

AIR AMERICA AND THE WAR IN LAOS, 1959-1974

by

J. Michael Ferguson

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*To my wife Adrienne,
Without whom I never could have done this.*

AIR AMERICA AND THE WAR IN LAOS, 1959-1974

by

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Secretly owned by the CIA, Air America operated as a civilian airline in the hazardous conditions of war-torn Laos from 1959 to 1974. Since the delicate diplomatic situation in Laos prevented the use of U.S. military forces, the largely unarmed Air America functioned as the CIA's paramilitary air force, flying in support of indigenous troops who fought against communist forces. It engaged in a wide variety of operations, from aerial supply to combat assault missions. Air America pilots forged an altogether different experience of the war in Indochina, even though they encountered the same kinds of danger as the military pilots who operated next door in Vietnam. Many express nostalgia for their time with the company, despite the many dangers they faced on a daily basis while flying in Laos. This paper explores some of the reasons why these men formed such a different outlook on the war in Indochina.

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INTRODUCTION

On September 2, 1971, Captain Ron Fitzgerald and Major Jim Compton found themselves suddenly under heavy enemy ground fire while they were flying their F-4 fighter plane over the northern part of Laos. Quickly the plane began going down, and the two managed to eject right before their F-4 hit the ground in a huge ball of flames. Seriously injured and deep in Communist controlled territory, their only hope was that airborne Search and Rescue (SAR) crews would arrive before any enemy patrols did. Suddenly, the reassuring drone of helicopter blades could be heard in the distance. As the two helicopters landed in the open field where the injured crewmen lay, a hail of enemy fire erupted, and the sound of clanging metal could be heard as the bullets hit the two rescue aircraft. Several crewmembers jumped from the choppers onto the field, ignoring the hostile barrage of bullets as they hoisted the two injured fighter pilots into the choppers.¹ The two helicopters quickly evacuated the area, and as the choppers took off the injured pilots looked and saw that the men who had risked their lives to rescue them were not trained and armed military SAR crews, but rather the civilian airmen of Air America.

This was a scene that would be played over and over again during the Second Indochina War, better known to most Americans as the Vietnam War. So what exactly was Air America, and what were they doing in Laos? To begin to answer these questions, we must first go back to 1950, when the CIA decided that it needed its own proprietary airline to conduct covert operations in the Asian theater. The CIA formed the Pacific Corporation, which in August of

¹ Memorandum from Department of the Air Force Headquarters, 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (PACAF) to Base Manager, Air America Inc., September 8, 1971, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266389.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2010).

1950 purchased Civil Air Transport (CAT) for a little less than one million dollars.² The CIA would go on to use CAT and its civilian pilots for a host of missions throughout Asia, including flying support missions during the Korean War, and supplying the French troops at Dien Bien Phu. In 1959, CAT changed its name to Air America. The CIA continued to use its air proprietary for a wide variety of missions throughout the globe. Air America pilots flew operations in Tibet, supplying anti-communist guerillas in the harrowing conditions of the Himalayas. They trained Cuban pilots for and participated in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion. They flew thousands of support missions throughout Southeast Asia: in North and South Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

By the early 1960's, Laos had become the main hub of Air America activity. But what was so special about this tiny, landlocked Southeast Asian country? Since the end of World War II, the French had been trying to regain control of their former colony, French Indochina, which consisted of modern day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The resistance centered around Vietnam, with the communist Viet Minh fighting to take back control of Vietnam from the French. President Eisenhower, fearing a communist domino effect throughout Southeast Asia, began giving aid and support to the French, including CAT as a means of supplying scattered French forces. The French could not continue the war, and Laos and Cambodia became free independent nations. Vietnam, however, was divided along the 17th parallel. The First Indochina War was at an end. The Second was just beginning.

In the summer of 1959, two events ensured that the war in Southeast Asia would not be confined to Vietnam alone. The North Vietnamese were determined to reunite North and South

² Larry D. Sall, William M. Leary, Tim Castle, and Joe Guilmartin, *Air America: Upholding the Airman's Bond* (Richardson, Tex.: University of Texas at Dallas and the Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2009) 10. This was a book put together by several different professors to be handed out at the Air America symposium celebrating the release of recently declassified material from the CIA.

Vietnam. Communist guerillas in South Vietnam, later known to the U.S. as the Viet Cong, had been fighting against the U.S. backed government of South Vietnam. In order to supply these guerillas, and as a way to funnel more troops into Vietnam, construction began on what would become known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This was a series of roads and trails that went from North Vietnam through Laos and into South Vietnam. At the same time in Laos communist forces known as the Pathet Lao, backed by the North Vietnamese, began fighting against the Royal Lao Government. Neither of these developments boded well for U.S. hopes of a non-communist Southeast Asia. The problem with Laos was that as of 1961, Laos was officially neutral. The North Vietnamese disregarded Laotian neutrality, and continued moving men and materiel (military equipment and supplies) down through Laos via the trail, and they continued to support the Pathet Lao in their attempt to take control of Laos. The U.S. Government feared Soviet intervention if the U.S. openly ignored Laotian neutrality, so direct military intervention was out of the question. To minimize any official U.S. presence in Laos, the CIA became the primary means of combating the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army in Laos through their use of trained indigenous forces. Thus began the CIA's secret war in Laos.

When focusing solely on the war in Laos, it is easy to dismiss it as another Cold War CIA operation. But when explored in a larger context, the conflict in Laos was intimately linked to the much larger war going on in Vietnam. While the Pathet Lao were a factor in the war, a large portion of the fighting in Laos was actually done by the North Vietnamese Army. Without a doubt, U.S. forces in Vietnam would have suffered much more had Laos fallen into communist hands. The Ho Chi Minh Trail would have had a much larger flow of necessary supplies and men, and more North Vietnamese could have been sent south to fight rather than being tied up in Laos.

Just as the fighting in Vietnam was interconnected with the conflict in Laos, so it was with the CIA and Air America. The CIA relied heavily on Air America in its attempt to keep Laos from being taken over by communist forces. Laos, a mountainous and somewhat primitive country, lacked significant infrastructure, and the CIA had to rely on Air America for communication, transportation, and supply. While Air America is often described as the “CIA’s secret airline,” one could argue that in war-torn Laos, Air America often acted more as the CIA’s paramilitary air force rather than as a standard airline. Air America would take on many of the tasks that military pilots would be flying across the border in Vietnam, such as search and rescue, troop transport, medevac, reconnaissance, and even combat missions. Without Air America, the CIA’s secret war in Laos would have been impossible. Air America, Laos, and the Vietnam War, were significantly and inextricably linked. When the war in Vietnam came to an end, so did Air America. It is interesting to note that the quintessential image of the end of the Vietnam War, the picture of what many people thought to be a U.S. Army helicopter on top of the Embassy in Saigon, was actually an Air America helicopter on top of the Pittman building, a ten story apartment building in Saigon. Air America’s role in the Second Indochina War had been, and would long remain, unknown and forgotten.

For the most part, little has been written about Air America and its role in Laos, and only a few scholars have documented their work in Laos. First published in 1979, Christopher Robbins’ *Air America* remains probably the best known book on the history of Air America, and it attempts to cover the airline’s entire history, from the pre-CIA era beginning in World War II with Civil Air Transport, all the way through to the war in Indochina. But Robbins only interviewed a handful of Air America pilots for his book, and at least one of them seemed to

enjoy telling the reporter some tall tales that Robbins went on to publish as fact in his book.³ In 1998, Terry Love published a “photo history” titled *The Wings of Air America*. It contains a brief summation of the history of CAT/Air America, but most of the book consists of photos of the various aircraft that the men of Air America flew.

In 2003, Dr. Joe Leeker began a similar project called “The Aircraft of Air America,” which he posted on the University of Texas at Dallas McDermott Library’s History of Aviation Collection website. Dr. Leeker, a professor of literature at Chemnitz University in Germany with a specialization in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance periods, has had a boyhood fascination with aviation. His interest in Air America began when he saw the *Air America* movie in the early nineties. His interest led him to begin research in the CAT/Air America archives in the UTD Aviation Special Collections Library, and he has visited the library annually to continue researching there. After publishing the fourth addition of “The Aircraft of Air America” in 2008, he began publishing an ebook for the Special Collections website entitled *The History of Air America*.⁴ The ebook, last updated in June of this year, lacks only a few more chapters before completion. Dr. Leeker’s work is an operational history of Air America, focusing on a chronological narrative of major events. Highly detailed, the book pays close attention to the aircraft minutiae, including airplane serial numbers. While providing an excellent overview of Air America’s history, the text is over laden with jargon and acronyms, recommending it to only the most dedicated readers and researchers.

Dr. William M. Leary, a professor at the University of Georgia, began doing intensive research for a book on Air America in the late 1970’s. His goal was to write a series on the

³ William M. Leary, *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia*, 2nd ed. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 4.

⁴ Lauren Buell, "Air America Research Brings German Couple Back to UTD," *The UTD Mercury*, (August 25, 2008), http://www.utdmercury.com/home/index.cfm?event=displayArticle&ustory_id=aac1678e-370e-4490-b3ef-a2cddfce8f2b (accessed July 29, 2009).

history of CAT and Air America that would become the complete reference book on the subject. *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia* was first published in 1984. Unfortunately, Dr. Leary died in 2006 before he was able to complete his book on Air America. He left behind several papers on the history of Air America, as well as a detailed chronology of Air America and its role in Laos.

A few books document the war in Laos. The most impressive, in terms of sheer volume, would have to be Kenneth Conboy's work with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*. This sizeable tome covers the war in Laos from French occupation following World War II, to the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975. Conboy's work follows the chronological progression in great detail, and given the key role that it played in carrying out the war, Air America surfaces many times throughout. Unfortunately, Air America appears often but without analysis. Although he emphasizes Air America's importance, Conboy does not offer much insight into how Air America operated, or who the men of Air America were. From a scholarly standpoint, Conboy's work seriously lacks citations detailing the source of his information. The vast majority of his notes simply offer points of clarification or extra details.

Perhaps the strongest book covering the war is the smaller and more concise *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government 1955-1975* by Dr. Timothy Castle. *At War* is extremely well researched and Castle provides extensive notes on sources. Castle utilizes a wide variety of archive materials, including declassified documents, and interviews with key U.S. policy makers and commanders, Lao politicians and commanders on both sides of the conflict, CIA agents, and Air America personnel. The focus of the book is primarily on the American activities and aid in Laos, but it also offers excellent background material on the political and military situation in Laos. As such, Castle goes into a considerable

amount of detail regarding Air America and its role in the war. But again, given the broad topic that Castle is covering, there is not much of an in depth look at Air America beyond its basic role in the war in Laos.

The works of Conboy and Castle place Air America within the context of the larger war, examining how its role was interrelated with the CIA, the U.S. military, the Royal Lao Government, and the various forces fighting on the ground. Conboy's main interest lies in the progression of the war, namely key battles, decisions, and actions taken by the different historical actors involved. Castle, more than Conboy, views Air America as a critical force in the war, calling it "a vital component of the overall U.S. effort."⁵ Castle more carefully situates Air America in the overall scheme of U.S. aid to the Royal Lao Government. But of course, Castle's work is concerned with the larger war, and despite its significance to the war, Air America was only one piece of puzzle.

The work of Joe Leeker and William Leary offer the most insight into Air America's history. Leeker's work is deeply researched, and the amount of information he has been able to gather on particular topics is impressive. A childhood fascination with aviation, might explain his fixation on the airplanes themselves. Leeker painstakingly documented the history of each aircraft with serial numbers. In this manner, he could tell you which planes were involved in a particular action, which helicopter was shot down and which chopper went in to salvage the wreckage. Leeker mainly sought to establish the narrative of Air America, an endeavor he accomplished. Leary achieved a similar victory of breadth. More than any of the other authors, Leary focuses more on the actual employees of Air America, often using their own words to

⁵ Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 2.

describe key moments and remembrances. But he never finished, and the incomplete manuscript lacks scholarly notations.

While the published and unpublished literature on Air America captures its basic operations, none examines the men of Air America, or what these men thought about their actions. The extant historiography might be described as a macro-history of Air America and the war in Laos. This narrative begs for a micro-historical investigation of the individuals who actually lived this war. So many questions have yet to be asked or answered when it comes to the men who played such a key role in an American war.

In looking at some of the oral histories of Air America pilots, an interesting trend emerges. Despite flying under extremely dangerous conditions, including enemy activity, and functioning as a proxy for military pilots in the war in Laos, the men of Air America do not display the same sentiment toward the war in Indochina as veteran military pilots often do. A military pilots' view of the war may run the gamut from pride in their service to a debilitating inability to talk about combat due to PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Air America pilots, however, tend to wax nostalgic about their time in Laos. They often describe Air America as the best job they ever had, or recall their time with Air America as the best years of their life. What accounts for this difference? By examining the oral histories of Air America pilots and scrutinizing their role in Laos, we can explore the possible answers to this question.

This thesis will also examine the extent to which these civilian pilots performed paramilitary operations in Laos. While some of the histories do highlight particular missions and projects, few draw attention to the civilians who executed these dangerous missions. Air America often acted as the CIA's paramilitary air force, operating in situations that would have been left to the military across the border in Vietnam. One of the critical differences was that,

unlike the military pilots, Air America pilots could (and sometimes did) refuse to fly particular missions. They flew many of their missions on a voluntary basis. Other missions, like search and rescue, were often performed on the spot without any request from Air America or the customer (often a CIA case officer), despite the risks inherent in such a mission.

In attempting to answer these questions, I hope to add critical dimensions to our understanding of combat, daily life, diplomatic relations, and covert military operations in the 1960's. By doing this, we expand our existing knowledge not only of the war in Laos, but also the wider American effort to stem the advance of communism in Indochina. But before looking at the individuals and their stories, it might be helpful to provide some background on the origins of Air America, as well as the course of the war in Laos, where they would play a key role.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS OF AIR AMERICA AND THE WAR IN LAOS

The origins of Air America can be traced back to before the U.S. became involved in World War II. In the late 1930's, China and Japan had plunged into a full scale war as Japan made an expansionist attempt to wrestle territory away from China. Unlike the Japanese, the Chinese air force was severely underdeveloped. In an attempt to aid the Chinese, President Roosevelt considered several different ideas, including sending a "volunteer" group of aviators, who were actually military pilots given official leave, to fly fighter planes in support of the Chinese. Claire Chennault, a former Air Corpsman who had been helping the Chinese air program since 1937, became the commander of this American Volunteer Group (AVG) in the summer of 1941. The AVG would soon come to be known by its more popular name, the Flying Tigers. The Tigers maintained an excellent record in China, shooting down some three hundred enemy planes while only losing twelve planes themselves.¹

After the World War II, Chennault joined with Whiting Willauer to create an airline name Civil Air Transport. But the war had not ceased for long when a civil war broke out between the Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Communists led by Mao Tse-tung. CAT sided with the Nationalists and increasingly involved itself in paramilitary operations such as troop transport and supply. As the Cold War grew in intensity, CAT also began to contract with the CIA, flying covert intelligence missions throughout Asia. By 1950 CAT had joined the

¹ William M. Leary, *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia*, 2nd ed. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2002) 4-5.

Nationalists in exile on Taiwan, and the company was on the verge of bankruptcy.² In an internal CIA memorandum, Stuart Hedden recounts a 1949 meeting between the CIA and Gen. Chennault, “to see if CAT would be available to help in the support which Agency policy was then giving to Nationalist troops on the Mainland of China. Our men were informed that CAT could do this job but that General Chennault and Mr. Corcoran had decided that it would be necessary to liquidate CAT because so much of its flying territory had been occupied by Communists that it was no longer possible to run the line at a profit. We urged them to hold the airline together because of the potential usefulness to this country of its fleet of planes, its trained pilots, and its capabilities from an operational point of view.” The CIA eventually decided that the survival of CAT was in the interest of national security, and in August 1950 the CIA covertly purchased CAT.³

During the Korean War CAT was utilized heavily by the U.S. military, mostly ferrying supplies, which allowed military aircraft and their crews to be allocated for other purposes. The Korean War proved to be advantageous for CAT, because in three months time they were able to increase the amount of aircraft being flown from three to twenty six. During this same time span, their flight hours increased from around five hundred hours per month to almost four thousand. Over the course of the war, CAT transported some twenty seven thousand tons of supplies and mail. CAT also became a transport for wounded soldiers, eventually airlifting thousands of wounded to hospitals and aid stations.⁴

The U.S. military was not the only entity that would rely heavily on CAT during the war. The experience of the Korean War showed the CIA that its recently purchased air proprietary

² Ibid., 112

³ Internal CIA Memorandum by Stuart Hedden., January 2, 1952, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05261065.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2010).

