

Air America: Flying for U.S. and Profit in Asia

By JOHN BURGESS
Special to The Star-News

BANGKOK — "The flying is non-military; in other words, civilian flying. You are flying for the U.S. government, that is government agencies such as USOM, USAID, USIS, etc. While these agencies may be under CIA direction, you don't know and you don't care. The government agencies direct the routings and schedulings, your company provides the technical know-how and you fly the airplane."

Thus an unnamed American pilot describes "civilian flying" in Southeast Asia for Air America and the lesser known Continental Air Services — both private companies on contract to the U.S. government. The pilot's comments are part of a confidential, 16-page brochure available at certain Air Force personnel offices. It is shown to Air Force pilots interested in flying for one of the companies upon completing their military service.

The brochure lists no author or publisher, but it offers an illuminating view into the internal operations of Air America, which has played a crucial role in the Indochina war theater since the 1950s. Air America, along with the other companies, has airlifted troops, refugees, CIA agents, American politicians, war material, food and occasionally prisoners all over Southeast Asia.

Extravagant Salaries

The brochure, dated June 29, 1972, boasts that Air America ranked as one of the most profitable corporation in the United States in 1969, a year when most of the world's airlines lost heavily. Air America's customer is the U.S. government.

It employs about 436 pilots, according to the pamphlet, of which 384 are working in Southeast Asia. The center of Air America's operation is Laos, where the presence of military or military-related personnel is prohibited by the much-abused Geneva Conference of 1962.

Air America's profits are high despite the somewhat extravagant salaries it pays for flying personnel. According to the report, a pilot with 11 years experience, flying a UH-34D helicopter base at Udorn air base in Thailand and

average of 100 hours monthly, will take home \$51,525. All salaries are tax free.

A newly hired pilot flying a C-7 Caribou transport based in Vientiane, averaging 100 hours flying time monthly, would earn a minimum \$29,442. The U.S. commercial pilot average is \$24,000.

Also available to Air America personnel, in addition to a liberal expense account, is life and medical insurance, two-weeks leave, tickets on other airlines at 20 percent normal cost, PX and government mailing privileges and educational allowances for dependents. Many Air America pilots are retired military men receiving military pensions.

'Good' Investment

Americans can also become "air freight specialists", commonly called kickers. Their job is to push cargo out over drop zones. Salary is \$1,600-\$1,800 per month. Qualifications: American citizenship, air borne training, experience with the U.S. Air Force preferred.

Air America, Inc., is owned by a private aviation investment concern called the Pacific Corp. Dunn and Bradstreet's investment directory places its assets in the \$10-\$50 million category, and rates it "good" as an investment risk. Air America itself employs altogether about 8,000 persons, ranking in size just below National Airlines and above most of the smaller U.S. domestic airlines.

Formerly called Civil Air Transport (CAT), Air America was organized after World War II by General Claire Chennault, commander of the American fighter squadrons in Burma and China known as the Flying Tigers. CAT played a major role in post-war China supplying Nationalist troops. CAT also supplied the French during their phase of the war in Indochina.

Air America is commonly considered an arm of the CIA. In Laos, the CIA for the past 10 years or more has maintained an army of hill tribesmen, mainly Thai and Lao mercenaries. Most of the air supply and transport needs for this army have been handled by Air America.

Military Assistance

Though the brochure does not mention it, it is well known

it hints at the subject of contraband:

"Although flights mainly serve U.S. official personnel movement and native officials and civilians, you sometimes engage in the movement of friendly troops, or of enemy captives; or in the transport of cargo much more potent than rice and beans! There's a war going on. Use your imagination!"

Air America works hand-in-hand with the U.S. Air Force. At Udorn air base in Thailand, Air Force mechanics repair the airline's transports and helicopters, many of them unmarked. The Air Force has reportedly leased giant C130 transports when the planes were needed for opera-

tions in Laos. In the section on Air America's benefits, the brochure lists in addition to normal home and sick leave: "Military leave will be granted appropriately" — an apparent acknowledgement that there are military people working directly with Air America.

One should not conclude, however, that the salaries, excitement and tax advantages mean that Air America pilots hope the war will continue. As the brochure's author notes in a typed postscript:

"Foreign aid situation unclear pending outcome military situation in RVN (Republic of Vietnam), but it looks as if we'll finish the war (and peace terms favorable for our side); if so, it is expected that a boom among contract operators will result when implemented, due to inevitable rehabilitation and reconstruction aid in wartorn areas. . . . Job market highly competitive and you'll need all the help you can get."

According to Pacific News Service, the following men sit on the Air America board of directors:

Samuel Randolph Walker — chairman of the board of Wm. C. Walker's Son, New York; director of Equitable Life Assurance Society; member of Federal City Council, Washington, D.C.; member of Action Council for Better Cities, Urban America, Inc., and life trustee, Columbia University.

