

Air America - Hennessy
01/03/2002 1:00 PM

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Air America... some may have heard the name, the more educated who have, for reasons best known to themselves, look over their shoulders before commenting. In the movie, 'Air America', Mel Gibson's portrayal of a flamboyant, Gung Ho, irresponsible pilot working with that Airline gave a very a distorted image, of the civilian pilots working with Air America. They flew, under extreme difficulties and at great risk to themselves, with a company designated to stem the tide of Communist forces seeping down through Laos. His attempted portrayal in no way depicted the proper image and credit due to those men, and their actions, exercised in the course of duty.

At the end of WW2 Gen. Claire Chennault and Whiting Willauer were instrumental in the formation of the airline Civil Air Transport in China. This carrier was created to operate a commercial passenger and cargo service.

In the '50's the CIA secretly bought CAT, and under the guise of a commercial operator this company furnished " aircraft and crews for secret intelligence operations". During the Korean War they " made more than 100 hazardous flights over Mainland China, air dropping agents and supplies". Air America was what could be called a subsidiary of CAT and was the transport wing of the Central Intelligence Agency, better known as the CIA. Its job was to transport personnel and supplies when and where they were required.

In 1954, according to the Geneva Conference, Laos got the status of an independent state and like every other state in the world there were groups for and against such a configuration. The Royal Lao Government was the designated governing authority, however the Pathet Laos (PL's) whose pro Communist characteristics during the cold war, resulted in their endeavoring to take control of that country as they engaged in gorilla type tactics to over throw, the appointed authority in the Country.

The Ho Chi Min trail, the main Communist supply line, wove its way down through Laos as did the Communists and their supplies while they continued their rampage, to takeover that country. South and West of the Mekong River came Thailand, and though its border outposts suffered an occasional PL attack their encroachment into Thailand was curtailed despite the fact of that being, no doubt their next goal. From there the remainder of South East Asia was open to them. The Australians and New Zealanders were very aware of this and they had no intention of allowing Communists infiltration into their respective countries.

But to reminisce for a moment. In Nov 1954, CAT pilots flying, C119's in French Air Force markings, flew over six hundred air drop supply missions to the besieged French paratroop garrison at Dien Bien Phu. During these missions several of these aircraft suffered severe flak damage. During one sortie, an aircraft flown by John B. "Earthquake Magoon" McGovern, and his copilot Wallace Bufford was shot down, resulting in the death of both these men.

The kicker survived. McGovern and Bufford were amongst the first Americans killed in combat in the Vietnam War. The crash occurred just south of Dien Bien Phu, and while there has been a delay recovering the remains it is expected that this will eventually be accomplished

After the fall of Dien Bien Phu, CAT crews flying the same C119s continued dropping supplies to isolated French outposts in Indochina.

As a result of the Geneva Agreement signed in July 1954, between August and October of that same year CAT transported 19,808 men, women and children South of the 17th parallel in 12 C46s.

In 1955 the rice crop failed and famine threatened several provinces in Laos. Air America again came to the rescue, this time using 3 C46's based out of Udorn in Thailand, they air dropped over a 1,000 tons of relief supplies. Rice was packed in eight stone bags. Each eight stone bag would then be encased in a sixteen stone bag. The bags would then be allowed to free fall from the aircraft. Normally the inside bag would burst on impact but would be contained by the outer bag, saving the rice. Such operations allowed drops into unconventional locations such as on to the sides of mountains and or marked locations in the jungle.

When the troubles started in Laos in 1959 there was concern for the Hmong tribesmen there, lest they suffer retaliation from the Communists as a result of their association with the French. Vang Pao a Hmong leader, was motivated by General Phoumi of the Royal Lao Army and assisted by the US Special Forces trained and turned the Hmong into a fighting force to be reckoned with. Vang Pao maintained they would fight the Communists or leave the Country while adding that he could raise an army of 10,000 men.

These tribesmen were scattered over the mountains in Laos. The CIA realized the necessity of good communications as a result of which Air America entered the Rotary Wing business in earnest and supported the Hmong during their many battles but in particular with the one fought against the Pathet Lao, at Pa Dong.

Charles Mateer and Walter Wizbowski were the first two Air America helicopter pilots killed as they attempted to land supplies to besieged Hmong there in bad weather.