⁴ Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 126.

proved quite useful in covert operations. The CIA utilized CAT in a series of covert operations including guerilla insertions and surveillance in China. After Korea, the CIA used CAT in operations in Indonesia, where the CIA made an unsuccessful attempt at unseating the Sukarno government. CAT would also be used to supply anti-communist forces fighting in the mountainous terrain of Tibet. For the CIA, the desirability of CAT lay not only in its reliable transport capabilities, but also in its plausible deniability.⁵ If a CAT plane was shot down and the pilot killed or captured, the pilot was a civilian with no direct connection to the U.S. government.

One region in Asia of increasing concern to the CIA and the U.S. government was French Indochina, which consisted of what we know today as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The French had held this region as a colony since the late 1800's, but it had lost it to the Japanese during the Second World War. At the conclusion of the war, the French sought to regain control of the region, but met resistance in the form of the communist Viet Minh. The Viet Minh waged a successful guerilla campaign against the French throughout Vietnam, and to a lesser extent in Laos as well. Both the Truman and the Eisenhower Administrations monitored the Indochinese conflict closely, since the U.S. policy towards communism at the time was that of containment. In a strategic move that would later be replayed in Laos, the U.S. decided that it would be more advantageous to finance the French in their effort to fight the communists rather than have the U.S. involve itself directly with military force. Between 1952 and 1954, as the French floundered in their fight, the U.S. government shouldered half the burden of the war's cost, paying some \$2.6 billion.⁶ The French, despite increasing U.S. aid, continued fare poorly against Communist forces in both Vietnam and Laos, and in early 1953 they asked the U.S. for air support.

⁵ Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 142.

⁶ Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 12.

Eisenhower was reluctant to use U.S. military personnel, and thus it was decided that CAT pilots would fly U.S. Air Force-supplied planes to supply the beleaguered French forces. On May 6, 1953 twelve CAT pilots began air operations in Laos, a first in what would eventually become a twenty two year involvement in that country.⁷

The French decided to make a stand at Dien Bien Phu, but they quickly found themselves surrounded and cutoff. CAT planes flew 682 air drop missions in support of the French garrison, braving heavy enemy fire. Despite CAT's efforts, Dien Bien Phu fell to the Viet Minh. Two of CAT's pilots were shot down and killed the day before the French surrendered. Even after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, CAT was still active in Indochina, supplying scattered French forces and airlifting nearly twenty thousand people from North Vietnam to South Vietnam after the signing of the Geneva cease-fire agreement in 1954.⁸ In 1955, Laos suffered a debilitating crop failure, and CAT was contracted to airdrop around 1,000 tons of rice to various receiving areas throughout the country.⁹ This humanitarian procedure would soon become a staple of both CAT and Air America in Laos over the next two decades.

As a result of the 1954 Geneva Agreement, a division was created in Vietnam, separating the communist north from the U.S. backed south. Laos and Cambodia were declared independent nations under the agreement. While much of U.S. history tends to focus on the concerns in Vietnam at this point in time, the administrations of Eisenhower and Kennedy were both very concerned about the situation in Laos. Since 1950, a communist group known as the Pathet Lao had been operating in Laos with the support of the Viet Minh against the French. The combined

⁷ Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 10.

⁸ Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 193.

⁹ "Rice Drop Over Laos: CAT's Know-How Makes Operation a Piece of Cake," in the CAT newsletter, v. 8, Dec. 1955, 4-5, from "Air America in Laos" at University of Texas at Dallas History of Aviation Collection website at <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/uniquecoll/speccoll/aamnote/aamlaos.pdf>.

forces, led by the Viet Minh General Vo Nguyen Giap, struck hard in Laos in 1954, leaving Eisenhower no longer confident in the France's ability in Indochina. In an expression of the domino theory usually associated with Vietnam, Eisenhower came to believe that "if Laos were lost, the rest of Southeast Asia would follow and the gate to India would be open."¹⁰ As the situation in Laos continued to deteriorate in the late 50's and early 60's, Laos increasingly became a central concern in Southeast Asia. As Eisenhower left office, he advised the incoming President Kennedy that Laos would be the "key to Indochina." Special assistant to Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., noted that during "the first two months of his administration he [Kennedy] spent more time on Laos than on anything else."¹¹ In a world-wide public broadcast in 1961, Kennedy himself stated that "the security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its safety runs with the safety of us all."¹² Clearly Laos had become a concern for U.S. policy makers bent on containing communism, but they still wanted to do everything possible to avoid sending in U.S. troops.

The U.S. was not the only country keeping a close eye on the situation in Laos. The eyes of the world were also focused on Laos rather than South Vietnam during the late 1950's and early 1960's. Both the North Vietnamese and the Chinese saw Laos as an area of serious contention and strategic importance. Both of these countries became heavily invested in the struggle for Laos as the war for Indochina progressed, supplying the communist forces there with massive amounts of both men and materiel. Even the Russians, who limited their engagement in

¹⁰ Castle, 10.

¹¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 163, 329.

¹² Castle, 34.

the later war in Vietnam, found themselves entrenched in the early stages of the conflict in Laos.¹³

So what made Laos so special? What was it about this tiny, landlocked country that created so much concern within the U.S. government? To understand this, one must first know a little something about the geo-political situation that Laos found itself in. Laos shares its border with six different countries. On its northern and northeastern border lay the communist countries of China and North Vietnam. Along the southeast it bordered non-communist South Vietnam, and directly to its south lay neutral Cambodia. Along its northwestern border it briefly touches Burma, but most of its western border is open to the anti-communist kingdom of Thailand. Viewed from its geographical position, it is easy to see how Laos soon became a pawn in a war to determine the political orientation of Southeast Asia.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the geography of Laos would be the Plaine de Jarres (PDJ), or Plain of Jars. It is located in the center of northern Laos, amidst the towering peaks of the heavily forested mountains that run along the border between Vietnam and Laos, the Annamese Cordillera. The PDJ received its name from the massive stone jars located throughout the plain. They were made long ago by an unknown group of inhabitants, and archeologists are still unsure of their exact purpose, although the most popular theory is that they were used to hold cremated human remains. Because of its location the PDJ has been historically used as a major thoroughfare for people moving through the country, particularly invading armies.¹⁴ The PDJ became a population center, boasting several villages and even a few rudimentary airfields. But what made this area even more strategically important was its roads. Laos had very little infrastructure, but the French had managed to construct at least a few highways (really just

¹³ Ang Cheng Guan, "The Vietnam War, 1962-64: The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 4 (2000): 602.

¹⁴ Castle, 4.

gravel tracks) that connected the major areas in northern Laos. The PDJ was the crossroads for all these major highways: Route 6 and Route 7 both went from North Vietnam into the Plain, from which point they could then connect with Route 13, which was the main highway between Luang Prabang, the cultural or royal capital of Laos, and Vientiane, the political capital of Laos. If one controlled the PDJ, ostensibly you would have easy access to both capitals, as well as two direct highways to Thailand. It is clear to see why the U.S.-backed forces would try to maintain control of the PDJ, since anyone seeking to control northern Laos would have to control this vital region. But as Douglas Blaufarb, a CIA agent who worked in Laos at the time noted, “There is also some reason to believe that the North Vietnamese see friendly control of the Plain to be a major factor in their security, for its roads lead to the back door of North Vietnam.”¹⁵

In 1959, another element gave the North Vietnamese an additional reason to want to control northern Laos. This was the year that work on the Ho Chi Minh Trail began. While some of the fingers of the trail passed through the northern part of Laos, most of the trail was located in southeastern portion of Laos along its large border with both North and South Vietnam. This main portion of the trail went largely through mountainous and densely forested regions that were sparsely populated. Bill Lair, one of the main CIA advisors in Laos, believes that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was so active in northern Laos because it wanted to consolidate control of the region, since “then they could just concentrate their effort on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.” Like Blaufarb, Lair believes that having anti-communist forces so close to the heart of North Vietnam made the NVA anxious to control this key region.¹⁶

The year 1959 would be an important year for a few other reasons. That year, CAT changed its name to Air America. Along with the name change there was a change in the way the

¹⁵ Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present*, (New York: Free Press, 1977), 130.

¹⁶ Bill Lair, interview by Stephen Maxner, December 11, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

company operated in Laos. Since few airstrips existed anywhere in the country (many were rough old strips made by the Japanese during WWII), there was a need to create more airstrips to make it easier to deliver supplies to friendly forces. Another problem stemmed from the fact that most of the indigenous peoples Air America supported actually lived on the tops of the mountains, making it necessary to create small strips where the airplanes could land. To get around this problem Air America began working on a STOL (Short Take Off and Landing) aircraft program. Potential sites would be scouted and then the local villagers would clear the area to make a small runway. In September, the first Air America Helio Courier was chartered for test flights in Laos.¹⁷ These small single engine airplanes could handle landing on the rough dirt runways that began to dot the countryside. By 1961 there were twelve STOL sites in Laos, which became known as Lima Sites. Each individual site then was designated with an LS followed by the site number, i.e. LS-88 for Lima Site 88 or LS-20A, for Lima Site 20 Alternate. As the war progressed it became clear that more sites were needed, and the effort to expand the strips was lead by Air America pilots like William Andresevic. Andresevic spent a considerable amount of his time looking for suitable areas. He would find somewhere to land and then would arrange to have the local villagers cut down the trees and level the strip. When Andresevic left Air America in 1964, there were about one hundred and forty-four STOL strips throughout Laos.¹⁸

Also in 1959, the CIA began to look at other means of aerial transportation in Laos. They requested that Air America send four pilots to receive flight training with the H-19 Sikorsky

¹⁷ Minutes of Meeting of the Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd., September 10, 1959, Box 6, Folder 4, CIA Corporate Records, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

¹⁸ William R. Andresevic, interview by William Leary, Beaverton, OR, June 19, 1987, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

helicopter.¹⁹ By April of the next year, Air America had four of its own H-19s. This was to be the beginning of Air America's sizeable helicopter program in Laos. Unfortunately these H-19s proved to be too underpowered and unsuited for use in Laos, and in late 1960 the U.S. Navy transferred four more powerful UH-34s to Air America at the direction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. A year later, sixteen more UH-34s were transferred from the U.S. Marine Corps to Air America. This transfer was authorized by President Kennedy himself. In addition to these helicopters, three hundred U.S. Marines were sent to Udorn, Thailand to begin working on a helicopter maintenance facility. Udorn would eventually be established as the headquarters for Air America's operations in Laos, as well as a base of operations for the CIA and the U.S. military.²⁰

By 1960, the political and military situation in Laos had deteriorated. Captain Kong Le, a paratrooper in the FAR (Royal Lao Army) staged a *coup d'état* against the Royal Lao Government. Kong Le was a neutralist who wanted to help bring an end to the war between the Pathet Lao and the government, and he believed that foreign aid had corrupted officials, making a truly neutral government impossible to achieve. In the end, Kong Le's coup only deepened the civil war. The Neutralists eventually joined forces with the Pathet Lao, and they were backed by the Soviet Union as well as the North Vietnamese. General Phoumi Nosavan and his right-wing forces regained control of the Royal Lao Government, with the backing of the United States.²¹ military intervention. Backing indigenous forces offered a more palatable option, but it soon became clear that the U.S. could not rely on the FAR. The U.S. government needed an indigenous force that could be relied upon to resist the communist forces that now held part of

¹⁹ Joe F. Leeker, "Air America in Laos I – Humanitarian Work Part I," (June 1, 2009) 8, <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/collections/speccoll/Leeker/history/LaosIPart1.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2010).

²⁰ Castle, 25, 29-30.

²¹ Castle, 20.

the Plain of Jars. The CIA hoped that it had found this force in the Hmong who lived high atop the mountains of northern Laos.

Laos has long been a country made up of many different ethnic groups, with the Hmong among the smallest. The lowlands are predominantly the home of the Lao Lum, who live by cultivating wet rice throughout the country. The Lao Lum are the most dominant ethnic group in the country, making up the majority of the population in Laos' major cities. Moving higher into the mountains, at around fifteen hundred to three thousand miles above sea level, one finds the Lao Theung. The Lao Theung are also known as the *kha*, or "slaves," perhaps because as an ethnic group they tend to be more submissive. Living on the mountainsides in Northern Laos, they cultivate dry rice as subsistence farmers. Further up the mountains, from three thousand to five thousand feet above sea level, live the Hmong,²² or Meo.²³

The Hmong, like the Lao Theung, live by slash and burn agriculture. This means that when a field has been worn out, they simply relocate and burn a new area to raise their crops. Their crops include dry rice, corn, vegetables, and poppy flowers. Unlike the other crops, which are grown for direct consumption, the poppies are grown primarily as a cash crop. Living high atop the mountains, the Hmong lack key necessities like salt and certain metals. The poppies, which provide opium, are sold to the lowland low in exchange for these necessary goods. While the Hmong do smoke some of the opium themselves, they harvest the flowers mainly for medicinal purposes. Addiction to opium is frowned upon by the tribe, especially among healthy individuals who should otherwise be providing for their families.²⁴

²² Blaufarb, 130-131.

²³ Although Meo was the name used by Americans during this period, it was actually a pejorative name given to the Hmong by the Chinese and is no longer used.

²⁴ Blaufarb, 132.

The Hmong had long held a reputation for being independent, and were known for being fierce warriors. They had a strong dislike for lowlanders, particularly the Lao Lum and the Vietnamese. When the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies held control of Hmong homelands in the northern provinces of Laos, the Hmong chafed under their yoke. Their independent streak clashed with the idea of a communist collective, and they strongly resented the fact that their men were often conscripted for forced labor, to be used to build roads and serve as porters. They also disliked that they were being taxed more heavily, and that often their opium crops were seized so that the Pathet Lao and the NVA could use the opium to trade for guns and ammunition from the Chinese. With little to no outside support, the Hmong began resisting the communist forces off and on with guerilla warfare from 1954 on.²⁵

A few CIA agents working in Laos took notice of the Hmong efforts. One agent in particular, Bill Lair, thought that they showed potential as a dependable fighting force. Lair had been involved in training Thai PARUs (Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit) in Thailand, which were developed primarily as a means of defending Thailand's border from communists. The PARUs would eventually be sent to fight alongside General Phoumi after the Kong Le coup. Lair believed the Hmong could benefit from the same kind of training, and in January 1961 he met with Vang Pao, a Hmong Lieutenant Colonel in the FAR who held considerable sway with many of his people, hoping to convince him to fight. But Vang Pao was already intent on fighting, and he believed that a relationship with the U.S. would be in the Hmong's best interest, since they would now have a major ally with them fighting a common enemy. As Lair recalls, Vang Pao told him "If you give us arms, we'll fight. Otherwise, we've got to leave Laos. We can't live

²⁵ Castle, 39; Blaufarb, 136.

with the communists.”²⁶ Lair pushed to have the Hmong armed, and arranged to have the first one thousand Hmong volunteers trained by the Thai PARUs.²⁷

After this first step, U.S. aid to the Hmong increased, as did the effort to train the Hmong guerillas, and as a result the Hmong army quickly grew. But as the size of the army increased, so did the problem of maintaining the Hmong population. In July of 1961 Brigadier General Edward G. Lansdale, the Pentagon expert on guerilla warfare, noted in a memorandum to President Kennedy’s military advisor that “About 9,000 Meo [Hmong] tribesmen have been equipped for guerilla operations, which they are now conducting with considerable effectiveness in Communist dominated territory in Laos... As Meo [Hmong] villages are over-run by Communist forces and as men leave food-raising duties to serve as guerillas, a problem is growing over the care and feeding of non-combat Meos [Hmong].” He goes on to note that the CIA had begun to relieve the problem by delivering rice and clothing, by using “CIA paramilitary... aerial resupply.”²⁸ This was of course referring to Air America.

Air America was increasingly used as the vehicle for arming, feeding, and transporting the Hmong. But as General Lansdale noted, the Hmong villagers were in need of assistance just as much as the fighting men. Not only were many families left without a head of household to help provide for them, but also whole villages were sometimes displaced because of encroaching communist forces. The care of the refugees and the dependents of Hmong fighters was largely coordinated by USAID (United States Agency for International Development). USAID officials worked with the CIA and Air America to provide food, supplies, building materials, and medical

²⁶ Vang Pao, interview by William Leary, October 1991, Box 13, Folder9, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas; Lair, interview.

²⁷ William M. Leary, “Air America: Myth and Reality,” 12, (paper presented at the Jalonick Memorial Distinguished Lecture, University of Texas at Dallas, February 2, 1992).

