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CIA pilots' missions kept secret until 1991

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Had Ben Van Etten's helicopter been filled with a different cargo, the story might not have turned out well.

But the day in 1970 he and another Air America employee, flight mechanic Manu Latloi, ran out of fuel over Burma, their H-34 was packed with 1,200 pounds of canned meat.

"I don't think they knew what to do with us," said Van Etten, a Wilmington resident.



Photo by Amy Hotz

Ben Van Etten worked for Air America, the CIA's secret civilian airline that operated from 1950 to 1975 in Southeast Asia.

Air America was the CIA's secret civilian airline that operated from 1950 to 1975 in Southeast Asia. The airline also worked for clients including USAID to help refugees and the State Department's Requirements Office which supported the Laotian army with logistics.

Pilots' jobs included transporting diplomats in and around Vietnam, delivering food and other supplies to isolated villages and, if they happened to be in the area, rescuing U.S. military personnel who were shot down or crashed in the dense jungle.

At first, Van Etten's captors seemed very interested in the two Uzi sub-machine guns kept in the helicopter. He told them that the guns were for survival situations in case of crashing.

Latloi could not speak English well, though, and he told them they were, "to kill rabbits."

"Of course, they made a big deal of it, 'Oh, well you mean Americans and Thais kill rabbits with machine guns,' " Van Etten said.

Burmese army soldiers took the Uzis, emptied their magazines of bullets and lined the 60 rounds up on a table like dominos. Then they had Van Etten and Latloi pose in front of the set up for a photograph.

The Burmese kept them for about two weeks, interrogating Van Etten, but treating him and Latloi well. After that, a couple barrels of fuel were brought in and they were released.

Stories like these, once kept quiet by an unspoken, unwritten rule, will be passed along freely during the Living History Forum segment of an Air America Association reunion. The event is open to the public and will be held at 1:30 p.m. Saturday at the Hilton North Raleigh Hotel, 3415 Wake Forest Road in Raleigh.

"It was interesting flying. It was exciting. We worked in Laos where the weather was always bad, we had very few (navigational) aids, a lot of enemy anti-aircraft, of course. One of our jobs was to go along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and try to prevent what we could, by using the Laotian army and CIA case projects to try to stop that



flow on the Ho Chi Minh Trail," he said. "And we did for awhile. For the dollars that were spent it was probably well worth it during those Vietnam years."

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Later it would be revealed that Air America lost about 260 people in accidents and fighting situations.

Since 1991, when the U.S. government decided to officially recognize their service, these civilian pilots have been free to talk about their experiences. Because they were not officially in the military, they were not permitted to be recognized on the Vietnam War Memorial wall. So they formed their own memorial at the University of Texas at Dallas in Richardson.

And some, like Van Etten, have begun to write down their life stories for a public that often does not know they even existed.

"We were not supposed to talk about how we got paid, for one thing.... We got special money for rescues and stuff, and that was supposed to be kept secret," he said. "Or if it was a special mission we couldn't talk about that. But other than that, it was probably just a tacit agreement that we would not talk."

Those interested in attending the Air America reunion in Raleigh should call John Wiren for details at (870) 491-5358.

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