

AIR AMERICA: ANYTHING GOES

It doesn't pipe Mantovani into its cabins, dress stewardesses in colorful Puccini or serve *bœuf bourguignon* on any of its flights. And yet Air America is one of the largest U.S. airlines, ranking behind National and ahead of Northeast in the number of its planes and personnel. Air America can afford to be indifferent to the extras provided by other airlines because it has only one customer to please—the United States Government—for which it performs a wide variety of services connected with the American military involvement in Southeast Asia. As a rule, these services go unpublicized. Recently, however, Air America came into the spotlight when it flew several hundred Thai troops into Laos to help the CIA-sponsored "secret army" of Gen. Vang Pao defend the outpost of Long Cheng from Communist attack.

Although in practical terms it is an operating arm of the CIA, Air America is owned by a private aviation-investment concern called Pacific Corp. Its managing director and chief executive, a large, affable man named George Doole Jr., laughs heartily when questioned about dealings with intelligence organizations—but hedges his answer. "I don't know all of our customers' private business and relations," he said last week. "So help me, that's a fact." But while that may be so, Air America's motto, "Anything, Anytime, Anywhere—Professionally," suggests the company plays by rather free-wheeling rules.

"I guess we carry about everything except bombs under our wings," says Air America Saigon manager E.J. Theisen. And in fact, the range of the company's activities almost lives up to its motto. CIA agents working in the Phoenix program—

a campaign to ferret out Viet Cong operatives in South Vietnam—fly Air America when they need to move a high-level prisoner. Green Berets use the airline to carry supplies to Montagnard mercenaries. And according to Theisen, even the U.S.'s supersecret Special Operations Group in Saigon, which works almost exclusively behind enemy lines, relies on Air America for some of its transport needs within South Vietnam.

Contract: At present, though, the bulk of the line's work is in Laos, where it drops tons of rice to Meo tribesmen under a contract with the Agency for International Development, carries troops to the front and evacuates refugees. But when it comes to discussing operations behind Pathet Lao lines, only miles from the North Vietnamese border, Vientiane manager James Cunningham Jr. is not giving away any secrets. "We operate on a you-call, we-haul basis," he said. "We don't go into details."

For its varied operations, Air America uses a fleet of some 150 planes—mostly unmarked twin-engine Vo'par Beechcrafts and Swiss-built Pilatus Porters. Its 600 pilots, many of them Vietnam veterans, make as much as \$25,000 a year—and earn every penny of it. Under all kinds of weather—and often under fire as well—they fly into remote jungle airstrips no bigger than football fields and wear thick gold bracelets which they can barter for food and medicine in case of forced landings in remote regions. But in spite of the risks they take, the pilots are rarely the daredevil Steve Canyons one might expect. "They're in it for the money," comments one old Asian hand. "These guys all read Barron's for stock-market tips."

Theisen, E.J.

CIA 104 Cunningham

James, A.