²⁸ *The Pentagon Papers: The Senator Gravel Edition*, Vol. 2. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 643, 646.

care to the Hmong.²⁹ Sometimes Air America would be used to airlift entire villages to safety, relocating thousands of refugees at a time.³⁰ The reason for such heavy reliance on Air America was because Laos had hardly any infrastructure. There were very few roads, and the Hmong were typically located on isolated mountaintops that could only be reached by helicopter, or by STOL aircraft if a landing strip was available.

As the war continued to rage in Laos, Kennedy and Khrushchev sought a way to avoid direct military intervention in Laos by reaffirming Laotian neutrality. After months of talks the “Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos” was signed in Geneva on July 23, 1962. The agreement provided for a coalition government that would include the rightists, neutralists, and the communists. The agreement also called for the withdrawal of all foreign military personnel by October. The US pulled all of its military and paramilitary forces out of Laos, with the exception of two CIA agents left behind to monitor Communist compliance. Air America supply drops no longer included weapons and ammunition, but they continued to supply the Hmong with other necessary food and supplies. But it soon became clear that the North Vietnamese had no intention of honoring the Geneva agreement, since some seven thousand NVA troops remained in Laos. These troops continued to fight and expand their control of northern Laos, attacking several Hmong positions. The Kennedy administration authorized a resumption of Air America arms supply flights in support of the Hmong, and it also authorized the CIA to continue its expansion of the Hmong program. By the end of 1963, some 20,000 Hmong had been armed and a CIA/Hmong headquarters had been set up in Long Tieng, which was known to Air America pilots as LS-20A.³¹

²⁹ Blaufarb, 144; Castle, 83-84.

³⁰ CIA Internal Memorandum, “Air America’s Role in Evacuation Operations in Laos,” <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05268856.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2010).

³¹ Leary, “Air America: Myth and Reality,” 15.

But America was not the only major foreign power watching the situation in Laos closely at this time. In September of 1963, Beijing hosted a conference between the communist leaders of China, North Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia. Beijing had grown increasingly concerned with the amount of U.S. aid being given to anti-communist forces throughout Indochina and decided it was time to intervene. The Chinese party leader Zhou Enlai encouraged the revolutionaries to continue their fight against the anti-communist forces, and pledged Chinese support for their effort. For Mao Zedong and the rest of the Beijing leadership, “the war of national liberation in Laos was a vital part of a world proletarian revolutionary movement.”³² Prior to 1964, Chinese support for the Pathet Lao had been minimal and sporadic. From 1964 on, however, the Chinese steadily increased the amount of supplies sent to Laos in support of the war effort, and throughout the course of the war the Chinese sent massive quantities of guns, artillery pieces, tanks and armored vehicles, transceivers and telephone sets, trucks, tons of explosives, 2.57 million items of military clothing, and 770 tons of food. The other major means of Chinese support came from their aid in engineering and constructing roads throughout northern Laos, which were intended to help the movement of troops and supplies in the area. The Chinese also supplied trained Antiaircraft Artillery units that were intended to protect the Chinese engineering projects.³³

The stage was now set for massive showdown in Laos, with both sides receiving large quantities of support from major foreign powers. The conflict deepened in late 1962, just months after the signing of the Geneva Agreement, when Kong Le’s neutralist forces and the Pathet Lao turned on one another. In 1963, the neutralists and the communists began to battle over control of the PDJ. Kong Le, who had met with U.S. Ambassador Unger in September of 1962, had begun

³² Xiaoming Zhang, "China's Involvement in Laos during the Vietnam War, 1963-1975," *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 4 (2002): 1146, 1150.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1158-1162.

to receive supplies from Air America, since the rift between the Pathet Lao and the neutralists stemmed in part from the neutralists' belief that they were not receiving their fair share of supplies from the North Vietnamese and the Soviets. The communists now found themselves fighting the combined forces of Kong Le's neutralists and Vang Pao's Hmong guerillas for control of the PDJ.³⁴

The war continued to intensify in the north, and the Johnson administration saw an opportunity to justify U.S. Air Force and Navy photoreconnaissance throughout Laos, including the region in the south where the Ho Chi Minh Trail was allowing increased infiltration into South Vietnam.³⁵ Approval was given for U.S. military reconnaissance flights over Laos in May of 1964, and the U.S. air war in Laos began. The first casualty occurred the very next month, on June 7. U.S. Navy pilot Lieutenant Charles Klusmann's reconnaissance plane was shot down by anti-aircraft artillery, but he managed to eject and parachute to the ground. Air America organized a rescue effort involving several planes and helicopters, but enemy ground fire was too intense and Lt. Klusmann was captured by the Pathet Lao.³⁶ This incident made it clear that the U.S. military needed a better Search and Rescue (SAR) capability in Laos, but the pretense of Laotian neutrality stipulated that no U.S. military aircraft could be stationed in Laos. Therefore, Air America was contracted to provide SAR in Laos for downed military aircraft, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorized the transfer of four additional H-34 helicopters to Air America to aid SAR efforts.³⁷

³⁴ Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*, (Boulder City: Paladin Press, 1995), 96-99.

³⁵ Castle, 67.

³⁶ Charles Klusmann, "The Price of Freedom," Air America Association, <http://air-america.org/Articles/Klusmann.shtml> (accessed April 6, 2010).

³⁷ Leeker, "Air America in Laos I – Humanitarian Work Part I," 45-46.

As the Secret War progressed, the CIA were largely responsible for all military planning, but the actual man in charge was the U.S. Ambassador to Laos William Sullivan, and his successor G. McMurtrie Godley who replaced Sullivan in 1969. The ambassadors attempted to uphold the thinly veiled fiction of neutrality in Laos, in order to avoid embarrassing the Lao and Soviet governments.³⁸ Thus Air America, with its civilian cover, was widely used in roles that normally the U.S. military would fill in order to maintain the pretense of neutrality, including military transport, supply, covert ops, and combat.

From 1968 onward the war in northern Laos fell into a predictable, though deadly pattern, based largely on the seasonal weather patterns in Laos. During the wet season, the roads and trails would become muddy and impassible. The communist forces in Laos had no air support, so their means of troop transport and supply depended on the condition of the roads. The U.S. backed forces however, had Air America at its disposal as a means of transport and supply during the wet season, and accordingly most of the major anti-communist offensives were conducted during this time. In addition, the U.S. military bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail slowed during the wet season, freeing more U.S. military aircraft to be called in for close air support and tactical bombing during the wet season offensives in northern Laos. But during the dry season, the roads dried up and were repaired, which allowed the numerically superior communist forces to advance and bring with them the necessary supplies and heavy artillery for their own offensives. During the dry season, the air superiority of the U.S. backed forces helped keep them from being overrun and destroyed by the communist onslaught. Air America transport could move troops out of harms way, or could relocate troops to an area in need of reinforcements. A contemporary Air Force history notes that as the war continued, Vang Pao and his Hmong forces came to rely increasingly on U.S. air support: "Airlift gave them their ability

³⁸ Leary, "Air America: Myth and Reality," 19.

to make surprise assaults, and aerial reconnaissance found the location of enemy troops and weapons... Airpower provided the only means by which his [Vang Pao's] 3,000 to 6,000 man force was able to mount offensive campaigns... against a better equipped, more experienced NVA force of an estimated 16,000 men."³⁹ Air America had become essential to the war effort in northern Laos.

The war for northern Laos, and in particular the battle for control of the strategic PDJ, continued to follow what many Air America pilots would call a "see-saw" pattern up until 1972. In that year, the NVA had fought its way to the doorstep of Long Tieng, the CIA/Hmong headquarters that was located south of the PDJ. Although Long Tieng never fell to the communists, the Hmong population had already paid a heavy price over the course of the war. Towards the end, Vang Pao was forced to call up thirteen year old boys to fight since the male population had been so decimated.⁴⁰ The Hmong had lost over ten thousand men in the fighting since 1962.⁴¹

That same year also saw a major development in the history of Air America. There had been an ongoing debate within the CIA as to whether or not the Agency needed to continue owning its own air proprietary. On April 21, 1972, CIA director Richard Helms settled the debate when he decided that the CIA should divest itself of Air America after the war in Southeast Asia came to an end. That end came in January of 1973, when the Paris agreement on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam was signed. A month later, a cease fire agreement was signed in Laos, and a new coalition government was formed. But even as the war wound down, Air America suffered some of its worst losses in the war, with 23 crew members killed

³⁹ CHECO Report, "Air Operations in Northern Laos, 1 April- 1 November 1970," 1971, Box 20, Folder 14, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

⁴⁰ Blaufarb, 164.

⁴¹ Castle, 122.

from April 1972 to June 1974, when the last Air America aircraft made the final flight from Laos to Thailand. Air America was done in Laos, but it continued operations in Vietnam until the fall of Saigon in 1975. Although Air America had been active throughout Southeast Asia, Laos had been the major theater of operations for the company, and during the course of the war 100 crewmembers had died there. But as the war in Laos ended, so did the usefulness of the CIA's paramilitary air force. Air America would close its doors for good on June 30, 1976.⁴²

⁴² Leary, "Air America: Myth and Reality," 25-26.

CHAPTER TWO

“THE BEST JOB I EVER HAD”

Over thirty years had passed since Brian Johnson flew helicopters for Air America in Laos. As he sat across from the interviewer, he seemed to have no trouble recalling innumerable details about his work in Laos. He recalled in vivid detail the time when a reluctant soldier high-jacked his helicopter. He clearly remembered when his helicopter crashed in a mine field after taking enemy gunfire. Names of people, names of places, and important dates all came to him with little effort, despite his age of seventy four years. He seemed to have no trouble answering any of the questions raised by the interviewer, until the interviewer asked him what he liked least about working for Air America. “I gotta think about that,” he said. After thinking it over, he said, “What I liked least about it... that it was over?”¹ He could not really think of anything negative to say about his time in Laos, except that it eventually came to an end. But it appears Brian Johnson is not alone in this. After looking through many other interviews, fondness recurs often as a sentiment marking the years with Air America. For many, this feeling goes beyond nostalgia. Pilot Nikki Fillipi recounts a story in which about fifty former Air America employees recently met together for dinner, and noted that “I think we all agreed, it was pretty much a consensus, that those years [with Air America] were about the best decade of our life.”² This

¹ Brian Johnson, interview by author, Richarson, TX, December 7, 2009.

² Nikki Fillipi, interview by Stephen Maxner, January 31, February 2, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

sentiment can be heard over and over again from pilots like William Utterback, who described his years with Air America as “the happiest time in my life.”³

So where does this nostalgia for Air America come from? It must be remembered that these men were flying in the midst of a war, and indeed were participants in that war. They risked their lives daily, and never knew when they might fly home for the night and find out that another one of their friends had been shot down or accidentally crashed into the side of a mountain. And yet, many state that they wish that they were still there, flying in the dangerous terrain of Laos. This is hardly a statement you would expect to hear from a military pilot who fought next door in Vietnam. Indeed, many military pilots were traumatized by their experience with the war in Southeast Asia. Air America often played the same sort of role in Laos that a military pilot might perform in Vietnam, but the experience was somehow different, or at least perceived differently by the Air America pilots, to the extent that some expressed disappointment with the war’s end. What accounts for this difference? This of course is a rather broad question that may not have a definitive answer. In attempting to answer this question, we must first gain a better understanding of who the men of Air America were, how they came to Laos, and what activities engaged them in Southeast Asia.

Air America pilots forged an altogether different experience of the war in Indochina, even though they faced the same kinds of danger as military pilots. Several different factors help explain this difference. First, despite their previous military service, many pilots signed up to fly in a war zone of their own volition. Some pilots were intrigued by the adventure that flying in Southeast Asia offered. The secrecy that shrouded much of Air America’s operations there increased the sense of adventure for many pilots. For some, their main motivation stemmed from

³ William Utterback, interview by William Leary, November 8, 1990, Box 13, Folder 9, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

the money that working for Air America offered, at least at first. But once they arrived in Laos, many pilots found several other elements that kept them with the company, often for years at a time. Many pilots loved the professionalism that the company and their fellow employees exhibited. Likewise the camaraderie among many of the pilots created a strong affinity for each other and for the job. This camaraderie often included the CIA case officers that Air America pilots worked with very closely in Laos. Another factor that seemed to motivate these men was the connection many of them felt with the indigenous people in Laos, particularly the Hmong. In many ways, Laos itself became an important part of their motivation to stay. Between the terrain, the weather, and the war that raged below them, pilots could really test themselves and their flying abilities to the greatest possible extent. As the war progressed, many of these pilots increasingly saw themselves as participants in the war effort, rather than merely working for an airline. A sense of patriotism and belief that their work contributed to America's war in Indochina, motivated many of the pilots to brave the dangers of flying the dangerous skies over Laos. Air America pilots, moreover, could bring their family with them, and many did. Unlike military pilots, they lived a family life at home while fighting a war at work. Another key difference stems from the voluntary nature of their work. A pilot possessed could quit at will without suffering any consequences. Furthermore, many of the more dangerous missions occurred on a voluntary basis. A military pilot had no such luxury.

Air America pilots often started out the same way as many military pilots did, with dreams of daring aviation and adventure, as is evidenced in their early fascination with airplanes and flying. Thomas Jenny had been interested in airplanes for as long as he could remember. As a teenager during World War II, he would study airplane silhouettes until he became practiced in

identifying aircraft. He dreamed of one day becoming a fighter pilot himself.⁴ Brian Johnson's father went to work for Pratt and Whitney during World War II building aircraft engines. He still remembers his father taking him for an airplane ride when he was 13 years old.⁵ For others, their connection with flying would come later. After graduating from Orlando High School, John Ford attended the Embry-Riddle School of Aviation. But while some other Air America pilots did receive their flight training as civilians, many, if not most of them trained with U.S. military.

Most Air America pilots came to work for the company with military experience in the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, or the Marines. This helps explain why a significant portion of the pilots seemed to flourish while living and fighting in a war zone. After he graduated from Embry-Riddle, John Ford joined the Army and served as a helicopter pilot for five years.⁶ Tony Durizzi applied to become an Air Force pilot, but when his test scores placed him as a navigator and not a pilot, he decided to go with the Navy, where he flew fixed wing aircraft monitoring Soviet submarines from 1956-60.⁷ Many of the pilots served during peace time, whereas others actually had combat experience. William Andresevic served with the Marines during the Korean War as machine gunner. After the war he went to flight school and flew as a fighter pilot, but he eventually landed behind a desk back in the States.⁸ Byron Ruck and Nikki Fillipi both served as helicopter pilots in Vietnam, with Ruck flying for the Marines and Fillipi with the Army. Fillipi had been a passenger on several Air America flights during his years with the Army, and his

⁴ Thomas Jenny, interview by William Leary, Atlanta, GA, May 24, 1988, Box 13, Folder 7, William Leary Papers, McDermott Library Aviation Special Collection, University of Texas at Dallas.

⁵ Johnson, interview.

⁶ John Ford, interview by William Leary, Green Cove Springs, FL, April 26, 1991, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, McDermott Library Aviation Special Collections, University of Texas at Dallas.

⁷ Tony Durizzi, interview by Stephen Maxner, May 3, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

⁸ William R. Andresevic, interview by William Leary, Beaverton, OR, June 19, 1987, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, McDermott Library Aviation Special Collection, University of Texas at Dallas.

experience with the company caused him to gravitate towards applying to work for Air America right after his service was up.⁹

Many pilots first heard about Air America while they were with the military. The Army actually gave John Ford the option of being transferred to Air America while he was enlisted. Pilots were occasionally transferred to Air America on a temporary basis for special projects, and typically transferred back once the project was completed. This process was known as “sheep dipping.” At the time, Ford had no interest in being “dipped.” From what little he knew of Air America at the time, it sounded like a military operation, and he had had enough of the military at this point. Tony Durizzi was the officer on duty at the Iwakuni airport in Japan when an Air America C-46 landed there. He quizzed the two American pilots about who they were and what they were doing there, and was fascinated by their description, as well as their shiny old silver plane and gray uniforms. Before they left the pilots gave him all the necessary contact information so that he could apply for a job with the company. Six months after writing to the company he received a reply back, stating that they would contact him after he left the Navy. A few months later, he left the Navy and returned to the States, and there he got a phone call from Air America asking if he still wanted the job.¹⁰

Other pilots found out about Air America from someone they knew. Brian Johnson was working as a bar owner and flight instructor when he started hearing about Air America. A friend of his, Charlie Basham, had been contacted by Air America trying to hire him, but Basham’s family situation at the time would not allow it. Johnson got the contact information from him and was hired over the telephone. When Basham found out that Johnson and another friend had been hired, he changed his mind and the three of them went to work for Air America together. John

⁹ Byron Ruck, interview by William Leary, April 7, 1991, Box 13, Folder 9, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas; Fillipi, interview.

¹⁰ Ford, interview; Durizzi, interview.

