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Nampa man who flew helicopters in Vietnam is finally getting recognition

BY KATHLEEN KRELLER - kkreller@idahostatesman.com
Published: 04/26/09

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Bob Charters has lived most of his life with the secret knowledge that he contributed to the Vietnam War.

Some 40 years later, Charters is still fighting - to stave off advancing cancer and to get recognition for the largely untold and misunderstood history of civilian pilots who flew covert CIA missions in Laos and Vietnam.

What little exposure the secret airline has gotten has come from books and the 1990 Mel Gibson movie "Air America," which is reviled by the real pilots. Few have heard the first-hand stories of the civilian pilots and the missions of Air America - a front corporation for the CIA.

But earlier this month, the CIA released 10,000 pages of previously classified documents that detail Air America's secret missions.

Many of those missions were harrowing - from rescuing downed pilots under enemy fire to ferrying humanitarian supplies, ammunition and soldiers.

But unlike their military counterparts, Air America's pilots didn't get medals or commendations.

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1967: Vietnam Bob Charters poses with one of the helicopters he piloted as an employee of Air America.

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ELSEWHERE

The CAT / Air America archive online

"We were paid well," Charters said. "But the only thing we got were the (typewriter) ribbons that printed out our checks."

These days, Charters tells his own story with 40 years of pent-up emotion.

"The Air America pilots, they aren't looking for publicity; they just want it clarified that we served," Charters said.

His home and 68-year-old body are an homage to his time as an Air America pilot. An Air America flag flies over his garage. During a recent interview with the Idaho Statesman, he wore a hat and shirt with the Air America logo (and suspenders with the Shriners logo).

BORN TO FLY

An Emmett farm boy, Charters was something of a troublemaker. He got the flying bug as a boy when a local fruit farm owner took him up in his airplane.

Charters graduated from Emmett High School and in 1959 made his way into the Army National Guard. He became a first lieutenant and then a pilot and flight instructor with the Texas Guard.

In the midst of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, Charters heard about the staggering \$50,000 annual salary Air America pilots were making in Southeast Asia.

He and other instructors signed up and went for training in Washington, D.C. They were told to keep quiet.

"We knew we were going to do dangerous work, but we couldn't tell anyone about it," Charters said. "Fear had no place in our hearts. We thought we could live forever."

DANGEROUS DUTY

Charters found himself as an unarmed civilian helicopter pilot in Vietnam in the middle of the 1968 Tet Offensive, a massive military campaign by the Viet Cong in September 1968.

He quickly learned the terrain in order to ferry embassy officials, soldiers, supplies and Vietnamese people. He relied on information from the Green Berets about enemy locations to keep himself safe.

Air America's pilots were known for their bravery and for adhering to the "pilot's creed," Charters said. That meant dropping whatever else you were doing to pick up a downed pilot.

Charters won't discuss this in detail because Air America pilots weren't supposed to endanger themselves and their aircraft. But he admits he rescued shot-down military pilots in Vietnam.

"That's how the people were. We looked out for each other," Charters said.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ABOUT AIR AMERICA

Air America was essentially the civilian front for a CIA-owned airline used during the Cold War as a tool in the battle against communism. The organization formed under the name Civil Air Transport in the wake of World War II.

From 1946 to 1976, Civil Air Transport (CAT) and Air America served alongside U.S. and allied intelligence agents and military personnel in dangerous combat and support roles. Air America personnel were used in counterinsurgency operations.

Air America officially disbanded in 1976 after the fall of Saigon.

Statesman staff and www.air-america.org

DOCUMENTS REVEAL SECRET MISSIONS

Earlier this month, the CIA turned over to the University of Texas at Dallas, a slew of previously classified documents detailing Air America missions, to be included in the university's extensive aviation collection. The school also has a memorial wall honoring the 243 Air America pilots who died in Vietnam and Laos.

The document release coincided with a special symposium on April 18 at the university to acknowledge and commemorate Air America's rescue efforts during the Vietnam War.

He later transferred to Thailand and flew missions in Laos. He made the change after a divorce to keep his son, Brandt, with him.

"It was more dangerous, though," Charters said. "In Laos, we were the military. Laos did not have troops on the ground. It was the CIA and us."

A LIFE-CHANGING LOSS

It was in Laos in 1969 that Charters had his most heartbreaking experience as an Air America pilot.

Charters and a co-pilot were ferrying soldiers and "anything else we could haul" (read: ammunition) into combat. Before the mission, Charters offered the main pilot's seat to co-pilot Bill Gibbs.

