured he'd bought the farm until he stumbled across a hut and inside found an Army field phone! "Man, that was the hairy part," he remembers. "I stared at that damned phone for 10 minutes, wondering if it was connected to anything, before I got the nerve to pick it up."

Bemis was lucky and found himself talking to an operator who connected him with CAT in Lanchow. His convenient "phone booth" turned out to be a remnant of Chennault's wartime early-warning net that had never been disconnected.

In spite of the hazards, the pilots wouldn't have worked for anybody except CAT. In many ways, they were misfits, men who couldn't stand military discipline or the spit and polish demanded by state-side airlines. Others were on the run from nagging wives or pregnant girlfriends. Many had served with Chennault during the war and were still drawn by his personal magnetism and the glory and adventure of it all. Whatever the reason, all of them were more than happy when payday rolled around. They earned a base pay of \$800 a month for 60 hours in the air and \$10 for each additional hour. In CAT lingo, a city was "\$20 away."

Certain runs were dangerous even for CAT and became bonus flights. One of these was CAT's famous Taiyuan airlift in which they kept that north China industrial city completely supplied for nine months as the Reds drew a siege line tighter and tighter around it. Old Marshall Yen kept building airfields for the CAT planes and the Communists kept capturing them. By the end, they had run through 15 landing strips, each one closer to the heart of the city, and were making 30 flights a day into the place, all dangerous enough to warrant \$100 bonuses (the operation later served as the model for the Berlin airlift).

, To add to the hazards, CAT men were called on to set down inside walled cities or to make last-minute evacuations. Bill Severt recalls his last days as CAT's station manager in Mukden, Manchuria. "I was on the last plane out, and the lead Chi-Com troops were already in sight on the airport road. Men offered fantastic sums in American money to get their families out." The plane crew had to blind the crowd with a spotlight to get their C-46's hatch shut. Then "they tried to drive a truck in front of us to block our takeoff. We gunned our engines down the runway, leaping Chinese who knelt in our path, still wringing their hands and pleading to be saved."

Anyone who spends time in Asia will hear tales of CAT pilots auctioning off "tickets" on the last plane out of any city and making hundreds of thousands of dollars on a single refugee flight, but these stories have never been proved.

The Communists steadily pushed ahead, and in 1949 the "world's most shot at airline" began evacuating Chiang's forces to Formosa. In Shanghai, pilot Felix Smith salvaged an old Navy LST from the bottom of the Whangpoo River, loaded her with CAT's machine shops, and set sail for Formosa where she still sits today.



"EARTHQUAKE"
flaming end

The last official CAT flight from the Chinese mainland was on January 15, 1950, when they flew the final load of tin from the Mengtze mines in Yunnan to Haiphong. Since that time, CAT and Air America have frequently returned to Yunnan but in a very unofficial manner.

At that point, it looked as though CAT was doomed to go broke. Formosa was primitive, with only five motor vehicles on the whole island, and CAT was an airline without routes or passengers. Then war broke out in Korea and CAT was back in business hauling military cargo for the UN forces. They eventually flew nearly 30% of all the Korean airlift and were back on their feet.

During this period, CAT also went deeper into the spook business for both Uncle Sam and Chiang Kai-shek. It is said that Richard Fecteau, recently released by Red China, was on a CAT plane shot down while attempting to deposit CIA and Nationalist agents on the mainland.

When the Nationalists had evacuated to Formosa, their 93rd Division had been cut off in southwest China and they fled south into Burma. There, they remained intact as a fighting unit, due to Chiang's direction from Formosa and, they say, CAT's clandestine supply flights into abandoned World War Two airstrips. By 1951 CAT had resupplied them to the point that they were able to launch a 12,000-man raid back into China's Yunnan Province.

Chennault continually worried about the Communist advances throughout Asia and, in 1954, tried to form an International Volunteer Group similar to his old Flying Tigers, to wage an air war against the Reds on a strictly cash basis. When he failed to



Film still depicts downed U.S. pilot captured by VC, a fate met by many CIA airmen.

raise the necessary financial and diplomatic support, he took CAT to Indo-China to fly cargo for the French in their war against Ho Chi Minh. The Foreign Legion was bottled up inside of Dien Bien Phu and the French desperately needed CAT's cargo-carrying talents to supply them. Twenty-four CAT pilots landed at Haiphong's Cat Bi Airport to do the "dirty work" for \$3,000 a month plus bonus. Their planes were C-119 Flying Boxcars whose U. S. Air Force insignias still showed through the hastily brushed on gray paint.