McRainey received a letter in the mail from a friend who was already working for Air America in Laos, telling McRainey that he would love the work there. McRainey called and sent resumes to the company for two years before he got a phone call from Air America stating that he was hired and that he needed to send in his passport immediately to get the necessary visas.¹¹

The reasoning behind going to Southeast Asia seems to have varied with each pilot. For some, money was a deciding factor. Five years after he had left the Army, Ford was contacted again by Air America. He had been working as a crop duster, and since he got the call during the slow season, and because he was short on cash at the time, he decided to sign up for just a few months. He ended up flying for Air America for nine years. For many pilots like Ford, Air America started out as just another flying job. But for others, Air America held a mystique about it that made it intriguing. When he was interviewed at Air America's office in D.C., Charles Davis noticed that the interviewer was very vague about what the job actually entailed. For Davis, "the whole tone of the conversation began to arouse a sense of adventure in me. Perhaps it was the vagueness and mystery that caught my attention."¹² Thomas Jenny knew many other Marine pilots that had joined up with Air America, and thought that the job sounded glamorous. Johnson thought it sounded like an adventure. But most knew very little about the company or what it was doing in Southeast Asia.¹³

The interview process typically did little to clear up what Air America was all about. It was usually a very brief affair. Clearly, many of the men still did not know very much about their employer even after they signed up. But perhaps, this cloak-and-dagger process added to the mystery and sense of adventure. After being asked if he wanted the job, all Durizzi was told was

¹¹ Johnson, interview; John McRainey, interview by Stephen Maxner, June 15, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

¹² Charles O. Davis, *Across the Mekong: The True Story of an Air America Helicopter Pilot* (Charlottesville, Va.: Hildesigns Press, 1996), 10.

¹³ Ford, interview; Jenny, interview; Johnson, interview.

that he had two weeks to get a passport and all the necessary shots. A ticket to Tokyo awaited him at the airport, where he stayed the night in a hotel. At the front desk the following morning he received a message giving him his flight information to Taipei. At Taipei he was asked a few questions about his flying experience, and then given his assignment, flying twin engines in Laos. The reason for the lack of information became a little clearer when he finally arrived in Laos. The pilot who checked him out explained that “Whatever you see you can’t talk about, whatever you do you can’t talk about, [and] if we catch you talking you’re fired immediately.”¹⁴ Several other pilots also describe the hiring process as being relatively vague. When Larry Taylor went to Air America’s D.C. office for an interview, the interviewer was very evasive about the nature of the job, but he finally acknowledged that “there is an element of danger.”¹⁵ Brian Johnson noted that he was never really given a description of what the job entailed, and that it was only described as “a flying job.” The company originally hired Johnson to fly in Vietnam in 1966. He knew that there was a war going on in Vietnam, but was not overly concerned because, as he understood it, he was going to be a civilian pilot and it would not be dangerous.¹⁶ Despite the misleading description of the work in Southeast Asia, many of the pilots decided to stay on with the company for several years. But at least a few were not thrilled with the prospect of flying in a war. This can be clearly seen in D. L. Fraser’s letter to the Air America office in San Francisco, in which he “fervently” requests to be transferred to another position within the company, “preferably outside Laos or Vietnam.” He states that this request stems in part from the fact that “when I talked to the Air America representative in Washington, D.C., I understood that even though there was armed conflict in Laos, it would be a very remote

¹⁴ Durizzi, interview.

¹⁵ Larry Taylor, interview by William Leary, November 28, 1984, Box 13, Folder 9, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

¹⁶ Johnson, interview.

chance that the flying in which I would be engaged in would be subject to extensive combat conditions.” For Fraser, this quickly proved not to be the case, and he was not interested in being a part of it.¹⁷

Fraser was not the only pilot to be shocked by the nature of the work in Laos. Some had a much more rude awakening to the reality of war in Laos. As a new pilot, Cy Asta flew as a co-pilot with veteran pilot Charles Weitz as part of the initial training. Flying a normal flight schedule, Weitz flew in to medevac wounded soldiers from a battlefield. As the wounded were loaded and the helicopter was taking off, the helipad exploded as it was hit by a mortar round. Obviously shocked by the close call, Asta asked Weitz, “Does this happen all the time?” The very next day they performed yet another medevac mission. Upon landing, a rocket suddenly hit the aircraft. Weitz and Asta managed to leap to safety, but flight mechanic Lowell Pirkle was not so lucky. A second rocket hit the aircraft and exploded, killing Pirkle and wounding both Asta and Weitz. The two pilots walked through the jungle with friendly Lao troops for two days before they were rescued by an Air America helicopter. Asta quit shortly thereafter.¹⁸

Since the company often gave a purposefully vague description of the nature of their work in Laos, clearly most of these men did not sign on with Air America with the intention of participating in the war in Indochina. Even though many of them possessed prior military experience, one should not mistake them for belligerent mercenaries simply looking for a battlefield. It seems rather that many signed on with the understanding that this was a civilian flight job, but one that might prove to be more risky than your typical airline work. When

¹⁷ D.L. Fraser letter to Air America, Inc. in San Francisco, CA, May 19, 1969, Box 4, Folder 1, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

¹⁸ Telegram from Air America office in Taipei to office in Washington, D.C., August 7, 1967, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05268509.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2010); Charles Weitz, interview by William Leary, March 28, 1992, Box 13 Folder 9, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

combined with the exotic locale of Southeast Asia, this job tended to attract the more daring individuals who enjoyed the prospect of “adventure.” And then of course some pilots initially signed on out of simple economic necessity. While the incongruity between the expectations and realities of life in Air America might be easy to understand, the violence in Laos begs a vexing question: why did they remain? If the dangers they faced along the Ho Chi Minh Trail proved no less menacing than those across the border in Vietnam, why not double back to a safe life flying choppers stateside?

For many pilots, the camaraderie and respect for the people they worked with strongly motivated them to stay with the company. Jess Hagerman initially signed on with Air America largely because he could not find a good flying position anywhere else. He intended to stay with the company for only eighteen months, at which time the company offered a return ticket home to anyone who wanted to leave. But Hagerman soon developed a great respect for his fellow employees, which he described as “a talented, loyal, and interesting group of people.”¹⁹ There certainly seems to have been a high level of camaraderie among the pilots, which is not surprising given the fact that they held a shared experience of excitement and danger. In addition, these men constantly found themselves in situations where they depended on one another. Helicopter pilot Marius Burke points out that you always knew “when things get tough... these guys would have made that effort to get me out and vice versa... and I think the fact that we were so grossly misunderstood by the public and the military that that brought us even closer together.”²⁰ Like many others, Brian Johnson agrees that the best thing about working for Air America was the comradeship, stating that they were “some of the best people

¹⁹ Jess Hagerman, interview by William Leary, August 28, 1991, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

²⁰ Marius Burke, interview by Stephen Maxner, June 9, 2000, April 12, 17, 19, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

I've ever worked with. I mean, you want to talk about true American heroes, these guys were professional to the core, they were no nonsense... they were the finest men I've ever been around, and I was honored to be a part of that.”²¹

Air America put a strong emphasis on professionalism, which many pilots found very appealing. Indeed, the company motto was “Anything, Anytime, Anywhere: Professionally.” Jess Hagerman noted that Air America was “one of the most professional organizations I've ever been a part of.”²² John Ford, who also originally signed on with the thought of leaving after a few months, found a great attraction to the level of professionalism exhibited by his co-workers. For him, it was “the best job I ever had,” and “one of the most professional operations I have ever been around.”²³ This of course does not mean that they always got along. Brian Johnson recalls one particularly obnoxious pilot, who always bickered with the other pilots. But Johnson respected him because when it counted, he was a professional and “a damn good pilot.”²⁴

Many pilots also felt a certain amount of attachment toward the Hmong. This would of course be due in part to the fact that they typically worked more closely with the Hmong than any other Lao ethnic group, but also because they held a great degree of respect for the Hmong as fighters. Marius Burke believed that “we were there because we... loved the people and particularly the [Hmong]... all they cared about was raising their family and growing their crops and being left alone. They were willing to fight for that and we were supporting them.”²⁵ Several pilots express remorse about the fact that the Hmong were left behind after America pulled out of the war. “They were great people,” Johnson notes, “nice people, hard working people... I get a little sad about this, because I feel like we were responsible for what happened to the Hmong.

²¹ Johnson, interview.

²² Hagerman, interview.

²³ Ford, interview.

²⁴ Johnson, interview.

²⁵ Burke, interview.

They did everything we asked of them, Vang Pao put his people out there to fight for us, and we [ran] off and left them.”²⁶ Many of the pilots had a great deal of respect for General Vang Pao in particular. Andresevic describes him as “fearless” and “a tough leader.”²⁷ On several occasions the Hmong leader would ride along with Air America pilots, scouting out enemy positions, checking on outlying villages, or helping offload supplies during supply drops. Some pilots maintained personal ties with Vang Pao even after the war was over.

Air America pilots also worked closely with CIA case officers, better known as “the Customer.” Due to the secretive nature of the war in Laos, the CIA agents were never referred to as such while they were there. Larry Taylor notes that he never heard the initials “CIA” during his entire time flying for Air America.²⁸ Typically the agents were referred to simply as “the Customer.” Most of the pilots suspected that the Customers were CIA agents. But many other customers worked with Air America in Laos, including USAID, people with the Department of Defense, Embassy workers, and the military attaché. And while working in Laos, Air America pilots understood that it was best not to ask too many questions. So while many pilots assumed that many of the men they were working with were CIA, they never really bothered to ask. At this time, hardly any of the pilots knew that the CIA actually owned Air America, although a few suspected. Most would not find out until years after the war was over, when it became public knowledge.

Many pilots harbored a good deal of respect for the Customer. Since they worked so closely with each other on a daily basis, the pilots often included the case officers in their sense of camaraderie. When asked what he like most about flying with Air America, Larry Fraser responded “The people. Customers and pilots both.” In regards to the CIA case officers, Brian

²⁶ Johnson, interview.

²⁷ Andresevic, interview.

²⁸ Taylor, interview.

Johnson stated that “some of them I’d go to the end of the world with them.”²⁹ Several individual customers seem to have been generally well liked by the pilots, including Bill Lair and Tony Poe. Andresevic said that Lair was “one of the finest people I’ve ever worked with.”³⁰ And Larry Fraser recalls that when a mission was particularly dangerous some of the customers, like Tony Poe, would often ride along.³¹ This was partially out of a desire to check out the situation first hand, but it was also a gesture indicating to the pilot that the customer was not asking the pilot to do anything he would not do himself.

Many of the case officers likewise had a lot of respect for the Air America pilots. CIA agent James Parker wrote a book about his involvement in the war in Laos, and he seems to have developed a great deal of respect for the men of Air America. He describes them as “aggressive, hard-living, tough, gnarled, in-your-face Americans. There was nothing phony about them- in the way that people who constantly make decisions with life and death consequences are not phony.” One incident in particular involving Brian Johnson stood out in Parker’s mind. A report came in that there was a wounded Hmong soldier in need of immediate medevac on the edge of the NVA controlled Plain of Jars (PDJ). As the situation was being discussed, Johnson volunteered to go and pick up the wounded soldier. He flew in, made the pick up, and headed back to 20 Alternate where the young soldier could receive medical attention. It was an operation fraught with danger, and according to Parker, “no one would have questioned a decision not to attempt the rescue. This unheralded event, however, clearly demonstrated the character, day in and day out, of the

²⁹ Larry Fraser, interview by Stephen Maxner, February 5, April 3, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University; Johnson, interview.

³⁰ Andresevic, interview.

³¹ Fraser, interview.

Air America pilots. Because I knew Air America would come get me, no matter what the situation, I never hesitated about going to the edge of the PDJ.”³²

Despite the strong mutual respect each felt for the other, on occasion the harmonious relationship between customer and pilot turned acerbic. Most of the disputes arose over the pilots’ unwillingness to fly into particularly “hot” areas, where there was known enemy activity and/or Anti-Aircraft (AA) guns. The standard protocol for going into a hot area included, at a minimum, having a co-pilot, as well as perhaps a back-up aircraft (usually a helicopter) that could be on standby to rescue a downed aircraft crew. If the situation was really dangerous, the pilots typically requested air cover, provided by either Air America piloted fighter planes, the Royal Lao Air Force, or U.S. military fighter planes. Some agents would try to downplay the threat level in the area, but more often than not the Air America pilots knew better. They would often refuse to go until they felt they had sufficient backup or air cover. This would sometimes lead to conflict, especially when time was of the essence, since it would often take some time to coordinate the additional aircraft and pilots necessary for backup, and air cover often had to be scrambled from U.S. aircraft carriers stationed along the coast of Vietnam or Cambodia. Marius Burke, who was chief rotary wing pilot, recalls that in these instances, “Customers would get upset and I remember there were times when I would get a call... ‘You’ve got to come up here. Your pilots aren’t doing the job they’re supposed to be doing.’ And I think without fail I’d listen to the brief and then I’d come to the same conclusion that we’re not going to do this.”³³ While this may have caused some terse words and hard feelings, it was only temporary. If the case officers wanted something done badly enough, they would wait for backup or cover, and then the mission would commence, albeit behind schedule.

³² James E. Parker, *Covert Ops: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 44, 136.

³³ Burke, interview.

Air America pilots, as this instance illustrates, had the option to refuse a mission if they deemed it too dangerous. Their ability to decline a hazardous operation stands as a major difference between their circumstances and those of military pilots. Indeed, many of the more perilous missions were voluntary in nature. Pilots could, and did, refuse to fly, without significant consequences. The same could hardly be said of the military pilots. If an order was given, it had to be carried out. A basic understanding of human nature teaches us that someone who volunteers for a hazardous mission is going to have a significantly different outlook on it than someone who has no choice in the matter. This might in part explain the divergence in the way the two sets of pilots viewed their experience in the war in Indochina.

But this again brings us to the question of what motivated them to fly in these hazardous conditions? They usually received hazard pay for dangerous missions, but most pilots would agree that the payment amount did not necessarily compensate for the amount of risk involved. A better explanation might be found in the fact that many pilots, once they had been in Laos for awhile, found themselves “caught up in ‘the cause,’” as John Ford puts it.³⁴ At least some pilots seem to have felt like they were a part of something bigger than themselves. Brian Johnson explains by noting that “Originally I thought I was just doing a job. But it wasn’t long before I realized... I was part of the effort, trying to win the war... I was a participant.”³⁵ Several pilots, like Jess Hagerman, point out that they felt like they were serving their country, noting that for many there was “a certain amount of patriotism was involved” in the decision to stay with Air America.³⁶ This sense of working on behalf of their country, rather than on the behalf of a company, can still be seen in the language of many of the former Air America employees to this day. Typically they refer to themselves as “Air America veterans” rather than “former

³⁴ Ford, interview.

³⁵ Johnson, interview

³⁶ Hagerman, interview.

employees,” alluding to their perceived service in the war rather than to their work for the company.

Perhaps the most striking example of this can be seen in the efforts of the Air America Association, a group composed of former employees and their families, to gain Civil Service Benefits for qualified Air America employees. They base their argument on the fact that since the CIA owned Air America, they were actually government employees. In 1989, a Federal court conceded that “Air America's U.S. national employees were employed under the authority of a Federal Officer, engaged in the performance of a Federal function, the prosecution of the War in South East Asia, and under the supervision and control of a Federal Officer, ultimately George A. Doole, Air America's Managing Director, then a Super Grade employee of the CIA.” Despite this, legislation is required in order for Air America employees to receive Civil Service Benefits, since the covert nature of their operation did not allow for them to be formally appointed to the civil service at the time. On May 21, 2009 Senator Harry Reid and Congresswoman Shelley Berkley introduced the “Air America Veterans Act of 2009,” which was intended to be the first step towards the granting of benefits.³⁷ In a press release, both Reid and Berkley praise Air America veterans as American heroes. Berkley notes that “The heroes of Air America risked their lives for our nation and we should fully honor their courage and recognize the critical role they played in U.S. military efforts in East Asia during the Cold War... The study authorized by this legislation will lay the groundwork for us to finally recognize the sacrifices made by Air America employees, and their dedication to our nation, by extending federal benefits to these

³⁷ Gary Bisson, "Letters to the Editors of AFIO: Air America Member and Former Legal Counsel Seeks Retirement Bill Support," Air America Association, http://www.air-america.org/News/bisson_letter.shtml (accessed April 6, 2010).

brave Americans.”³⁸ This statement echoes the same sort of sentiment sometimes espoused by Air America pilots when referring to their fellow employees, although not necessarily to themselves.