"All of the sudden the helicopter jerks, and Bill lurched forward. I thought he had a heart attack," Charters said.

Charters took the stick and steered the chopper out of the area. After landing, "I pulled the window out and I saw the blood run out of his helmet," Charters said.

Gibbs had been shot in the head and soon died. Charters later apologized to Gibbs' wife for swapping seats.

"She said, 'Bill loved flying with you because you switched seats,' " Charters said as tears streamed down his cheeks. "Years later, I had to explain to his daughter what happened."

Charters eventually had enough of the danger and headed home to Idaho with his son. Over the years he worked as a commercial helicopter pilot, a pilot in the Idaho National Guard, and a postal worker.

He's been married twice more. The third marriage, to Phyllis, has lasted 25 years and brought with it step-children and grandchildren.

HONORED TO SERVE

Charters, who is now retired and fighting colon cancer that has spread to his lungs, still relives his days as an adrenaline-soaked pilot.

During an interview last week, Charters shuffled into a back room in his immaculate Nampa home and returned carrying an imposing black jewelry box.

He cracked the lid and gingerly pulled out a gold linked bracelet that weighs more than a pound and has a tell-tale medallion - the symbol for Air America's pilots and a bargaining chip to use with potential captors.

The bracelet is part of Charters' collection of Vietnam-era memorabilia, which includes photos, patches and pilot's licenses.

With the CIA's release of classified information and a recent ceremony that publicly acknowledged Air America's secret missions, Charters said it was time to come forward.

"I'm very honored to have worked for Air America and very proud," Charters said.

Kathleen Kreller: 377-6418

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[syncster](#) wrote on April, 25 11:21 PM:

Bob,

You flew me and many other soldiers around the desert south of Boise, at Yakima and many other places. I will never forget some of the stories you told and some of the flights. You and Rick Bollar were the greatest! Great pilots, even greater people!

Thanks for all you have done!

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[veryfareast](#) wrote on April, 26 0:19 AM:

I know this guy. He is a TRUE American Hero.

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[groovesoop](#) wrote on April, 26 2:47 AM:

I hope as soon as he showed that memento to the reporter he went to the bank and put it in a safe-deposit box. In a recession or no, this nice anecdote sounds as if it could be an accidental invitation to a home-invasion robbery. But a good read anyway.

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[JohnnyB](#) wrote on April, 26 6:08 AM:
Welcome home Brother..H/2/9 3rdMarDiv RVN

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[whipsaw](#) wrote on April, 26 7:07 AM:
This comment has been hidden and is pending site review. Click here if you wish to view.

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[gemsurf](#) wrote on April, 26 7:23 AM:
Those of us in the military during those years, never forgot what Air America did and how they did it as unsung heroes. Thank you Mr. Charters and my prayers are with you in your current struggle.

And thank you to the statesman for bringing this story to light.

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[mtnrideagain](#) wrote on April, 26 7:23 AM:
Thank you Bob and you and all those that served in the USA service branches.

And yes Whipsaw, covert types of operations cost money. I am sure we have no idea of the people involved that were under the radar.

Under the radar in every war since the revolutionary war to present day.

Thanks again to all of those who have served.

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[gemsurf](#) wrote on April, 26 7:26 AM:
Replying to whipsaw (April, 26 8:07 AM):
"I hate to burst everyone's bubble, but this man was not an "American hero". He and the others in Air America were mercenaries - they flew for the money. If the big money wasn't there, they wouldn't have been there. I believe he is a good guy, but let's reserve the hero worship for the 58,000+ men...":
It may have been about the money to get there, buddy, but I guarantee you 500K wasn't enough to do what the mission required. Until you have an idea what these pilots actually had to do during those missions, you need to STFU, bigtime!

The whole reason for their existence was to do things others couldn't

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[Wakeup](#) wrote on April, 26 7:28 AM:

A great read about a great guy. Thank you for your service. Please get a safety deposit box and have the reporter do a short story with photos of you using it. Too many meth heads around.

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[gemsurf](#) wrote on April, 26 7:28 AM:

Replying to gemsurf (April, 26 8:26 AM):

Replying to whipsaw (April, 26 8:07 AM):

"I hate to burst everyone's bubble, but this man was not an "American hero". He and the others in Air America were mercenaries - they flew for the money. If the big money wasn't there, they wouldn't have been there. I believe he is a good guy, but let's...":

The whole reason for their existence was to do things others couldn't or wouldn't do. Either way, it had to be done and was worth every penny he ever earned doing it!

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