It was here that CAT's most famous pilot, James B. McGovern, ran the show. A huge, 300-pound mountain of a man, he was called "Earthquake McGoon" (after the Lil Abner character) by one and all. A booming extrovert openly contemptuous of anyone timid, McGoon was no stranger to the Orient. As a fighter pilot for Chennault, he had been one of the war's last prop aces. Instead of going home to Elizabeth, New Jersey, he went to work for CAT when it was first formed and rented a house in Tsingtao, next door to Admiral Badger, CO of the US 7th Fleet. As reported in the *Saturday Evening Post*, he first stole barrels of the admiral's drinking water to fill the swimming pool he built. Then he won a troupe of White

Russian dancing girls in a poker game and finally tapped the admiral's electricity to light his all-night parties.

The official CAT hangout was Pop Gingle's bar in Hong Kong. Pop had taken his Navy retirement there years ago, got into a poker game, and woke up with the deed to the joint. Anybody who ever met him said that he looked like Sidney Greenstreet—fat, heavy jowls and squinty eyes, Panama hat and cane. He always had steaks, beer, baseball scores and country music for his CAT boys, and Chennault's picture hung in the back room. But McGoon was his favorite; some claimed that Pop was the only man in all of south China who could beat Mac in a belly-bumping contest. McGoon usually parked his enormous bulk in an easy chair in Pop's back room, drinking gallons of beer and threatening, "Someday I'm gonna quit coming here and ruin your business."

Mac almost made good on his threat when he ran out of gas over Communist lines in December, 1949. His feet were always bothering him, as if complaining about the load they were forced to carry, and he would tell Bill Welk that he'd "never bail out because I'd only have to walk." True to his word, he rode his C-46 down onto a dry riverbed and was immediately captured (Continued on page 52)

(Continued from page 29)

As soon as Pop heard about it, he raised \$100,000 and gave it to Chennault with instructions to "Use it all if you have to, but get my boy back."

No one knows if it was Pop's ransom money that did the trick or not, but six months later, Mac walked into Gingle's screaming for a beer. He didn't remember until 24 hours later to notify CAT that he was all right and that "the goddam Com-mies couldn't afford to feed me." As the news flashed through the Orient, beer glasses were raised from Tokyo to Singa-pore.

The first to volunteer for Indo-China, Mac and Eric Shilling flew into Haiphong together and calmly wheeled an icebox out of their C-46. "After all," they said, "you got to have cold beer if you're going to fight a war."

So fat that he couldn't pull the yoke all the way back, Mac was known for his tail-high landings, but twice a day he squeezed himself into a C-119 to deliver seven-ton loads of ammo to General De-Castries. It was a 90-minute flight followed by a couple of minutes of sheer terror as they went into "the slot," a gauntlet of Communist anti-aircraft fire, and dropped their loads from only 1500 feet to insure getting them into the ever-shrinking French lines.

At night, the CAT crews hung out at Haiphong's La Marseillaise bar, unwinding from the day's runs and trying not to think about their mounding casualties.

Although they were supposed to stick to flying cargo, they began to feel for the French troops on the ground and on April 2, 1954, they loaded one of their C-119's with napalm and used the lumbering cargo plane for a dive bomber to drop their deadly load on the Communist lines during a particularly crucial battle.

One day toward the end of April, Mac looked over Wallace Buford's flak-riddled plane at Haiphong and joked, "Somebody must have been carrying a magnet." A week later, enemy machine-gun fire severed McGoon's elevator controls as he flew through the slot, and he called over

his radio, "I seem to be having a little trouble flying this thing." After see-sawing all over the sky on his trim tabs, he made it back to Haiphong to tell his ground crew, "Now I know what it's like to ride a kangaroo."

Buford met him with a grin and asked, "You borrow my magnet?"

The afternoon of May 6, one day before Dien Bien Phu fell, Mac took off in Bird 2 of a six-plane flight. His copilot was Buford and Mac couldn't resist telling him, "Now maybe we'll find out which one of us carries the magnet."

Steve Kusak, called "the Polock" by McGoon, was first through the slot. Just as he looked back to check on Earthquake, Mac called out, "I've got a direct hit. Where the hell are the fighters?"

His port engine was out and the leading edge of his wing was torn up. A second shell exploded against his right tail boom and he called to Kusak, "Steve, tell me which way the mountains are lowest."

"Turn right. Can you make it? Bail out."

"No sweat," Mac answered. "We'll ride her."