One of the key spearheads of this effort to gain Civil Service benefits is Gary Bisson, who worked as Air America’s government contracts lawyer for five years. Bisson, like some other Air America employees, bristles at the characterization of Air America pilots as mercenaries. Indeed, it would seem that a good portion of Air America pilots would not fit under this term. The term “mercenary” implies that the soldier for hire will fight for whoever pays the most. Some of the patriotic sentiment suggested by some of the pilots’ accounts indicates that for them, it was not just about the money. Bisson offers his own cogent viewpoint on the pilots’ motivations: “First and foremost, they were involved due to the sheer thrill of flying in that environment. Next, most of them supported the United States’ effort in Southeast Asia and felt they were performing patriotic duties. Then, there was opportunity Air America gave to remain in exotic Asia rather than return to places such as Friburg, Maine. Finally, in distant fourth place, was the money.”³⁹ Bisson’s assessment brings us back again to the sense of adventure that seems to be associated with the work in Laos. The varying degrees to which the camaraderie, the patriotism, or the money influenced their decision to stay may have differed from pilot to pilot, but the adventurous spirit required to fly in Laos would have been almost universal. To comprehend the “sheer thrill” that flying in Laos presents, a closer look at the flying conditions as well as a gaining a sense of the day to day operations in Laos should prove useful.

³⁸ Press release for Senator Harry Reid, May 21, 2009, Senate.gov, http://reid.senate.gov/newsroom/pr_052109_airamericabillintro.cfm (accessed April 6, 2010).

³⁹ Gary Bisson letter to William Leary, October 22, 1986, Box 14, Folder 2, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

Even if one negates the dangers associated with flying in a war zone, Laos still presents a number of challenges to aviators. The country's terrain provides the first hazardous element of flying in Laos. Much of the countryside is mountainous, with rugged peaks reaching as high as 9,242 feet above sea level. Karsts, jagged limestone formations, also dot the northern region, where Air America was most active. But it was the weather, in combination with the treacherous terrain, that made flying in Laos so difficult. Air America pilots typically divide the weather in Laos into three seasons: the dry season, the wet season, and the smoky season. The dry season brought the few months with relatively clear flying conditions. After that came the wet season, which was actually monsoon weather that brought heavy rains and thick low lying clouds. This was followed by what was called the "smoky season." The Hmong and other ethnic Lao were slash and burn farmers, which means that they burned large tracts of land to make way for new crops. This would create a massive amount of smoke that would engulf the countryside for months at a time. Pilots describe it as flying in a thick, dense fog, and Marius Burke notes that "you could see maybe an eighth of a mile in front of you and maybe you could see straight down and that would be about it."⁴⁰ Between the smoky season and the wet season most of the year was filled with hazardous flying conditions, which made flying in the rugged, mountainous terrain that much more perilous. To make matters worse, Air America aircraft were not fitted with radar or any other navigational device. Flying in these sorts of conditions was, to say the least, adventurous.

Air America counteracted the flying conditions by requiring an intensive "area familiarization" training for new arrivals. As an example, if a new pilot came into the H-34 program, he would ride as a co-pilot in an H-34 with a seasoned captain who was familiar with the terrain. The captain would go about his normal day-to-day duties, traveling from one site to

⁴⁰ Burke, interview.

another, allowing the new pilot to become familiar with the area and all of the key landmarks. This process could take several weeks or several months, depending on how quickly the new pilot learned the terrain. Once the new pilot was checked out by a senior pilot in the H-34 program, he became a captain, and would begin flying on his own. Many pilots attribute Air America's success to this type of training. Area familiarization "was extremely important in Laos," notes Johnson. "To go from one place to the other in the smoky season you had to know exactly where you were at all times. You couldn't look at a map, so you had to have the experience of knowing where you were. If you see a karst out to the side, you know exactly where that was, and you know you could go so far over this way."⁴¹ Using this sort of dead reckoning, pilots were able to make their way throughout the country even under adverse weather conditions.

Pilots faced numerous other dangers in Laos along with the challenging weather and terrain. Enemy gunfire, from the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese Army, posed a constant threat. Aircraft were hit with everything from small arms fire to heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA). For the most part, Air America aircraft had little or no armor, and they had no means of firing back at the enemy. Their only means of defense lay in knowing where the enemy was, and avoiding that area. Here again, area familiarization proved key to a pilot's survival. Richard Byrne found out how important it was to know the area shortly after he checked out to fly solo. He could not find the strip he was looking for, and landed at another strip in the area. He realized shortly after coming to a stop on the landing strip that the soldiers there were actually enemy soldiers. Fortunately, they were as confused as he was, and he managed to bluff his way out.⁴²

⁴¹ Johnson, interview.

⁴² Richard Byrne, interview by William Leary, Carmichael CA, August 4, 1987, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

Air America worked hard to make sure incidences like this one remained infrequent.

Charles Davis describes his first encounter with the big map of Laos in Vientiane:

Areas in red show reported enemy activity and movement, and that is the part that catches my attention. Areas of the most recent activity or any place where unusual events have taken place, such as sightings of small arms fire, are marked with a small thumb tack with a number painted on its head. A corresponding number is written in a pamphlet which provides a description, location, date, and intensity of the activity. By spending some time in front of this map and observing what is there, a pilot can certainly keep himself informed on where the safe areas are.⁴³

The pilots all worked to make sure they updated the maps regularly, keeping track of whatever enemy activity they observed while they were flying. According to Nikki Fillipi, “When you came back you’d stop in the [intel] shop and if you had discovered anything up there and written it on your map you’d transfer it... to the debriefer, telling him that you’d encountered this, that, or whatever, and he’d post it on his maps... in the intel shop, for all subsequent pilots coming in.”⁴⁴ It was each pilot’s responsibility to stop by the intel shop before they went up country, to check and make sure there was no new enemy activity they needed to know about for the day. In this manner, Air America pilots became intimately acquainted with the territory.

The degree to which the pilots were able to become familiar with the hazards of Laos constitutes another significant difference between the Air America pilots and the military pilots in Southeast Asia. As several Air America pilots point out, the military pilots would only be in the region for one tour, and then get transferred out just around the time they were beginning to get familiar with the territory. Air America pilots were typically there for several years, some of them for decades. They knew the area they worked in and it served them well. “The military would get really angry,” notes Burke, “because they’d go in a great big gaggle, low level, and they’d get all shot up going into some place, and 10 minutes later here comes an Air America

⁴³ Davis, 25.

⁴⁴ Fillipi, interview.

helicopter just no problem at all... They couldn't understand why we weren't getting shot up."⁴⁵ Johnson argues the reason Air America had so much success was that "in order to live, you had to make sure that you knew everything about the territory, where the bad guys were supposed to be, where you could go, where you couldn't go." Furthermore, Air America also placed a heavy emphasis on seniority. When they would go on any special mission that involved flying in dangerous territory, "There was no discussion about it, whoever the senior man of us, if there was five, six guys in there, he was in charge of that mission... that's how we got through that thing and lived, because the most experienced guy was in charge of every mission we operated in."⁴⁶

Despite all these precautionary measures, Laos remained a dangerous place to fly. Enemy troop movements could be very fluid and sudden, catching pilots off guard. Maurice Keustler recalls one instance in which his destination, LS-63, was known to be friendly. As he flew in, he noted that the site had the proper sign displayed indicating that it was under the control of friendly forces (another measure designed to protect pilots). But on his final approach he noticed that one of the "soldiers" sitting along the strip was actually a straw dummy. He quickly realized that he had flown into a trap, and while he attempted to turn around, the enemy opened fire on his plane and hit the fuel tanks. He managed to get airborne, but because of the damage to the fuel tanks he had to shut off the engine and make a dead stick landing in the valley below. Luckily, he was uninjured, and he was able to make contact with friendly forces and returned safely back to work. Enemy gunfire riddled Air America aircraft all throughout the war. Keustler relates another instance in which he was flying along, when suddenly he was hit by a single AK-47 round. The bullet grazed his leg and then fragmented. Some of the shell fragments then hit

⁴⁵ Burke, interview.

⁴⁶ Johnson, interview.

him in the chest and face. A considerable amount of blood issued from the wounds, and Keustler worried that he might not make it back alive. Fortunately, the wounds proved to be mostly superficial, and he survived to fly another day.

While Keustler's good fortune allowed him to fly another day, other enemy bullets found their mark. John Ford was doing the check out ride for Don Merkel's upgrade to captain. They were doing routine flying when they were called in for a special mission, dropping off a Hmong team in enemy territory to do damage assessment after a major B-52 strike. Ford remembers contemplating whether or not to let Merkel stay in the right seat, and he decided that Merkel had done a good enough job earlier in the day, proving that he was ready for the task. Ford and Merkel's helicopter was the last one to reach the small landing pad. It was a tricky approach, so Ford took over control to complete the landing, even though it was not really necessary since Merkel had been doing a great job. As they lifted off from the pad, Ford was about to apologize to Merkel for taking control of the landing, when a single bullet came through the right window and through Merkel's neck. Merkel was killed instantly, and Ford eventually managed to regain control of the aircraft.⁴⁷ Incidences such as this occurred with some regularity. Marius Burke notes that "A lot of our losses, particularly in the helicopters, were from small arms fire, and I'm pretty sure the other side had teams of snipers... in fact, we ended up having to go to two pilots because we lost some where the only rounds that they could find were right between the eyes of the pilot."⁴⁸

During the course of its operations in Laos, Air America assuredly earned its title of "the most shot at airline in the world." Many of the one hundred Air America employees killed while working in Laos died as a direct result of enemy action. But many were also killed in accidents.

⁴⁷ John Ford's Logbook, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, McDermott Library Aviation Special Collections, University of Texas at Dallas; Ford, interview.

⁴⁸ Burke, interview.

The weather and the terrain allowed for very few mistakes. A slight miscalculation, a momentary lapse in concentration, could result in death. Whenever possible, Air America would investigate crash sites in an attempt to determine the cause of the accident. If an accident occurred, pilots took note, as Brian Johnson points out: “the flying was so treacherous in those mountains, that any small mistake you made... and that’s why anytime there was an accident, everybody wanted to know what happened. And your first thought was ‘How did he screw up,’ and that’s kind of cruel, but that’s what you ask in your mind, because you didn’t want to do that, you wanted to make sure you learn from that experience, so you wouldn’t make the same mistake yourself.”⁴⁹

The STOL (Short Take-Off and Landing) airplanes in particular had reasons to be worried about accidents. The small STOL landing strips were not the ideal place to land an airplane, and since there were hundreds of these strips throughout the country, pilots had to be aware of the unique challenges each site presented. The STOL strips were typically handmade by villagers using whatever primitive tools they had available. Most of them were literally carved into the sides of mountains, and as such they were usually unlevel and full of potholes. It required more than a little skill and nerves to land on these sites. Joe Hazen recalls a particular episode that highlights the unique dangers these STOL strips presented. Hazen had flown a customer to site LS-85, located on top of a particularly tall peak, surrounded by unfriendly territory. When the customer had completed his business there, they prepared to take off. The small strip was higher in the middle than at both ends, making it impossible to see the other end of the runway. As he approached the hump in the center of the runway, Hazen noticed a Hmong soldier standing with two thumbs up in the air. As he reached the crest of the hump, he suddenly realized that two thumbs up meant that there were two horses standing on the runway! “I proceeded straight ahead, pulled back on the yoke, got airborne and hit one horse with the right

⁴⁹ Johnson, interview.

side landing gear... it went over the end of the runway to its death. The other one ran off. If I had attempted to stop, I believe I would have hit the horse, damaged the prop and airframe, gone over the end of the runway and cart wheeled down the side of the karst to the jungle floor, about 1000 plus feet below. Not good.” The customer wanted to go back and shoot all of the horses at the site, but Hazen convinced him that getting the potentially damaged aircraft out of enemy territory was the wiser course of action.⁵⁰

Fortunately, accidents caused by equipment issues proved relatively infrequent. Air America pilots often praise the maintenance crews that worked on their aircraft. As Nikki Fillipi recalls, “We had such wonderful maintenance. The Air America maintenance was so good that mechanical failure, in other words, failure of the aircraft itself, was very, very rare.”⁵¹ Brian Johnson agreed, saying that “the maintenance was unbelievable, absolutely the best. You never had to worry about something being broken, or if you broke something they’d fix it.”⁵² Despite the excellent maintenance, technical difficulties did occasionally occur, adding just one more element of danger to flying in Laos.

Despite all the perils facing them, the Air America pilots continued in their day-to-day work. So what then did a day’s work consist of for an Air America pilot? It is difficult to say what a routine day would consist of, since most pilots would agree that a day flying in Laos would be anything but routine. At the beginning of the day, the pilot would be assigned to a particular customer, perhaps a USAID worker or a case officer. Then the pilot would do whatever the customer needed done for the day. As Nikki Fillipi explains, “We would work for the customer and do anything that that customer wanted, and basically we were providing all the

⁵⁰ Joseph W. Hazen, “Two Thumbs Up,” Air America Association, <http://www.air-america.org/Articles/Hazen.shtml> (accessed April 6, 2010).

⁵¹ Fillipi, interview.

⁵² Johnson, interview.

services provided by the Army in Vietnam. We transported troops, we moved people into various positions, we conducted combat assaults on behalf of the Laotian Army, we did resupply, we did medical evacuations, just whatever that particular customer had to do that day, moving of ammunition, moving of people, moving of supplies. Each day was different.”⁵³

When asked what his primary mission in Laos was, Larry Fraser responded simply, “Everything. Anything that moved in Laos moved by air.”⁵⁴ This proved to be no exaggeration. Air America moved massive amounts of people throughout Laos. Given the rugged terrain and lack of roads, Air America was the primary means of troop transport for the war in Laos. Air America also provided transportation for all the CIA case officers, the Lao military leaders, and other personnel responsible for conducting the course of the war. As a result of their constant movement throughout the country, Air America afforded a steady means of communication across the country that would have been difficult otherwise. As Andresevic notes, “Air America provided cohesiveness for the war in Laos. The [Hmong] held 70-80 scattered positions that lacked transportation and communication. Air America allowed Vang Pao to exercise control over these outlying areas.”⁵⁵ Air America also served as a major mode of transportation for the Hmong villagers. Helicopters and STOL aircraft provided the villagers with a means of commerce, allowing them to transport their crops or wares to other villages and cities for sale. Air America was also utilized to evacuate refugees in the wake of enemy troops, sometimes evacuating and relocating entire villages.

Since a large proportion of the Hmong male population was involved in the fighting, the Hmong came to rely on U.S. aid for food and supplies. Air America was the arm for feeding and supplying the villagers, transporting tons of rice and other foodstuffs throughout the countryside.

⁵³ Fillipi, interview.

⁵⁴ Fraser, interview.

⁵⁵ Andresevic, interview.

Air America even transported livestock, including live chickens, pigs, and water buffaloes. All of these supplies were vital to the survival of the Hmong. One might speculate here that the humanitarian nature of many of their missions, in tandem with the relationship many of the pilots had with the Hmong, contributed to the fondness with which the Air America pilots remember their time in Southeast Asia. Military pilots on the other hand, would have had much less positive interaction of this sort, tending to spend more of their time directly involved in the conflict.

But perhaps the most significant difference between the military pilots and the Air America pilots arises not from what they did out in the field, but what they did with their time off. Unlike the U.S. military forces in Vietnam, the men of Air America were not fighting a seven-day-a-week war. When they were done with their flights some of the pilots, mainly fixed wing, headed home for the evening. Others would spend a week to ten days upcountry before returning home for a weekend off. This was no bunker they returned to, but an actual home, often replete with their own maid, and in some cases, a wife and children. More than half of the pilots were married, and many kept their families in either Udorn or Vientiane, depending on which city they operated out of primarily. Others kept their family in nearby Bangkok, and still others had family further away in places like Hong Kong or Singapore, or back in the States. Many pilots thoroughly enjoyed having their family with them. Larry Fraser had served in Vietnam with the Marine Corps before he came to work for Air America. When he was hired, his family came along with him to live in Udorn. His wife was actually hired to teach at the Air America school, which was a school for the dependents of Air America employees. When asked to compare his time in Vietnam to his time with Air America, Fraser replied that "It's a better way to be involved in a war. With Air America you'd go up country and you'd do your job for a

week or ten days and then you'd come back and your family was in a relatively secure situation. You've got to have a family life, too."

In addition to having "weekend" breaks with their families, pilots also received STO, which was Special Time Off. Every couple of months they would get a week off, and at least once or twice a year they would get a full two weeks off. According to Larry Fraser, this opportunity to travel with your family was one of the better perks offered by Air America. "CAT had formed a legitimate airline... and as a part of the same company complex we all got airline discounts on travel and hotel rooms and that sort of thing."⁵⁶ Sandra McRainey, who was married to an Air America pilot, remembers their family traveling the world while they were with Air America: "we went to Europe; we went to Australia, New Zealand, the South Seas, Hawaii, Singapore, Hong Kong, [and] Japan."