William A. Reed — chairman of the board of Simpson Timber Co.; chairman of the board, Simpson Lee Paper Co.; director of Crown Simp-

Seattle First National Bank; director of General Insurance Co.; director of Boeing Co.; director of Pacific Car Foundry Co.; director of Northern Pacific Railroad; director of Stanford Research Institute.

Arthur Berry Richardson — foreign service officer in Russia, China and England from 1914 to 1936; chairman of the board of Cheeseborough Ponds, Inc. from 1955 to 1961; director of United Hospital Fund, New York; trustee of Lenox Hill Hospital.

James Barr Ames — law partner in Ropes & Gray, Boston; director of Air Asia Co., Ltd., director of International Student Association; member, Cambridge Civic Association and trustee of Mt. Auburn Hospital.

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CIA-Backed Commando Raids into N. Viet Told

BY WAYNE THOMIS

[Aviation Editor]

[Chicago Tribune Press Service]

SAIGON, Viet Nam, June 14

Hanoi broadcasts infrequently mention "works of saboteurs" in North Viet Nam's panhandle, and Saigon's vernacular press occasionally report odd little aircraft accidents with nonmilitary planes in mountainous regions of Laos, Northwestern South Viet Nam, and sometimes in Northeastern Thailand.

These are mere pecks by the general public at a tremendous submerged "iceberg" of clandestine operations continuously and now increasingly carried out against the Communist North.

These actions probably never will be disclosed in full detail but it can be said responsibly that today they constitute an important phase of this Southeast Asia battle.

It is a silent war. It is carried out by special forces and by mercenaries. It is a hit-and-run war in which units are airlifted or sea borne deep into North Viet Nam for demolition missions, for seizure of prisoners, for probing forays, and—it now is understood—for accumulation of information on American prisoner of war camp locations.

This type of action has been taking place in the North Vietnamese panhandle from the Demilitarized Zone to well north of Vinh during the last 60 days.

An increasing series of such raids have come from the seacoasts and from helicopter air-bridge links in Laos and Thailand to points where damage can be done or information obtained from the North Vietnamese, it was learned from reliable sources.

Communist broadcasts from Hanoi in the past have used "saboteur" in an ideological sense. Now they are referring to actual dynamitings by these raiders. They specialize in targets which are too difficult for bombers to identify from the air, or are too well hidden to be spotted by aerial photography. They also carry out a traffic in agents not otherwise possible under present conditions.

Size, Duration Vary

Reports filtering from Central Intelligence Agency and associates military establishments indicate such raids may vary from 20 to several hundred men. They may stay in North Viet Nam from a few minutes to 24 hours.

Mercenaries enlisted for such secret actions include Europeans, Chinese, Malays, Japanese and Americans. The operations are carefully planned and surrounded by the tight security.

The CIA now believes the large-scale American attempt to free prisoners from a camp near Hanoi a year ago failed because of a security leak

which resulted in a prisoner shift.

The raiders are heavily armed. Not one operation has failed, and none of the raiders have been trapped, according to informed sources.

Casualties among these special forces have been low. Pay scales are said to be "quite high" and morale among these specialists in demolition, electronics sabotage, and interrogation is very high. The men regard themselves as an elite corps.

Financed by CIA

The mysterious, CIA-financed Air America civil flying fleet seems to operate on a super-national basis across Cambodian, Thai, Laotian, and South Vietnamese borders. It has had a part in some of this work. However, much of the work is being done by military detachments, temporarily posted to the special forces.

The military establishment here generally attempts to suppress mention of this side of the war for a number of reasons, with security against enemy knowledge being the least important. The North Vietnamese are fully aware of the nature of the CIA-directed and financed special operations.

It is known that after each such raid all civilians and military personnel in the North who have had contact with the raiders are subjected to rigorous and lengthy questioning by Communist secret police and political commissars.

The U. S. forces seek to hide the clandestine side of the war to prevent embarrassment to Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian governmental departments.

It is recognized by American leaders that such concealment is merely "token" but is required in certain diplomatic relationships which the countries fringing South Viet Nam

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Air America Pilots Aging In Laos War

Vientiane, Laos — (AP) — They fly long hours in the flak-filled skies of Laos and play hard in exotic Oriental fleshpots.

But behind the swashbuckling facade, Air America pilots are often men with mortgages, sagging waistlines and even grandchildren. The soldiers of fortune are going gray. They now have something to lose.

If they get shot down, their lives are only worth two kilograms of gold — worth about \$3,300 in Europe. This reward is offered to primitive hill tribesmen for surviving crew members by the private company, a civilian contractor which takes orders from the Agency for International Development.

"The average age of my pilots is 43," said James Cunningham, the Air America chief in Laos. "They're still wild, some of them still break the rules all the time and fly by the seat of their pants. But they're also serious family men with business interests.

125 Professional Pilots

Often called the CIA airline because of its contract work for Washington's paramilitary involvement in Laos, Air America has 125 professional pilots flying 35 fixed-wing planes and 36 Thailand-based helicopters.