He headed for a valley along the Nam Dinh river, fighting for control of his shot-up plane. Then, slowly and horribly, his C-119 skidded toward the hills, and Kusak heard Mac say, "Looks like this is it, son." His left wingtip dug into the hillside and the plane turned a perfect cartwheel before bursting into a ball of flame. Less than an eighth of a mile ahead was a clearing where he could have safely put down.

When Pop's phone rang just after mid-night, he answered and said, "You don't have to tell me. It's Mac, isn't it?"

After Dien Bien Phu fell, most of the planes were shifted to flying anti-Communist refugees south to Saigon, but a young CAT pilot named Richard Pope was packing to leave. War correspondent Richard Tregaskis had ridden the slot several times with Pope and asked him where he was going now.

"I don't know. I guess I'll do a little tiger hunting," he answered. A few months later, it became apparent what kind of "tigers" Pope and a handful of other CAT pilots were hunting. They turned up in an anti-Communist rebellion in Indonesia, flying B-26 bombers for the rebels. Pope

was shot down and spent long months as a "guest" of Sukarno.

Most people speculate that it was about this time that the CIA stepped into the picture. Among other things, CAT was reorganized to give birth to the offshoot called Air America. The old CAT stayed legitimate for the most part, flying commercial passenger traffic throughout the Pacific, and Air American took over the undercover part of the operation. The whole operation is such a tangle of phony corporations that it's hard to tell just who controls what, but it appears that both the Nationalists and the CIA were involved for a while and one rumor even has it that Madame Chiang has a personal interest in the deal.

Chennault died of cancer and control passed to a group of ex-Pan Am pilots headed by George Doole in Washington and Hugh Grundy in Taipei. Air America got deeper and deeper into the secret wars being fought in Southeast Asia and, in 1958, North Vietnam began complaining about civilian planes invading their air-space. It is claimed that these were Air America C-47s on CIA missions. At the same time, China complained of U.S.-supplied Nationalist Chinese special forces camps in Yunnan Province. Again, Air America is mentioned as their source of men and munitions.

In 1959, retired Admiral Felix Stump took over as board chairman of Air America and moved the operation into Laos, where a new war was starting to brew. As far as is known, the first Laos casualty for the company occurred in 1960 when one of their planes was shot down over the Plain of Jars. The copilot turned out to be the son of C. Hollington Tong, Nationalist China's ambassador to Washington.

Air America quickly became the unofficial air force of the Laotian government for a few reasons. The Laotians didn't have a prayer of forming an air force of their own, and Americans can't serve in the armed forces of a foreign government without losing their citizenship. Also, if an American military plane is shot down over a hostile country, the enemy has a marvelous "incident" to publicize. If a "civilian" plane goes down, the enemy can't complain to anyone but the company. The easiest solution to the whole mess was to hire the Air America gang, who'd do anything as long as the price was right.

Things really got spooky in Laos and the company had a hard time maintaining their civilian cover. They flew a large fleet of choppers and one of their pilots claims, "Most of my missions were given to me directly by CIA agents in Vientiane." As the scale of operations grew, the original group of former CAT pilots had more business than they could handle and the company began recruiting pilots. Or, as some say, shanghaiing pilots.

"I was a Marine chopper pilot based on Okinawa," explains a blond, 30-year-old Air America man. "CAT came through looking for flyers. I thought I was going to become an airline pilot when they hired me. I resigned my commission, went to Taipei full of dreams about being a civilian jet jockey, and a couple of weeks later, found myself hedge-hopping a Sikorsky through ground fire north of Vientiane. Sure, I could have quit on my three-year contract, but I came out of the service broke. So



"... Anything but fried chicken!"

MAN'S MAGAZINE

here I stay, flying the missions as ordered."

Laos is a strange place, populated by different tribes who all believe they came out of a pumpkin thousands of years ago. The country's major exports are gold and opium, and palace revolts are so common, the pilots often don't know who will be paying them.

One of the old CAT men tells, "Half the time when we heard shooting, it meant combat. The other half was for local festivals. I woke up one morning in Vientiane with all hell breaking loose. I grabbed my 45 thinking the Pathet Lao (PL) had finally taken the city, but it was only the start of the three day Boun Banx festival. Naturally, both sides completely stopped the war to celebrate it. And the Army fired thousands of rounds of star shells to illuminate the festivities. It almost would have been safer flying against PL flak."