McRainey and her daughters seem to have enjoyed life in Southeast Asia. "We really had quite a nice life. We had a lot of friends there of course and we had a nice home and we had exotic pets that the girls loved, and the girls both were members of the Bangkok Equestrian club... the help was wonderful, the shopping was wonderful, restaurants... I mean everything. It was a very, very nice place to live."⁵⁷ Leigh Hotujec, whose father was an Air America pilot, likewise seems to have enjoyed growing up out of country. She knew her father was a pilot, and that there was a chance that he might not come back home. But beyond that, she relates that "I don't think we even realized until we were much, much older what was going on around us, it was very sheltered, very protected, and yet we were very exposed to so many other cultures and

⁵⁶ Fraser, interview.

⁵⁷ Sandra McRainey, interview by Stephen Maxner, June 13, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

adventures. It was wonderful.” Hotujec and her siblings learned to speak Thai and Lao, and played with the local children there.⁵⁸

With family life came numerous possibilities for socializing. At the base in Udorn there was an Air America compound, which included a restaurant, a bar, and a swimming pool. Sandra McRaine recalls that the wives socialized together often: “There were bridge clubs, Mah Jong clubs. We all, almost all of us bowled, we had a bowling group in both Bangkok and Vientiane... There [were] always get-togethers among the people.”⁵⁹ Brian Johnson also recalls a lot of social activity among the pilots and their family members: “Every night someone’s having a dinner, or cocktail party or something.”⁶⁰ This socializing with family and friends could have only increased the sense of camaraderie the men of Air America already felt for one another.

So was it the camaraderie then that affected the men of Air America so strongly that they still cherish the years they spent flying in a war zone? Or was it the existence of a family life in the midst of the war that made it bearable? Or maybe it was really just all about the money in the end? It is difficult, or perhaps impossible to come to one single motivation for such a large group of unique characters. At least one pilot, Marius Burke, argued that “sure, I think everybody likes to make money, but you could have made a heck of a lot more money if you stayed in the States and flew for the airlines with nobody shooting at [you]. I think most of the guys were there because they believed in what they were doing and enjoyed the challenge and the intrigue and all the rest of it... There were times when I felt if they’d just feed and clothe me, I’d do this for nothing because you just had that good feeling about it, that you were actually accomplishing

⁵⁸ Leigh Coleman Hotujec, interview by Stephen Maxner, February 12, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

⁵⁹ Sandra McRaine, interview.

⁶⁰ Johnson, interview.

something.”⁶¹ Several other pilots express a similar sense of accomplishment. Air America seemed to have attracted men who sought adventure, and Laos certainly provided adventure in spades. They continuously braved the perils of a war zone, using skill and professionalism to bring aid to the local people and their fellow Americans who were in need. In the end the war was still lost, but they left with a sense that they had done the best that they could. Whatever their true motivations were, we may never know, but they certainly were an unusual group of men. And in order to stay and fly in a place like Laos, as Larry Fraser notes, “I suppose it takes a little bit of being unusual.”⁶²

⁶¹ Burke, interview.

⁶² Fraser, interview.

CHAPTER THREE

AIR AMERICA: THE CIA'S AIR FORCE

Captain D. L. Fraser was not a coward. He sought to clarify that point in his letter to the Air America office in San Francisco, in which he requested to be transferred to any other position in Air America, “outside Laos or Vietnam.” Fraser felt misled about the nature of Air America’s work in Laos. When he arrived in Southeast Asia, the extensive exposure to combat conditions shocked him. He expected that he might be shot at infrequently, since he knew that an armed conflict raged in Laos at the time. But he soon discovered, to his surprise, that the company (or more accurately, the company’s Customer) directed its pilots to land in hot LZs (Landing Zones) that could come under attack at any time, take troops into enemy strongholds to make combat assaults, and fly over enemy controlled territory where the pilots could encounter heavy anti-aircraft fire. “I find that I am expected not only to do all of the above things but that it is very frequently,” Fraser notes, and “it appears that there will be far more of it required in the future before there is less.” He goes on to list the numerous times his aircraft received hostile fire, including heavy anti-aircraft artillery and mortar attack, and notes that many of his fellow pilots have undergone the same experiences. But Fraser points out that “I am not particularly fearful of a combat situation and believe that I have handled myself well while under fire both here and while in the Marine Corps in Vietnam. It is, however, a situation in which I would rather not be placed, particularly as a civilian.”¹

¹ D.L. Fraser letter to Air America, Inc. in San Francisco, CA, May 19, 1969, Box 4, Folder 1, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

The extensive combat role Air America played in Laos surprised many other pilots, including Byron Ruck. Like Fraser, Ruck had served in Vietnam as a USMC helicopter pilot. Ruck found the operations in Laos to be much the same as they had been in Vietnam when he had supported the Marines with emergency medevac, combat resupply, troop insertions and extractions. The only difference in Laos was that Ruck now flew in support of indigenous forces at the behest of the “Customer” (the CIA), rather than under the direction of the U.S. military.² The supposed neutrality of Laos ruled out a significant American military presence based in the country, and the Royal Lao Government had a small and largely ineffective air force. Due to this unique diplomatic and military situation, the Customer began to rely on Air America for much more than simple transport and supply missions. The CIA and its air proprietary adapted to the expanding war in Laos, and pilots like Fraser found themselves increasingly flying in combat roles.

This chapter argues that Air America became the CIA’s paramilitary air force in Laos, engaging in the same kinds of missions that would have been undertaken by U.S. military pilots right next door in Vietnam. While the CIA’s activities in Laos are consistently referred to as being paramilitary in nature, no one ever describes Air America’s role in such a way. Air America was known as a civilian transport and supply unit. This image may well have been manufactured by Air America and the CIA, which portrayed Air America as just another airline. Granted, some civilians and military personnel knew that their pilots flew in a dangerous area, but few really knew just how involved in the war Air America had become. This focus on maintaining a pretense of normalcy explains why many pilots, like D. L. Fraser, were surprised when they began working for the company. Air America did not want potential employees

² Byron Ruck, interview by William Leary, April 7, 1991, Box 13, Folder 9, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

knowing too much until absolutely necessary. Indeed, during the course of the war in Laos information often became available only on a mission-by-mission or “need to know” basis. Thus pilots who signed up to fly as civilians in a war zone soon found themselves actively participating in the war effort.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines paramilitary as “a group of civilians organized in a military fashion, especially to operate in place of or assist regular army troops.” Air America’s role in Laos certainly fits this description, although one could argue that at the higher levels the company operated more like a business than a branch of the military. However, at the aircraft level, Air America functioned similarly to the military, with each aircraft crewed by a pilot, a flight mechanic (Air America’s version of a crew chief) and occasionally a co-pilot when the situation required. Undoubtedly Air America aircraft in Laos operated in place of military aircraft, performing many of the same functions that U.S. military aircraft performed in Vietnam, including flying in combat with fighter planes or using unconventional weaponry, performing vital military functions like reconnaissance, and working as Forward Air Controllers (FACs). While Air America engaged in these kinds of missions infrequently, assisting army troops played a significantly larger part of their work in Laos. Besides supplying troops with necessary food, weapons, and ammunition, Air America played a vital role in transporting troops to and from the battlefield. They also provided medevac to wounded soldiers, flying them out of harm’s way and delivering them to medical facilities. The CIA utilized Air America extensively for dangerous infil/exfil (infiltration/exfiltration) missions, which involved dropping off and later recovering special forces teams deep behind enemy lines. In addition to supporting the Lao and Hmong military effort, Air America also played a key role in assisting U.S. military forces in Laos by providing Search and Rescue (SAR) to downed military pilots.

One of the significant differences between Air America and the military is that Air America aircraft and their crews typically flew unarmed and unarmored. The U.S. government remained intent on maintaining the pretense of neutrality in Laos, and wanted to avoid at all cost having an American civilian acting as a combatant. The last thing the U.S. government, the CIA, and Air America wanted was for one of its pilots captured or killed as a combatant, so Air America placed a strict ban prohibiting pilots and crews from carrying weapons on board any aircraft. Besides seeking to avoid an international incident, the company believed that if shot down, an unarmed pilot would not be harmed or captured by enemy forces. Many pilots routinely disregarded the ban, as Brian Johnson recalls that “we weren’t supposed to carry guns but we all carried them.”³ Pilots note that the company’s enforcement of the ban could be lax at times. Upcountry in Laos no one checked for weapons, and sometimes the Customer would arm pilots, but in Udorn or Vientiane, one could potentially get into trouble for carrying a gun. The company lifted the ban after an incident made it clear that non-combatant status would not protect Air America crews. Helicopter pilot Marius Burke describes the incident, which occurred in Vietnam in the early 70’s: “We had a C-47 [that] was going into a strip and was shot down... nobody was really I think badly hurt, but the VC came and killed them all, killed the crew, and they took their uniforms off and put them on.” Shortly after the accident, several helicopters arrived for SAR. Seeing people on the ground with Air America uniforms, they came in for the pick up, when the enemy opened fire. The helicopters avoided being shot down, but not before more crew members were killed by the gunfire. Air America employees complained after the incident, pointing out that if they were armed, the crew would have had a fighting chance. The

³ Brian Johnson, interview by author, Richardson, TX, December 7, 2009.

company finally acquiesced, allowing employees to check out Uzis before a potentially dangerous mission, which would then need to be checked back in when they returned.⁴

Despite the general disregard for the ban on carrying arms, Air America pilots seldom found themselves needing to use their personal weapons. Air America personnel did, however, find themselves in that rare occasion that they had no choice but to fire back at the enemy. Burke relates another incident that occurred on the PDJ. A helicopter pilot, French Smith, was flying with one of the customers when enemy fire brought down his aircraft. He managed to land the helicopter safely, but Smith and the customer soon found themselves surrounded by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops. The customer brought some weapons on this particular flight, and the two used them to keep the enemy at bay. Finally, another pilot in the area came in to pick them up, despite the heavy enemy action.⁵ Incidences that necessitated self-defense such as this one were unusual, but not unheard of.

Pilots typically avoided combat, but “Project Tango” placed some of them in exceptional circumstances. In early May of 1964, Ambassador to Laos Leonard Unger received permission from the U.S. government to use American civilian pilots to fly T-28s, a type of propeller driven plane outfitted with machine guns and bombs. These older fighter planes from the 1950’s came cheap from the U.S., where they were largely used for training purposes rather than actual combat. Previously, under Project Waterpump, U.S. Air Force personnel had begun training Thai and Lao pilots to fly the T-28s in bombing missions. The Thai and Lao pilots proved relatively competent, but officials in Washington wanted to utilize more experienced American pilots for key missions. Once Ambassador Unger received permission to use American pilots, the CIA and

⁴ Marius Burke, interview by Stephen Maxner, June 9, 2000, April 12, 17, 19, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

⁵ Burke, interview.

Air America started identifying which pilots would fly these missions.⁶ Joe Hazen recalls a Customer asking him if he or any of the other pilots would be interested in flying T-28s. The pilots responded overwhelmingly that they wanted to be involved in what became known as “Project Tango.”⁷ Five pilots were selected initially: Joe Hazen, John Wiren, Thomas Jenny, and Richard Byrne, all Marine pilots with T-28 experience, and Ed Eckholdt, who had flown fighter planes for the Air Force. John Wiren recalls his acceptance into the program:

Early in May of 1964 I was instructed to go see the station manager. I immediately wondered what I had done wrong this time but, when I found out that four other of my cohorts were likewise summoned, I was somewhat relieved. With the station manager was a customer type (CIA). We were ushered into the office, and it was immediately evident that this was a closed-door meeting. We were asked in the most strictest of confidence whether we would be interested in flying the T-28 (Trojan) for interdiction of roads, air to ground combat and SAR. To the man, we eagerly accepted the offer. It was our chance to retaliate after being shot at for several years in unarmed aircraft... On acceptance, we were asked to resign from Air America, Inc. [and] our personal records were sanitized in the event we were shot down and captured. We would then be classified as mercenaries for the Royal Laotian Air force to protect the U. S. government from violating the Geneva Accord Agreement.⁸

For their first mission, Bill Lair wanted them to take out a key bridge at Ban Ban. Unsure if the opposition would be heavy on the mission, Lair instructed them to go in, salvo their bombs, and get out. On the day of the mission, Richard Byrne remembers that they left behind all forms of identification, except for a document in French the designated the pilots as “aviation specialists.” The Customer gave them each a .45 pistol and an M-1 carbine, but since no helmets were available, the men simply wore baseball caps. The arrival of the T-28s caught the enemy

⁶ Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 66-69.

⁷ Joseph Hazen, interview by William Leary, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

⁸ John Wiren, "It Takes Five to Tango," Air America Association, <http://air-america.org/Articles/Wiren.shtml> (accessed April 6, 2010).

completely by surprise, and the pilots dropped their bombs largely unopposed. They missed the bridge, but managed to crater the road.⁹

Thus began the Air America T-28 program, often called the “A Team.” Typically, Air America used the T-28s in support of other unarmed Air America aircraft that were involved in dangerous missions, particularly SAR. Lao and Thai piloted T-28s were sometimes used, but the American pilots were preferred, partially because of ability, but also because communication was much easier. The indigenous pilots often spoke very little English, making it difficult to direct them against specific targets. The T-28s provided excellent cover for dangerous missions. Early in the war they usually provided the only means of protection the other unarmed aircraft had. If a landing helicopter received ground fire, the helicopter pilot radioed directions to the T-28 pilots and they would attack with .50 caliber machine guns or drop bombs on the enemy, at best scoring kills and at the least causing the enemy to fall back or cease fire temporarily.

While Air America used the A Team T-28s as support aircraft throughout the war, initially the CIA also utilized the A Team for strategic bombing. Thomas Jenny remembers many Search and Rescue operations revealed themselves, in execution, to be attack missions against CIA targets. Bill Lair or another case officer would ride in an Air America Twin Beech and locate the target, nearby helicopters would report that they were receiving gunfire, and then the T-28s would be called in to attack the target. Jenny notes that many times secondary explosions occurred, indicating that their bombs hit either stores of fuel or ammunition, or perhaps both.¹⁰ Targets could include roads, bridges, or truck convoys, but sometimes the Customer sent the A-Team to attack enemy positions in a given area, like the PDJ. Once there the pilots could attack

⁹ Richard Byrne, interview by William Leary, Carmichael CA, August 4, 1987, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

¹⁰ Thomas Jenny, interview by William Leary, Atlanta, GA, May 24, 1988, Box 13, Folder 7, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

whatever targets they spotted. On one mission over the PDJ, where the AA fire grew particularly thick, Jenny's plane took eight rounds in the fuselage, while one bullet penetrated through Hazen's cockpit, just behind his head.¹¹ Despite the numerous dangerous missions they flew, the enemy never managed to kill or capture an American pilot flying one of the Air America T-28s. Two planes did go down, but Jenny attributes these to mechanical failures. One plane force landed because the fuel tank began leaking. In the other plane, the pilot fired a rocket that ignited but failed to launch. Fearing the rocket would explode while still attached to the plane, the pilot bailed out. Both pilots survived, giving the A-Team an impressive combat record of no pilots lost.¹²

The Tango program remains the starkest example of Air America working in a paramilitary role for the CIA in Laos. The A Team worked as the CIA's air force, attacking targets throughout the country. The program worked well, but the U.S. government felt that the program created far too much risk. As Marius Burke puts it, "It would be one thing to say, 'Well, all we were doing was supporting and protecting our people' as opposed to going out of our way to bomb and attack someplace, and I'm sure the powers that be lost a lot of sleep at night just thinking, 'What the hell am I going to say if... one of these guys get shot down and then captured?'"¹³ The solution came when the United States fully entered the war in Indochina. The CIA eventually had access to U.S. military fighters and bombers, and could now use these resources for bombing and interdiction. In addition, Project Waterpump, which originally only trained Lao and Thai pilots to fly the T-28s, began to include Hmong pilots in its training program. The Hmong seemed to exhibit a degree of proficiency with flying. Many Air America pilots agree that the Hmong proved to be excellent pilots, and the CIA and Vang Pao

¹¹ Wiren, "It Takes Five," <http://air-america.org>.

¹² Jenny, interview.