Ousted from Pa Dong, Vang Pao moved his forces southeast to Pha Khao. The United States Special Forces had trained 9000 Hmong tribesmen and furnished them with equipment to engage in gorilla tactics. As their numbers grew, so did the Air America Rotary wing fleet and went to become their lifeline. While the men were away fighting Air America kept the villages supplied with food while furnishing supplies and equipment to their fighting men.

This hall marked the beginning of the Air America operation out of Udorn in Thailand

In the mid 60's the Company I worked with unfortunately went out of business and out of a job I headed back to New York to try find myself another one. The day after I arrived, on checking the New York Times, I saw an advertisement from an employment agency, who had a requirement for FAA licensed dispatchers. The following morning I headed for the City. The man behind the desk was impressed with my qualification, to the extent that he made a phone call while I sat there in his office. On hanging up his phone he told me that the man he had spoken with was impressed with his find and that I had an interview with the Air Asia Company in Washington on the following day.

Arriving there I was met at the airport by a large limo and driven to their offices where I had a very casual interview, being told that the position was with CAT in Taiwan. When the gentlemen at the interview saw that the location did not present a problem as far as I was concerned all they asked then was "When can you start." "Immediately" was my reply and so the Air Asia Company, on behalf of their subsidiary Civil Air Transport in Taipei hired me.

I had expected that I would be leaving directly from NY to Taiwan. However since Mary and the kids were still in Ireland, the gentleman at the interview suggested that instead of I

traveling first class from NY to Taiwan, I should travel coach and go back to Ireland for a week, then pick up a JAL flight out of Heathrow to Tokyo. I would over night there, before continuing on to Okinawa where I would change to CAT for onward transportation to Taipei.

The following week I left Shannon for Heathrow, picked up a JAL DC8 and we went Heathrow / Munich /Anchorage, and was it cold there, before continuing on to Tokyo, where I over-nighted. Next day, I continued on to Okinawa, to pick up a CAT Convair 880, which got me to Taipei several hours later.

In Taipei I met Al Ozorio and he introduced me to so many people over the next couple of days that I really came to the stage I did not know who was who.

I was there about two-week when one day Al called me into his office, and out of the blue told me that I was being seconded to Air America and said, "You will be going to Udorn tomorrow" "Udorn" I thought, "where in God's name is that..."

After my meeting with him, I headed to the operations office and asked the man behind the counter "Where is Udorn" and he went on to show me on the map exactly where it was.

The following day when at the airport I met Hank Schulte, an A&P also a new arrival to the Company and who was like myself heading for Udorn. We both boarded the CAT airplane heading for Hong Kong where I met Joe Kane, a former Transocean crew member but who now was the CAT Station Manager there. The transit was brief and we were soon back in the air again heading for Bangkok arriving there late in the evening.

The CAT people had arranged an hotel and all the trimmings which came to an abrupt halt on the following morning, when we boarded a train, which I was to learn was on a par with the West Clare Railway. This was a narrow gauge railway that ran between Ennis and Kilkee in Ireland, a distance of 35 miles.. The time it departed Ennis and arrived in Kilkee was problematic.

"Are you right there Michael are you right, do you think that we'll make it 'fore tonight..." are words taken from a song, composed back in the early 1900's by the late Percy Ffrench, resulting in his being sued by this company for what they called " his disparaging remarks " about their railroad. If you know someone from Clare or as the call it "The Banner County " ask them and they will tell you the legend of the Est Clare Railway .

Prior to leaving Bangkok we were told that bandits occasionally held up the train, and should that happen on this occasion we should just give them what we had, without creating hassle.

We boarded the train and I for one had reservations as to whether or not I had chosen the right career in the first instance. Dispatching airplanes was one thing however hearing that the James gang has a subsidiary, which had no qualms of conscience about taking some one out; operating in Thailand was something else.

However we eventually got to Udorn, and set up in the Siri Udorn Hotel. Arriving at the airport on the following day I met Dick Ford who was my immediate boss. He was a retired army Lt.Colonel and he proved to be an exceptionally pleasant man. The operations office was big, with an abnormally large movement board there to facilitate the large number of aircraft that were operating there. North of the Mekong was described as "Indian country".