Cunningham pooh-poohs talk of clandestine "spook missions" and "black operations" allegedly performed in China and North Vietnam.

"That's a lot of drivel," he said. "We haul passengers, fuel and supplies, any cargo required by the services of this country. I'm not saying there isn't a CIA presence in Laos, but if I found any of my pilots taking orders from the CIA they'd get canned.

"You see those planes out there? At 125 knots they wouldn't last five minutes over China or North Viet-

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However, the pilots have some pretty spooky passengers on occasion — strange Americans with code names, unidentified Asians from several different countries, men with guns who ask to be landed at little-known airstrips in the jungled mountains behind enemy lines.

"I don't know who they are and I don't want to know," said one pilot. "All I know is a guy could get fired talking about them."

Pilots also have helped rescue downed U.S. Air Force fliers.

Air America itself has lost five planes in the past two months and nearly 50 have been shot up by antiaircraft fire. Pilots also are being buzzed by Soviet-built MIGs of the North Vietnamese air force.

Danger Is Rife

Antiaircraft sites are so thick in Laos that some areas are technically off limits to unarmed civilian aircraft. But "there's written policy and unwritten policy," explained one Air America man.

"We fly anywhere, and it's getting worse all the time," he added. "This country is going to hell. No place is safe any more."

Flying in high-risk areas and earning night differential, some of the pilots make \$40,000 a year.

"I earn every penny of it," said pilot James Russell, 49, a decorated World War II bomber pilot.

"I fly where other pilots don't fly because I need the money," the Texan said. "I have several deals cooking. I have a wife and three beautiful children to support. I want to expand my cattle ranch," a 25,000-acre spread in Brazil.

Plane Destroyed

Last week Russell's plane was destroyed on the ground by enemy mortar fire. He was on a clandestine mission involving six unidentified Asians, including a CIA agent code-named Swamp Rat. Russell outran pursuing North Vietnamese soldiers for two miles before a helicopter picked him up.

"Right now there's a well-dressed North Vietnamese wearing a singed \$65 flying jacket," he drawled. "I'd just bought that damn thing in Hong Kong and like a fool I left it in the plane."

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750 sorties in one day

CIA 'air force' fighting in Laos

By JAMES FOSTER
Scripps-Howard Staff Writer

UDORN, Thailand, Jan. 27 — The United States is throwing more and more of its own air power and support for native ground forces into the struggle against Communist take-over in Laos.

U.S. air missions into Laos are said to be up 90 per cent over a year ago. Some days as many as 750 bombing sorties are flown from even strategically located bases in Thailand.

Laotian government troops can't stand up against the estimated 40,000 North Vietnamese and 30,000 Pathet Lao Communist rebels who already control the eastern half of the country, adjacent to North Vietnam.

If the remaining half is to be saved — the

part that stands as a buffer along Thailand's border — it is apparent the United States will have to do it.

For similar reasons the seven operating air bases in Thailand are U.S.-built, -financed and run, but title was turned over to the Royal Thai Air Force. In this manner the United States becomes a guest and can't be accused of owning any bases where it isn't supposed to.

Several of these bases are within a stone's throw of the Thai-Laotian border. Air controllers at Nakhon Phanom, in the northeast, for instance, watch the sun rise over Laotian mountains 13 miles away. The border is only 10 miles away.

And Udorn, south of the border, is 10 minutes by jet from the Plain of Jars, main battle-

ground in the see-saw fight for control of the northern sector of Laos.

Udorn is said to be the busiest field in Thailand with 6,500 U.S. Air Force personnel (there are 38,000 in all of Thailand) and an undisclosed number of civilians working for Air America.

Air America is the largest of two air forces operated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The second is Continental Air Service.

Other U.S. civilians hired by the CIA give on-the-job training to guerrillas, operate a communications network along the border, carry out intelligence missions and run other clandestine errands.

The CIA also hires Thai guerrillas and supports a 40,000-man army of Lao hill tribesmen.

By using civilians and the Air Force the U.S. hedges its claim of having no "combat troops" inside Laos.

While ground operations are relatively inexpensive and inconspicuous, Air America and Continental Air Service are not. They seem to be everywhere. But their cost, which might indicate the scope of their operations, is hidden in the CIA budget which is immune to public scrutiny.

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AREA OR COUNTRY(S)	ORGANIZATION	FUNCTIONS & TOPICS	PERSONALITIES	DOCUMENT
HQ	Air America	Proprieteries		DATE: 10 Aug 1972
Laos		Press		CLASS.: None NO.:
South East Asia		Public Image		
Vietnam				
IDENTIFICATION OF DOCUMENT (author, form, address, title & length)				NO.:
File of press clippings concerning Air America				LOCATION: ✓ HS/HC-845

ABSTRACT

News items dealing with Air America and CIA involvement.

(Also see: CSHP-160, Subject: Aspects of the Air and Ground War in Laos; HS/HC-844 and HS/HC-677 re Laos; and HS/CSG-547, 1488, and 2340 re Air America.)