¹³ Burke, interview.

increasingly relied on the Hmong T-28s for daily bombing and interdiction runs. As a result, the CIA no longer needed the A Team for these types of missions. The Tango program did continue, however, to provide cover for SAR missions. These missions required clear communication for a successful rescue effort, and thus American pilots were preferred for providing fire cover. Often the U.S. military fighter planes would fly in, offering superior protection to that of the indigenous pilots, but sometimes it took too long for the planes to reach the rescue site. On these occasions, the A Team pilots would be scrambled and provide cover for the mission.

The T-28s were not the only combat aircraft that Air America pilots would fly in Laos. In 1961, President Kennedy “ordered the CIA to undertake ‘deniable’ bombing operations against communist positions on the Plain of Jars.” They planned the strike to coincide with the planned Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, but wanted to use non-U.S. military planes and personnel for the job to avoid provoking the Soviets.¹⁴ The operation, known as “Project Millpond,” utilized sixteen B-26 heavy bombers, based in Thailand and flown by four Air America pilots and twelve “former” Air Force pilots. The Air America pilots possessed more experience with the aircraft, as they took the lead as the flight leaders. After waiting on standby for several weeks, the pilots finally received a briefing on their mission. But the morning of the scheduled attack, they awoke to discover that the attack had been cancelled, due to the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion.¹⁵ The pilots remained on alert for several months after that, sometimes flying the B-26s on aerial photo-reconnaissance missions over Laos. But in August of that year, the government decided to scrub the B-26 operations in Laos.¹⁶

Beyond these particular operations, Air America tried to avoid engaging in combat situations, primarily to circumvent an international incident in neutral Laos. But a few notable

¹⁴ Castle, 34.

¹⁵ Jenny, interview.

¹⁶ Castle, 35.

exceptions occurred throughout the war. Pilot Albert Roberts remembers a few incidences in which the Customer directed Air America cargo planes to drop 250 and 500 pound bombs on key targets. This use of conventional bombs occurred very rarely throughout the war, but the CIA and Air America came up with a few other creative ways of bombing the enemy. Roberts also remembers dropping fifty-five gallon drums of fuel from his plane, which were then ignited by T-28 gunfire.¹⁷ For a time, the CIA began making its own homemade napalm for use on enemy positions. This homemade napalm would then be dropped from Air America cargo planes on enemy forces with great success, until the U.S. Ambassador to Laos found out and put a stop to it.¹⁸ Jim Pearson recalls an incident where Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army troops moved unopposed towards the city of Pakse. In an effort to halt the advance, a Customer told Pearson to load up six fifty-five gallon drums of fuel and attack the enemy. In order to ignite the gas on impact, Pearson rigged the barrels with thermite grenades. Dropping two barrels at a time against the targets, Pearson's improvised bombing worked perfectly. After the first run, Pearson made four more attacks throughout the rest of the day using the same method, and managed to halt the advance.¹⁹

Perhaps the most unique, if not bizarre instances of Air America combat occurred at Phou Pha Thi, a key U.S. Air Force installation on a mountaintop in Laos that provided a radar system allowing U.S. fighter planes to bomb North Vietnam in inclement weather and at night. The NVA became aware of this installation and tried to take it out with two Soviet AN2 biplanes rigged to drop explosives. With his helicopter on site during the attack, Air America pilot

¹⁷ Albert Roberts, Jr., interview by William Leary, Oak Harbor, WA, June 29, 1991, Box 13, Folder 9, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

¹⁸ William Utterback, interview by William Leary, November 8, 1990, Box 13, Folder 9, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas; Joe F. Leeker, "Air America in Laos III," June 1, 2009, 53-55, <http://www.utdallas.edu/library/collections/speccoll/Leeker/history/Laos3.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2010).

¹⁹ Leeker, "Air America in Laos III," 53-54.

Theodore Moore decided to give chase to the fleeing planes. Moore's flight mechanic, Glenn Woods, grabbed an AK-47, which he used to shoot down at least one of the planes. To this day it remains the only instance of a helicopter shooting down a fixed wing plane in the history of the Vietnam War. The company was not happy about the episode however, and decided to fire Moore. He was subsequently re-hired at the behest of the CIA.²⁰

Air America thus functioned as much more than an airline in Laos. The CIA and Air America clearly saw combat roles as being necessary in Laos, and only the country's tenuous diplomatic situation held them in check. But they carried out many of these combat missions despite the potential for an international incident. While their role in combat aids in demonstrating Air America's paramilitary role in Laos, it should be kept in mind that combat actions made up a very small portion of Air America's work. However, Air America engaged in many other paramilitary activities, including aerial reconnaissance.

During the early years of the war in Laos, the CIA lacked reconnaissance intelligence for its paramilitary operations. Consequently, they contracted Air America to begin providing aerial survey and scouting. In 1961, the Geneva Accords negotiation remained ongoing between the U.S., Great Britain, the U.S.S.R., China, Laos, North and South Vietnam, and several other countries. The U.S. government suspected that the NVA not only refused to withdraw from Laos, but that they continued to funnel additional troops into the country. To confirm these suspicions, Air America pilots began photo reconnaissance flights over Laos in unarmed B-26s bombers under Project Black Watch.²¹ When the U.S. became directly involved in the war in Indochina, the need for up-to-date recon of Laos and its border with Vietnam increased significantly. In 1966, Air America received two Volpar Turbo Beech planes, which were contracted for aerial

²⁰ Castle, 94-95.

²¹ Leeker, "Air America in Laos III," 5-6.

photo reconnaissance flights over Laos. The CIA used the Air America recon photos to assess targets for U.S. military air strikes on the Ho Chi Minh trail and Northern Laos.²² The military conducted the strikes in Northern Laos largely in support of Vang Pao's Army, destroying key enemy positions or holding enemy assaults at bay.

The CIA contracted several more Air America Volpars for use over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In an attempt to monitor traffic moving through the Trail, the CIA directed Air America to insert Lao and Hmong road watch teams along the Trail. These teams then needed to relay information back to the CIA. Air America fitted the Volpars with a huge fuel tank, which allowed the aircraft to fly all night long, since flying at night reduced the chance of being shot down. An unpressurized aircraft, the Volpar typically flew above 20,000 feet, necessitating that the pilot wear an oxygen mask for the eight to twelve hours the plane was in the air.²³ As it flew along the trail, the plane collected the radio relays from the road watch teams, providing vital information about the Trail.

Besides aerial reconnaissance, Air America pilots occasionally flew as Forward Air Controllers (FACs). FACs, typically flying smaller planes like the Helio Courier, guided airstrikes by flying low and spotting the enemy positions, and then relaying those positions via radio to the bombing aircraft. William Utterback, one of the pilots used as an FAC because of his experience as an Air Force FAC in Vietnam, recalls that the Customer would orchestrate an airstrike with either U.S. Navy, Air Force, or Marine Corps fighter planes. The Customer rode along on the mission, and sometimes a Lao or Hmong radioman as well, depending on which troops were on the ground near the airstrike. The radioman communicated with the troops on the

²² Memoirs of Frank Bonansinga, Box 1, Folder 1, Small Collections, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

²³ Larry Fraser, interview by Stephen Maxner, February 5, April 3, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

ground, while the Customer coordinated the military fighters on his radio. Utterback flew hundreds of these FAC missions, sometimes flying all day long.²⁴ Eventually FAC missions fell under the purview of Air Force FACs, known as “the Ravens”, in 1966. But Air America pilots sometimes resorted to acting as informal FACs on some of the more dangerous missions. Nikki Fillipi recalls that when they went on a mission with U.S. military fighters providing cover, if they received anti-aircraft fire they would toss a smoke grenade out the window. They then used the smoke to direct the fighters to where they believed the enemy fire was coming from.²⁵

While combat, reconnaissance, and FAC missions did not make up a large part of Air America’s work in Laos, pilots flew other paramilitary missions like infil/exfil with more regularity. Air America aircraft, usually a helicopter, took small indigenous special forces units deep inside enemy territory, sometimes even across the border into North Vietnam. The special forces groups typically participated in guerilla warfare, sabotage missions, or road watch teams that monitored traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Flying these missions presented a particularly formidable task, because many of these areas, especially the Ho Chi Minh Trail, were infested with enemy soldiers and anti-aircraft guns. Typically the Air America aircraft would be unarmed, but for some missions fighter planes accompanied them to provide fire support.

Pilots regarded these missions as particularly dangerous. Jess Hagerman referred to them as the “scariest missions,” since one never knew what would be found upon arrival at the pickup/dropoff point.²⁶ For the most part, these missions occurred deep within enemy held territory, which meant that often the area was not as familiar to the pilots as areas they routinely

²⁴ Utterback, interview.

²⁵ Nikki Fillipi, interview by Stephen Maxner, January 31, February 2, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

²⁶ Jess Hagerman, interview by William Leary, August 28, 1991, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

flew. And for the unarmed Air America aircraft, familiarity with danger zones remained their best chance at avoiding enemy gunfire. Then of course, they always faced the possibility of flying into an ambush of some sort. Often the enemy troops waited until the helicopters landed, and then opened fire. On one particular infil mission, helicopter Robert Charters landed and let out his troops, while Larry Fraser circled above in a second helicopter, on hand to perform SAR if anything happened to Charters' aircraft. As soon as the troops exited the chopper and Charters began his takeoff, enemy gunfire erupted from the trees. Charters looked to determine where the volley's origins, when he suddenly noticed his co-pilot had slumped over onto the controls. Up above, Fraser saw the Charters' helicopter abruptly lurch and thought that they were about to crash. Charters managed to regain control of the aircraft, but he did not understand what had happened to his co-pilot, since he could not find any visible wound. Upon returning to base and lifting the unconscious pilot out of the plane, his helmet fell off and blood rushed out from a head wound that had been held in check by the helmet. He died four hours later.²⁷

Perhaps one of the most unique of these missions occurred towards the end of the war. In 1972, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wanted more information to aid in his negotiations with North Vietnam. The CIA knew of a key telephone line in North Vietnam that could be tapped at a particular location, but the enemy guarded the area heavily. In order to slip in unnoticed, the Hughes Tool Aircraft Division sent two Hughes 500P "Quiet One" helicopters to Air America to use for this mission. Hughes designed the helicopter to be extremely quiet, and the Quiet One probably still holds the record for world's quietest helicopter. They also fitted the chopper with FLIR (forward looking infrared) and a long-range navigation system to allow them to fly at night. Originally the CIA attempted to have the helicopter flown by Taiwanese pilots, but after

²⁷ Robert Charters, interview by William Leary, April 7, 1991, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas; Fraser, interview.

several botched practices, including one night mission that destroyed one of the choppers, the CIA decided to use Air America pilots. On the night of the mission, Air America pilots also provided a de Havilland DHC-6 Twin Otter plane with Lao paratroopers and a Sikorsky Twin Pack helicopter in case SAR was required. On December 5, 1972, the Quiet One, loaded with Lao commandos, managed to slip by undetected to drop off and then pick up the commandos. They managed to secure the tap, but whether or not any significant information was gathered as a result remains classified.²⁸

Besides special missions deep into enemy territory, Air America also engaged in some other hazardous troop transport missions. While a certain amount of troop transport in Laos involved moving soldiers from one secure location to another, sometimes transport would be required under fire, particularly if a unit was in danger of being overrun. Again, these situations called for the pilots to land under heavy enemy fire in order to extract the soldiers. Air America helicopters also engaged in “leapfrogging” troops. This involved moving troops from one place to another on the battlefield to reinforce key positions or to outflank the enemy, as military helicopter pilots often did in Vietnam.

Air America pilots often performed another potentially dangerous extraction in medevac missions. Since throughout the war Air America remained the chief means of transportation in Laos, a wounded soldier in need of medical care typically had to be extracted by an Air America aircraft. Whenever possible, the soldiers brought the wounded personnel to a secure location, where they could be picked up by either fixed or rotary wing aircraft and brought to a medical facility. However, sometimes a secure position could not be reached, or the nature of the wound required immediate evacuation. Under these circumstance, Air America helicopter pilots

²⁸ James R. Chiles, "Air America's Black Helicopter," *Air and Space Magazine*, February 2008, http://air-america.org/Articles/A_S_Mag_Black_Helos.shtml (accessed April 6, 2010).

sometimes found themselves landing for a medevac pickup under heavy enemy fire. On one particular medevac, the Customer called Larry Fraser into a hot area for a pickup. Since they expected enemy resistance, T-28 fighters were scrambled to provide cover. However, it was late in the day, and the T-28s still had not shown up. Rather than cancel the mission, Fraser decided to go ahead and make the pick up, with only a Raven FAC hovering overhead to watch for enemy troops. The Ravens typically only carried a few white phosphorous rockets that they used to mark targets for fighter planes. After Fraser made the pickup, he turned the helicopter around for lift off when suddenly, “the whole world kind of erupted right in front of us.” The Raven had spotted a group of enemy troops lying in wait for Fraser, and as he turned around they stood up and prepared to open fire. The Raven had launched his white phosphorous rockets and somehow managed to directly hit the enemy soldiers, saving Fraser and his load of wounded soldiers.²⁹

As can be seen in the example of Larry Fraser, Air America pilots sometimes put their own lives on the line to save others. Often these brave moments went unheralded, but on at least one occasion, the Customer wrote to the Air America Vice President at Udorn, Clarence Abadie, to commend a pilot and his crew for a particular incident:

The Flight Crew of Bell Helicopter 96W on 23 Feb 1972, deserve special commendation for their outstanding performance and dedication. This crew successfully medevac’ed several wounded men from an upcountry site despite the fact [that] it was completely dark by the time they arrived at the pickup site. Although there were more injured than could be carried in one load, this crew volunteered to return for the remainder of the wounded and were only prevented from attempting this mission due to the loss of security at the friendly position. Their willingness to respond caught the attention of the men who work daily with these outstanding airmen and sparked this expression of appreciation and recognition. Please convey our gratitude to Capt. Baker and his crew for their gallantry [sic] and our respect for their professionalism.³⁰

²⁹ Fraser, interview.

³⁰ Letter to Clarence Abadie, March 7, 1972, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/AirAmerica/C05266403.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2010).

It is important to note again that these pilots had the wherewithal to refuse a mission, particularly a dangerous one. As CIA case officer James Parker noted when Brian Johnson performed a dangerous medevac, “no one would have questioned a decision not to attempt the rescue.”³¹ And yet time after time, these pilots braved the hazards to help rescue wounded indigenous soldiers.

Some other pilots actually took things a step further to ensure the survival of the wounded fighters. Frank Janke and Mike LaDue both served with Special Forces before they were hired on with Air America. Janke noted that he seemed to be doing a lot of medevacs for Hmong soldiers. What bothered him most about these missions was that unlike the medevac choppers in Vietnam, Air America typically provided little en route care. The goal typically consisted of getting the wounded to a medical facility as quickly as possible. Both Janke and LaDue received medical cross-training while with Special Forces, and they decided they could help the situation. They contacted some Filipino doctors at the volunteer hospital in Vientiane, and arranged for some refresher training for themselves, and collected some necessary medical supplies to use for en route care.³²

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Air America’s paramilitary role in Laos remains that of its pilots’ dedication to Search and Rescue. Prior to the expanded role of the U.S. military in the war in Indochina, Air America had the responsibility of rescuing its own downed pilots. But Air America’s SAR responsibilities became even greater after mid 1964, when the U.S. air war over Laos began. President Johnson first ordered Air Force and Navy reconnaissance planes over Laos, and later fighters and bombers were ordered to attack enemy positions in Laos and to bomb the Ho Chi Minh trail. But when any of these US planes were shot down over Laos, the U.S. military possessed no SAR capability in the country. The U.S. military could not establish a

³¹ James E. Parker, *Covert Ops: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 136.

³² Frank Janke, interview by William Leary, December 3, 1986, Box 13, Folder 7, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

base in Laos because of its neutrality, and sending in a SAR force from outside the country would take far too long. The military decided that until they could organize some sort of SAR capability for Laos, Air America would be contracted to provide SAR.

SAR never required orders from a customer or a contract. If a pilot heard a distress call and they were in the area, they stopped whatever they were doing to go and make the pickup. Time was critical with SAR in Laos, because as Marius Burke jokingly points out, “if somebody did get shot down it was interesting that they never got shot down in friendly areas.” Typically enemy gunfire brought the aircraft down, which meant that most likely the enemy had watched the aircraft go down and was on its way to capture or kill the crew. Most pilots estimate that the SAR aircraft had fifteen to thirty minutes to get to the downed aircraft before the enemy did. But avoiding harm to the downed crew was not the only reason to hurry to the crash sight, as Burke notes that “if you were within the first 30 minutes of somebody going down, [you] had a real good chance of getting them out. If it went beyond then, it was tough because then the enemy, they would kind of circle around and wait and ambush.”³³ These ambushers typically waited until the rescue helicopter was in its most vulnerable position and then opened fire. And if anti-aircraft fire brought down the first aircraft, that same weaponry posed a threat to any would be rescuers. Once again, these missions were much more hazardous for Air America pilots, because unlike U.S. military SAR aircraft, they typically lacked any firepower or armor.