A very efficient cordial staff of Thai personnel manned this office and they soon showed me the do's and don'ts of the operation .I immediate became aware my position in Air America was no different to the ones I had, had with the other Airlines I worked. My job for the most

part was juggling aeroplanes and crew, which was a thing I had a lot of experience doing. I learned crews were type rated and those assigned to fixed wing aircraft such as C130's, C123's, DC3, and Porters did not jump into helicopters to start charging all over Laos buying guns as Gibson's actions would seem to indicate.

Rotary wing aircraft operating North of the Mekong were required to call in with position reports every ten minutes. The C123 fleet was on what one might call used on a charter basis. There were two Customers. AB1, which was run by Jack Deegan, later substituted by Jim Butler. This group was assigned one C123.

Roger Bartell ran AB2 and two C123's were assigned to this "customer". These "customers" were located in different parts of the Airport and the aircraft assigned them shuttled back and forth carrying supplies from Udorn to various zones "up country" all day.

The aircraft were normally allocated in this manner, however on occasions it would be necessary to give AB1 preference and allocate them additional C123's . As well there were DC3's, Porters, Sikorsky UH34's and who knows what else.

The day came to life around 5.A.M and as mechanics checked the aircraft, tankers pumped fuel aboard as forklifts shot up and down the ramp loading pallets, some which were rigged with parachutes and dropped. I often wondered why other Airlines did not adapt to this type delivery, saves lots of money in wear and tare and as well as landing charges. The Operations Office prepared the flight plans as crews had breakfast in the cafeteria better known as the Club Rendezvous. Finished they immediately headed for the office to be briefed on the weather, NVA activity, flight plans, fuel loads, and possible ultimate destinations.

The 123's and DC'3's usually carried a crew of two pilots and a kicker. .The man known as 'the kicker' rigged the parachutes for drops. Once the drag went flying through the rear door his next priority was to keep out of the way, as the pallets left the airplane, like, "it", left the goose.

Porters carried one pilot while Helicopters, a pilot, a kicker or flight mechanic. The first morning I just stood and watched taking note of what went on. In WW2 movies I had seen flights crews getting prepared to fly but I never thought I would witness such an experience . They took careful note of what was said, commented on "Charlie's" activities and as though they were going on a joy flight, picked up their parachutes, some carried them

by the straps others threw them over their shoulders and with a smile the captain would quip " See you". With that they were on their way across the ramp to their respective aircraft.

Once everything was moving the operations people went and had breakfast.

And on one such morning I saw this low sized red headed smiling character, with a parachute hanging from his shoulder approach me. "I'm from Cork," said the smiling Pat McCarthy who flew as a flight mechanic on the Sikorskys, "I live in Limerick" I replied as we shook each other's hand.

The Thais considered our accents to be the common denominator and made him aware of my presence, which resulted in Pat going out of his way to make himself known to me. We spoke for a few moments. "I got'a go... Slán...." he smiled as he left the operations office. " Slán...." I replied.

From that day, every time we met we got the greatest kick out of uttering the couple of words of Gaelic we could remember, to each other, as the Thais and Americans alike tried to figure out what this language was and were in fact a possible threat to security.

Some weeks later I received a letter from the personnel department in Taipei, with insurance papers, and a bunch of other stuff, which included my company ID number. I looked at it, nodded my head and thought "James Bond 007 ... how are." Here now was I '009', two points ahead of him, in real life, but then Bond never worked with Air America.

Not alone did Air America transport supplies but they were always on hand to go looking for those Air Force Wallies, who despite all the money that had been spent on their training, and all they had been told about the evasive action they should take in order to avoid getting themselves shot but did they listen..... did they listen..... oh no..... Some of 'em still went and managed to go and just do that. And who went looking for them.... Air America crews, these were the fellows who had no training for such tactics but they still went looking and found most of them. They were in fact so successful in this type operation that someone thought that there had to be something in it for the Air America crews and that was what gave them such incentive. A rumor quickly spread that for each Air Force crew member they rescued they were paid a bonus of \$1500.00 which was completely untrue.

From the mid to the late 60's the police action in Laos had turned into a real war and there was I in the middle of it all. Security at the time did not allowed me to write home and say what I was doing. In fact when Mary wrote the address I had was an APO Box in San Francisco. Anyway if I had mentioned what I was involved in she would probably have thought "he should keep his head covered now he's having hallucinations."

From 1965 to '67 Air America lost a total of eleven crew members up in Laos, five of which were as a result of enemy action. In fact I could very easily been the twelfth.