The really strange thing is that, at one point, the Russians were also flying transports into the Plain of Jars to supply the PL side, and they'd often pass Air America planes along the way. On one occasion, an Air America pilot was searching for a hole in the monsoon cloud cover to make his drop when he spotted a Russian doing the same thing. The American spoke a little Russian and asked them for an altimeter setting. They willingly gave him a reading and both went on to make their drops so the troops below could kill each other for another day.

Wattay Airport outside of Vientiane began to look like Air America headquarters until part of the operation was shifted to the Long Chieng base of General Vang Pao. An Air Force officer who flew in there once told this author that some of the planes he saw on the strip had sets of insignia and the crews swapped them like license plates on a car so that the plane could claim any of several identities.

The Air America crews have done their best to make themselves at home in this out-of-the-way spot. The Vieng Rattay bar has good booze and the city is full of lithe, young prostitutes. "Even if you had a mission in the morning, you drank because you knew that at least the booze was pure," says one veteran of the scene. "The local drinking water from the muddy Mekong was so lousy, we paid a dollar a quart for imported, tinned drinking water. Everything in town closed up by 10 PM except bars and opium dens."

On duty, even the country itself is an enemy. Mountains are often a thousand feet higher than the charts show and sudden monsoon storms spring up out of nowhere. Pilots regularly have to cope with shot-out engines, emergency evacuations, and making takeoffs while 2,000 pounds overweight with an escaping Lao general, his staff and concubines and PL mortars hammering the strip.

One pilot trying to get out of Ban Nam Boc was horrified to find a PL artillery barrage open up just as he began to taxi. The Lao ground troops panicked and rushed the plane trying to get aboard. "We had to taxi right through them to get out," he says.

The chopper pilots earn their pay the hard way, often flying behind enemy lines to rescue people. In the early days, they used old Sikorsky H-34s that the Marines had already worn out before they got them. The book says that the H-34 can go to

5,000 feet with 18 men aboard, but Air America pilots have never been known to pay much attention to the book.

"I've had my bird up as high as 14,000 feet," says a nervous, chain-smoking pilot, "and as many as 20 guys in the cabin. Sometimes, the only way I could get airborne was by bouncing the ship up, like a kid getting higher and higher off a trampoline. I constantly flew with engine RPMs way past the red line.

"It's no wonder we lost so many ships in Laos. Our navigational checkpoints used to be 'this crashed copter here' or 'that one over there.'

"When we hauled troops in, they'd pile out with rifles, machine guns, sacks of rice, cooking pots, loaves of bread—while the PL fired away at us. It was a helluva job, let me tell you."

Even refueling is ticklish in this part of the world. They use C47s to spot 55-gallon fuel drums at all the isolated strips. If you must put down at one, you have to hand pump the gas into your bird while local tribesmen watch . . . and you wonder, are they friendly or enemy? Are they civilized or are they some of the head hunters that still roam the region?

Casualties have mounted as the Communists teach the PL to sit on mountain-tops with 20-and 40-mm AA guns and fire down at low flying Air America planes. Their instructions are "to kill the metal birds."

Of the many Air America crews listed among the missing, only one is known to have survived capture to return. In 1961, Ed Shore's plane developed engine trouble and went down near Ban Vieng San. They were quickly captured by the PL and led off to a jungle prison where they were kept tied to posts and displayed to the natives for 15 months.

"We were treated like wild animals, locked in stocks, and held while Meos fired their guns at our cell for amusement," recalls one of Shore's passengers.

Finally released at Wattay Airport during a truce, the Air America men were quickly hustled aboard a plane for the States and have never talked about their ordeal.

Although Air America is highly visible wherever you go in Asia, its pilots' most daring exploits are cloaked in official secrecy. Yet, if you hang around that area long enough, you begin to put the pieces together. An Air Force officer speculates, "North Thailand is dotted with airstrips that are beautifully maintained. I wouldn't be surprised if they were flying right into China from some of them."

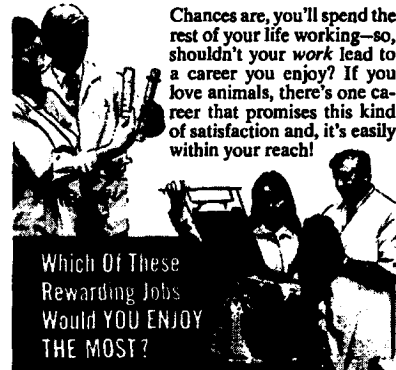
Although some 23 years have passed, the shadowy Chinese Nationalist General Li Mi still commands several thousand troops from his old mainland 93rd Division. They operate in the triangular area formed by the junction of Burma, Thailand and Laos and are regularly accused of crossing over into China's Yunnan Province (remember, they are officially still at war with Mao) and raiding ChiCom camps—with Air America support.