Air America tried to provide some means of protection for its crews by establishing protocols for SAR. Ideally, a SAR crew consisted of three different elements. First, they used two helicopters each with two pilots, in case one of the pilots was killed or injured the other pilot could return the aircraft and crew back safely. One helicopter went in for the actual pickup, while the other hovered close by ready to rescue the first crew if the enemy managed to shoot them

³³ Burke, interview.

down. The second component typically consisted of a fixed wing aircraft, the “Victor Control,” which circled high above the crash site and directed and coordinated the other aircraft in the rescue effort. The third element, the air support, provided the firepower. Air America or Royal Lao Airforce T-28s, or U.S. military fighter planes, kept the enemy at bay while the helicopters went in for the pickup. But again, this SAR crew represents the ideal.

Typically, if a pilot went down in enemy territory, time did not allow for such a massive effort to be organized, and Air America crews would often do the best they could with whatever was available, even if that meant going in without back up or air support. As Nikki Fillipi notes,

You wouldn't stop to organize a rescue with dual captains and waste that precious 20 minutes... you'd just go in there and do your best to get the guy out... when there's a pilot down, everything stopped. There [were] all kinds of assets that could be brought to assist you but the time was the most important thing and everybody just more or less dropped what they were doing to do the best they could.³⁴

After 1965, the Air Force established SAR crews from bases next door in Thailand, but many pilots believed that they still made more SAR pickups than the military crews. Partially this may be because Air America pilots were much more flexible when it came to following the rules, putting the safety of the downed crew ahead of their own. True to form, the U.S. military remained much more rigid in following its SAR protocols, which as pilot Ben Van Etten notes, could be quite extensive: “Some times the Air Force was its own worst enemy because by the time birds were scrambled, briefed, cover provided, MIG cap provided, and authentication of the downed pilot (as if the enemy would stage a fake crash) were made, he'd probably be captured.” Van Etten goes on to recall that on more than one occasion, “I'd picked up a downed crew, moved them to a safe area, and finally the military would make their pick up.”³⁵ Several other pilots likewise remember that military SARs were often hampered by their own protocols. On

³⁴ Fillipi, interview.

³⁵ Ben A. Van Etten, "Rescue," Air America Association, <http://air-america.org/Articles/VanEtten.shtml> (accessed April 6, 2010).

more than one occasion Air America helicopters swooped in for a pickup, while U.S. military choppers hovered overhead, still waiting for clearance to land.

Another reason Air America performed so many successful SARs in Laos was because they were constantly in the air all over the country, and thus in a much better position to make a quick pick up. The U.S. military sometimes temporarily stationed SAR crews in Laos when their bombers engaged in particularly dangerous missions, but for the most part the Air Force SAR crews were stationed across the border in Thailand. Typically Air America pilots had no obligation to rescue downed military pilots. They could choose to ignore distress calls and go on about their work. But Air America pilots flying all over Laos knew that time was critical with SAR, so when they heard a distress call, they did not assume that an Air Force SAR crew would arrive in time. The omnipresent nature of Air America in Laos made it that much easier for its pilots to make a rapid rescue. Helicopter pilot Larry Taylor heard a mayday from an Air Force A-1 fighter plane as he was flying upcountry. The pilot put out a distress call saying that he was punching out. As Taylor looked around, he saw the empty A-1 crash into the side of a mountain about a mile away. As he searched, he looked up to see the pilot parachuting down through the clouds, headed straight down on top of Taylor's chopper. Taylor moved the helicopter out of the way to avoid hitting the pilot, and was able to pick him up within a minute of landing on the ground.³⁶

Not all Air America rescues involved pilots literally dropping from the sky into the waiting hands of their rescuers, but again Air America's presence in Laos typically made it that much easier for them to perform a quick SAR. On one evening Nikki Fillipi hurried back to LS-20 Alternate to get in before darkness settled, when he received a mayday call from a military

³⁶ Larry Taylor, interview by William Leary, November 28, 1984, Box 13, Folder 9, William Leary Papers, McDermott Library Aviation Special Collection, University of Texas at Dallas.

pilot that needed to make an emergency landing on the Plain of Jars. Since he knew the area well, Fillipi was able direct the pilot to an old air strip, but warned him to avoid the bomb crater in the middle of the strip. The pilot found the runway, and thanks to Fillipi's warning, managed to tuck in his landing gears and skid to a stop just before he reached the bomb crater. As the pilot stepped out of the aircraft, Fillipi arrived, made the pick up and flew in to 20 Alternate.³⁷

Fillipi's rescue illustrates another key to Air America's success with SAR: Air America's knowledge of the region often aided in performing a quick and safe SAR. Most military pilots only spent a year in Laos before their tour ended, just about the time they finally became familiar with the territory. Air America pilots, on the other hand, often stayed upwards of five or ten years, often developing a strong familiarity with the region. This knowledge carried a variety of advantages. They could direct a pilot to the best place for an emergency landing, could pinpoint a pilot's location from his description, and most importantly, they often knew which areas possessed heavy enemy activity or anti-aircraft gun emplacements. This allowed them to safely fly in and out of the crash site without being shot down themselves.

Despite the risks they assumed to save downed U.S. airmen, Air America and the U.S. military did not always have the best perception of each other during the war. This acrimony largely stemmed from a rumor that Air America pilots received a substantial bonus each time they picked up a down U.S. pilot. As is the case with many rumors, the purported amounts fluctuated from \$1,500 all the way up to \$20,000. The rumors seem to have begun with a U.S. Air Force captain stationed with the military attaché in the Laotian capital of Vientiane. The captain often visited various Air Force bases and carrier ships, assuring pilots that they need not fear being shot down over Laos, since Air America pilots received a huge bonus for picking

³⁷ Fillipi, interview.

them up.³⁸ The rumor reportedly bred some resentment on the part of the U.S. military personnel. Marius Burke recalls sitting in on a briefing where the Air Force briefer told his men, “Well, if you go down and you see one of those unmarked helicopters, don’t get on board. It’s one of those damn Air America mercenaries trying to make money off of you.” While Burke notes that “Nobody ever turned us down,” the resentment sometimes led to other problems in the field. Burke recalls one particular incident involving U.S. military jets sent to provide cover for a SAR mission. When the jets arrived, Burke directed them to bomb a highway with a known anti-aircraft threat so the helicopters could safely fly over it to make the pickup. The jet pilots responded with, “‘Who the hell are you?’ and I said, ‘Well that’s not really important, what’s important is what you’re trying to do,’ and all I heard was ‘To hell with you,’ and they off and left us... I was furious at them.” Despite losing their cover, Burke and the other helicopter pilot decided to go ahead and perform the SAR anyway. Several other pilots recall U.S. military SAR crews refusing to give Air America pilots the coordinates of a crash site, presumably because they wanted to perform the rescue themselves. This occurred even when the Air America helicopter was closer to the site than the military choppers. However, by and large Air America and military SAR crews managed to work well together throughout the war.

More than the U.S. military airmen, many Air America pilots strongly resented the implication that they received payment for SAR. As Marius Burke points out, a pilot was more likely to lose money performing SAR, especially in the early years of the U.S. involvement in the war:

If the military was given some bombing missions of whatever, we get called and they say, ‘Go ahead and shut down, and stand by the radio station.’ We had a few radio stations positioned around the country and you might sit on the ground for a couple of days doing nothing, just waiting, and at that point in time we didn’t get paid for sitting on the ground... So if you’re sitting on the ground for a couple of days when you might

³⁸ Jenny, interview.

ordinarily be flying 10 hours, you were losing money and then if somebody actually got shot down, they never shot them down in friendly areas, so all you had to look forward to was going into pretty unfriendly situations and we got five dollars an hour for flight in denied areas.³⁹

Even when they lost no money performing SAR, many pilots resented the accusation that the only reason they risked their lives to save someone was for the money, and some of them vehemently so. Brian Johnson recalls an incident in which a few officers invited helicopter Frenchy Smith to the Air Force officers' club as a thank for a SAR he had performed earlier that day. When Smith arrived at the club, several men at the bar asked him how happy he was about the ten grand he just made. "Frenchy said 'What are you talking about?' [The pilot] said 'Well, they told us you guys got 10,000...' and he says, 'You think I got \$10,000 for picking your ass up out of that jungle?' and he cold-cocked him, knocked him right on his butt in that bar, and turned around and walked out. No, we didn't get nothing for doing what we loved to do."⁴⁰

Note that Johnson describes SAR as "doing what we loved to do." Many other pilots express a similar sentiment about SAR, describing SAR as the best part of their job in Laos. On the face of it this seems quite paradoxical, given that for most of the war it technically was not part of their job description, and that these particular missions were sometimes their most dangerous. And yet despite the voluntary nature of SAR for Air America pilots, whenever they heard a distress signal there would literally be a race to get to the downed airmen as soon as possible. So what drove them to willingly risk their lives for SAR work? It seems a sense of patriotism, as well as a simple humanitarian impulse drove the pilots. Marius Burke states that "I think almost, to a man, every one of us realized that that could be one of us down there and that's one of our people and boy, if we can get them out of there we need to do that. It wasn't a question of how much money am I going to be paid, because they couldn't have paid us enough

³⁹ Burke, interview.

⁴⁰ Johnson, interview.

money to do that just for that basis.” Whatever their motivation, the end result was often nothing less than heroic.

Whether they were flying combat missions or rescuing downed pilots, Air America clearly played a paramilitary role in the war in Laos. Although it remained relatively rare, Air America directly engaged in combat on more than one occasion, and were often held in check by diplomatic fears of a potentially international embarrassment. Beyond combat, Air America often fulfilled the same role in Laos as the U.S. military pilots did next door in Vietnam. They did so by flying as FACs, providing aerial reconnaissance, flying infil/exfil missions and medevacs, and performing SAR. Even with their supply missions, Air America assisted the war effort by providing necessary food, weapons, and ammunition for troops throughout the country. The paramilitary role of Air America is significant, because without an air proprietary the CIA and the Hmong would have been unable to engage the Pathet Lao, and more importantly the NVA, as well as they did. More than likely, the U.S. military would have been required to expand their operations in Laos, perhaps eventually using deploying ground forces there as well. Without Air America, it is likely that the war in Vietnam would have spilled over to become a much wider war in Indochina.

CONCLUSION

Like many other Air America airmen, helicopter John Ford experienced quite a few bad days flying in Laos. Shortly after Air America hired him, he flew as co-pilot with Captain Ray Semora. Semora attempted to demonstrate a take-off from atop a 5,400 foot pinnacle, when the aircraft suddenly lost power. The helicopter crashed into the trees and rolled down the side of the mountain. Ford, Semora, and their three Lao passengers managed to crawl out of the burning wreckage and run down the mountain slope just before the aircraft exploded. The flight mechanic, however, never made it out, having been crushed to death when the cargo on board shifted on impact. On another occasion, Ford landed on another mountaintop landing strip, when the tail of his aircraft hit a land mine. While performing a troop evacuation, Ford watched as another Air America helicopter began to sustain heavily enemy fire. The other pilot, Dan Carson, lost control of the aircraft and crashed into a mountain. Despite the danger, Ford rushed to the crash site. As enemy mortar rounds exploded around him, Ford managed to successfully rescue Carson and his passengers.

Ford experienced a few of his own crash landings. Flying on a medevac mission, a .50 caliber machine gun opened fire on Ford's aircraft, forcing him to make an emergency landing near a friendly village. The villagers began yelling that they needed to stay inside the aircraft. They landed in the middle of the village's mine field. Even though they had no maps of the mine field, several soldiers made their way through the minefield to escort Ford and his crew to safety. For Ford, it was "the longest walk I had ever made, even though it was only 50 yards." Rescue

helicopters arrived to pick him up, but he radioed that a pickup in this area could prove risky, given the close proximity of the enemy. He likewise refused to allow a fixed wing pilot to attempt an extremely dangerous landing on a nearby road to come pick him up. Instead, they made a wild jeep ride through jungle dirt roads to the nearest friendly position. In another incident, his aircraft lost power while flying over a river, forcing him to crash land into the river. He and his flight mechanic managed to swim to safety before the helicopter sank. After spending several hours in the jungle, they managed to find some friendly soldiers, and eventually an Air America helicopter picked them up.

Enemy gunfire riddled Ford's aircraft numerous times, in some instances with only minor damage, while others forced Ford to make emergency landings. Everything from small arms fire, to anti-aircraft artillery, to mortar rounds provided a constant threat to Ford and his crew. One day Ford landed on a mountaintop landing strip and started refueling his chopper. Suddenly, the strip came under heavy mortar attack. Another Air America pilot, George Carroll, happened to be flying in the area. Seeing the enemy activity, Carroll decided to take action. He flew his aircraft in the direction of the enemy fire, and managed to distract the enemy long enough to allow Ford and his crew to evacuate the area. And then of course, the most unnerving incident with enemy gunfire occurred on the day Ford's co-pilot received a round through his neck, killing him instantly.

Despite the enemy gunfire, despite the hazardous weather and terrain, despite the close brushes with death, John Ford chose to stay with Air America for nine years, eventually participating in the evacuation of Saigon in 1975. Ford, like many of his fellow employees, describes his time with Air America as "the best job I ever had." What motivated this sentiment? Why did these men choose to fly in such hazardous conditions for years on end? Perhaps some

derived their main motivation from the money. Ford admits that when he accepted Air America's offer, "I was short on cash at the time." But many argue that while the money played a role in their initial decision to join, their decision to remain stemmed from other reasons.

For some, flying in exotic Southeast Asia proved to hold a considerable allure. For others, the job offered a sense of adventure. The secretive nature of the job likewise proved intriguing for the more adventurous pilots. Perhaps one of the greatest enticements for the more daring pilots lay in the challenge the job provided. Indeed, few other places on earth presented a better test of a pilot's skill. The terrain, the weather, enemy gunfire, all coalesced to create a work environment that seldom allowed any boredom. It certainly beat flying a tedious commercial airline route or crop dusting.

The sense of professionalism that went along with the company motto of "Anything, Anytime, Anywhere: Professionally," certainly seemed to endear many of the pilots. Ford, like many of his fellow pilots, found Air America to be "one of the most professional operations that I had ever been around." These men prided themselves not only on the skill they brought to their work, but also their professionalism. Although they could dislike an individual on a personal level, they could at the same time respect his ability and what he brought to the team. A strong sense of camaraderie developed among these men, perhaps because of their shared experience, their similar personalities, or a little of both. They knew that they could count on one another, even in the worst of situations. Ford risked his life to save Dan Carson and his crew, just as George Carroll risked his life to save Ford's.¹

The paramilitary role Air America played in Laos possibly explains some of this sentiment. Clearly Air America did not work as a typical transport airline in Laos, as the

¹ John Ford, interview by William Leary, Green Cove Springs, FL, April 26, 1991, Box 13, Folder 6, William Leary Papers, History of Aviation Collection, McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

company and its customer would have liked the world to believe. Their role in combat, reconnaissance, medevac, infil/exfil missions, and SAR all contributed to a sense of participation in the war. Like many other pilots, Ford soon found himself caught up in “the cause.” Their work became more than just a job. Some of their attachment to “the cause” stemmed from their connection to the Hmong, for whom they tended to have some strong feelings. Some of it came from a sense of patriotism. As pilot Nikki Fillipi put it, “At the time we thought what we were doing was right. In fact, almost all of Air America were ex-military pilots from one branch of the military or the other and we felt what we were doing was in support of national interests... I think we all felt what we were doing what was right at the time.”

Whatever understanding we gain about Air America and its role in Laos by looking at the motivations of its employees, there still remains much more to be explored about Air America. To begin, Air America involved itself in many other countries besides Laos, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Tibet. And a broader look at the history of Air America should also include its flight mechanics and maintenance crews, who in many ways played just as vital a role as the pilots did. And of course, the fascinating lives and culture of Air America families living abroad certainly demands further research, by probing deeper into the memories of family members, and finding out more about living in such a strange mixture of American and Southeast Asian culture, all the while surrounded by war. Air America and the CIA certainly accomplished their mission of keeping Air America behind a veil of secrecy. Even now, some forty years later, many questions remain unanswered. But for the men who flew the unfriendly skies of Laos, there remains no question. If they had to do it over again, they would, and quite gladly. “Let me

put it this way,” says Nikki Fillipi, “If Air America was still in existence, and I was still flying, that’s where I’d want to be. It was a magnificent experience.”²

² Nikki Fillipi, interview by Steve Maxner, February 2, 2001, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

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