As I sat in the office on the morning of December 8th 1966, word came through, one of the Sikorskys, Hotel 22 had crashed up country, very far up country. "Joe you go up there ... get some pictures of the aircraft," said Dick Ford as he handed me a camera. "You can get a ride with Tom Richardson up to (L)uang (P)rabang. And I'll have chopper pick you up and take you on up to the crash site."

With camera in hand I got a lift out to Tom Richardson's DC3, and when it was loaded we headed North. A couple hours later we landed in LP.

I was picked up in a jeep and shot across the ramp to a waiting Sikorsky UH34 whose called sign was Hotel 21. Aboard I saw Marius Burke was riding shotgun and without formality, we cranked and headed further North. Some hours later we came into land on the top of a hill. The wreckage of Hotel 22 was at the bottom of this. I made my way down the very steep incline and took all the pictures I could of what was left of the airplane. Fortunately the crew got out without injury.

Finished I made my way back up the hill and met Marius. "It will be getting dark soon. so we'd better be getting out of here .." he said.

Anything in the air after darkness in Laos was fair game not that they wouldn't have a crack at you during the daylight, but I am sure crews felt that in the daylight they could at least see where they were going.

The crew got aboard, I got in moved up the airplane and sat on the floor. There were two other passengers. One was the kicker from Hotel 22 and the other was a mechanic.

I sat there, heard the crew going through the preflight, listened as the engine fired up, felt a slight vibration as the rotors were engaged and for a couple of moments we sat there, burning and turning. Then the chopper lifted off the ground and started to back quickly off the pad. In a matter of seconds I felt the airplane sinking. " We've lost ground effect...." the kicker shouted and as he did the Captain pushed the nose down to gain forward speed and turn, but the aircraft continued forward and sinking.

"We're going in," the kicker shouted as he jumped through the opened door, seconds before we crashed into the side of the hill. I grabbed the stay above me, and held on as the fuselage continued to tumble and bounce its way down the hill. Anything that wasn't tied down was flying around, as the cabin bounced off the side of the hill on its way down. I got a belt of a tool box in the ribs but I still held on until the wreckage finally came to rest at the bottom of the hill. Fortunately for us the aircraft did not burst into flames.

I started to crawl back inside the wreckage, and on coming to an opening, Marius Burke and Tom Pitkin helped drag me from the shambled wreck. Shattered rotors mingled with tangled, twisted wreckage, as it lay strewn all over the bottom of the hill.

Slowly we made our way back up the hill, and when at last back there I got on the emergency radio and called "Mayday" a couple of times in the hope that someone might hear me, but no luck. We dared not continue using the radio or light a fire lest the PL's home in on our position. They no doubt had more artillery than we had, so we certainly were no match for them. The emergency equipment was broken out. The tent was set up; cans that looked like their sell by date had expired years before Dunnes had thrown them out were broken out. Frankly I couldn't say what the stuff tasted like I just ate what I got. After darkness our position allowed us to overlook the jungle, and occasionally flashes of gunfire could be seen in the darkness. The Captain organized sentry duty. We got into the tent kept close together to keep warm, and as I lay there for what seemed like hours I got a gentle tug on the shoulder, as it was my turn to play soldier.

The man I relieved uncocked the M16 before handing it to me. I immediately re-cocked it, nervously, sat, not knowing

what to expect but I know had anything, anything what so ever in front of me had moved I would have pulled that trigger. All were awake at dawn on the following morning. We waited and we waited and eventually about 10 AM we saw a chopper far in the distance sweeping back and forth, looking for us, in a line parallel to our position. Marius fired a flare, but they did not see it. When the aircraft turned to sweep back he fired another one. All waited and hoped he would see it. Suddenly the chopper turned and started to head in our direction a cheer went up from the couple of us that was there, thrilled that he now knew our location. The lumbering big nosed Sikorsky H34 would by no means qualify, if there were such a thing as a helicopter beauty competition, but to us on that particular day she looked like Marilyn Monroe.

" My name is Burrows, I'm from Enniskillen, I'm Church of Ireland, but whipped into see you when I heard you were Irish," said the visitor as he stood over my bed some weeks later in the Bangkok Christian Hospital. Small in stature, he smiled and every day from then on he came to see me.