Experienced observers go even further in their listing of Air America activity, crediting them with flying agents in and out of North Vietnam, putting U. S. Special Forces teams behind the lines in Laos, parachuting infiltrators into Cambodia, and supplying a myriad of secret base camps along the North Vietnam—

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China border that are jumping off points for commando raids into enemy territory.

Joe Maggio, a fiercely aggressive ex-CIA spook and Congo mercenary, claims to have been part of a team that was transported into North Vietnam by Air America in the early Sixties. "We were taken in by one of their choppers, and after we'd completed our mission, they picked us up and took us back out," he says. "Those guys were flying all over North Vietnam in unarmed choppers and old C-46s."

Terry Wolkerstorfer, an ex-Special Forces captain with two tours in Vietnam's delta, talks of the CIA-run Special Operations Groups, bands of spooks made up of both U.S. and foreign agents. "They carried Swedish K submachine-guns with silencers and were hauled around behind the lines by Air America. The whole outfit is weird. They say that one of their agents cracked and went over the hill a while back. He completely disappeared. But a few months later, an Air America guy was doing a job in the Congo and spotted this deserter working there as a mercenary. He knew too much to be running around loose; so they quietly kidnaped him and shipped him back to the States.

When Air America began recruiting pilots from the military, they added new skills to the "company" that were put to work in the Laotian fighting as far back as 1964. At that time, the U.S. still wasn't officially involved, and some of the Air America pilots abandoned their cargo planes to fly T-28 fighter-bombers in combat for the Laotian government.

Perhaps the most interesting "work" that Air America has undertaken, however, was their involvement in the rebellion

in Tibet. Bob Miller, an old hand in Asia, told this author, "As recently as 1966 the CAT-Air America boys were regularly running to Tibet in C-46s to resupply rebels there that Chiang had stirred up."

The recently published Pentagon Papers confirm this story. General Ed Lansdale, an experienced Asian CIA man, said, "CAT has . . . more than 200 overflights of mainland China and Tibet . . ." It appears that the Nationalists grand scheme was to coordinate and lead twin rebellions in Tibet and Yunnan.

The deeper you look, the more you realize that the Air America organization is into almost every aspect of Asian air operations. They provide plane crews for Air Vietnam, and columnist Jack Anderson claims that the planes of another Asian outfit, Southern Air Transport, are actually Air America craft with a new paint job.

Most Air America planes are old C-46s and C-47s built during World War Two, but they're beautifully maintained and prized for their durability. Others are specially built jobs that can land on grass strips only 250 feet long, C-123 cargo planes of the type used by the Air Force, a fleet of Huey helicopters and a recently spotted four-engine Constellation with "strange humps" in the fuselage that looks very much like the electronic spy plane the Navy uses. Unusual aircraft for a civilian airline.

Doole has just been replaced as head of Air America, but before he left, he hedged his answers when questioned about his company's business. "I don't know all of our customers' private business and relations," he said. "We carry people and things—whatever the customer has for us."

Others in the company are less cagey about what they do. Saigon station chief E. J. Theisen says, "I guess we carry about everything except bombs under our wings." Even that is doubted by some, but Theisen does admit that the super-secret SOG groups use Air America for their in-country transportation. These are the guys you see getting out of a plane on some God-forsaken strip, dressed in uniforms without insignia, and carrying gun bags that take a form suspiciously like that of the Swedish K.

Vietniane station manager Jim Cunningham will only say, "We operate on a you-call, we haul basis. We don't go into details."

Strangely, one of the members of Air America's board of directors is a very prominent Boston lawyer. An ex-Air Force officer, he says that he "got to know some of the CAT operating personnel and was invited to join the board. Air America handles mostly CIA charter work. It's a very well run airline." Evidently, it's a damned well run airline. They supposedly show a \$10,000,000 profit every year.

So America's flying foreign legion flies on. In fact, as the official U.S. presence in Asia shrinks, Air America is stepping in to fill the void in its "unofficial" manner, and they're busier than ever before.

Wherever they go, whatever they do, they earn their keep by doing what nobody else would touch with a ten-foot pole. In Taipei, a statue of the "old man," Claire Chennault, looks out over New Park and he has a satisfied look on his face as though he knows that the outfit he left behind will always live up to its motto: "Anything, anytime, anywhere—professionally." ▲