" Look at this..." he quipped many visits later as he held up the newspaper they called the Bangkok Post. "IRISH GUN BOAT FIRES ON RUSSIAN TRAWLER" read the headline. On reading the story I went on to find out that some Russian trawler had been caught fishing inside the twelve-mile limit in Irish waters. When the Russian Captain saw this Irish frigate approaching, he cut his nets and started to run for the high seas. He had no intention of

waiting around for a boarding party. However the Captain on the Irish frigate fired a couple of shots across the Russian's bow, and that quickly put a stop to his gallop. Had the Russian known they fired the last two shells they had, he sure, as hell would not have waited for the boarding party.

The 'Secret War' in Laos, as it became known, as was for a time what might be called as seasonal. From October to May the PL's and their buddies the NVA went on the offensive, shooting anything that moved, in particular the Hmong and Government forces. However when the monsoon season came around these fellows had the advantage of having the mobility provided by Air America and kicked butt deep into enemy territory. The situation there was described as "a mirror image of Vietnam".

"The North Vietnamese, impatient with the progress of the Pathet Lao, introduced major new combat forces into Laos and took control of the year's dry season offensive", resulting in the Hmong losing more than a thousand men. In 1969 despite their decline in strength the Hmong discarded their gorilla tactics, and using the increased air power available to them, launched a major offensive against the PL and NVA., As a result of which they reversed their position, and reclaimed all that was theirs as a result of which they captured 1,700 tons of food, 2,500 tons of ammunition, 640 heavy weapons and 25 Soviet tanks. Their success was short lived as the NVA brought in two divisions to reclaim all they had lost.

It soon became obvious that Laos would become Communist dominated despite all the efforts to insure that this would not happen. Between '72 and '74 twenty-three

Air America crew were killed in flight operations in Laos.

On 27 Jan 1973 the Paris Agreement on Vietnam was resolved. American troops would move out of Vietnam. The following month, a cease-fire, resulting in the formation of a coalition government for Laos.

On the 3rd June 1974 Air America ceased operations in Laos and moved to Saigon, where they flew until 1975. The CIA then disbanded the Company but, Air America, like the West Clare Railway, will forever remain a myth and while people will speak and read about it, many will wonder if in fact the writings are a work of fiction.

The crews, operations personnel, mechanics and all others employed with Air America, were employed by an airline. All other airlines in the world did the identical same work, moving passengers and cargo from one place to another with circumstances dictating policy as to places and loads. The people of Air America gave it there all, to the extent that one hundred of them in total gave their lives in the course of duty in Laos.

"Never in the history of the British Empire has so much been done by so few for so many," complimented Winston Churchill on the actions of the Royal Air Force during WW2.

Had Mr. Churchill been around in the mid 70's he could just as easily have said "Never in the history of Civilian Aviation, have employees shown loyalty as did the personnel of Air America. Some gave the ultimate, which did not deter the remainder from carrying on, despite knowing the possible consequences."

A total of A total of 243 CAT/Air America personnel gave their lives and those missing presumed dead, in the course of duty, during Air America's tenure in South East Asia.

February 12, 1969, was no different to any other day. Most aircraft were in the air. Glancing at the large clock in the Operations Office I saw that it was 1200L and was about to go to

lunch when the phone rang, It was Bob Crone, one of the Operations Managers from Vientiane, who due to their work load at that particular time had a requirement for an additional C123 to help them. Our board showed we had a 123 which was presently enroute from LP to Udorn, and I requested that he position Vientiane. At 1400L I called the Operations Office in Vientiane to enquire when this aircraft would be released by to us. I asked to speak with Bob only to be told that he had been killed an hour previously. The story I heard was that soon after he had spoken to me, he and a pilot were flying a Piper Cub which was blown out of the air by PL fire. These two men from Vientiane, and Pat McCarthy from Udorn, Thailand were only three of the one hundred Air America people, who had life snuffed from their grasp in the course of duty in Laos.

They may be gone but not forgotten as their names are engraved for all to see, on the role of honor at the CAT/ Air America Memorial on display at the McDermott Library, at the University of Texas in Dallas, Texas.

'Slán' I murmured on reading the name,

Of Pat McCarthy who from Cork came,

For North of the Mekong, came a thunderous sound,

As Pat in the chopper crashed into the ground.

No more he'll reply, his spirit is free,

As his mortal remains lay in Cork by the Lee.