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The greatest pilot we never saw

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When the CIA needed to fly a small team into Iran to lay out a landing strip for a Delta Force operation to spring 53 U.S. embassy hostages -- and maybe save Jimmy Carter's presidency -- it knew where to turn: Clayton resident Jim Rhyne. It was 1980 and Rhyne may have been the only pilot alive who could regard the request as routine. For him, the question wasn't whether the flight was possible, but how to do it. He employed perhaps his second-best skill: calculating the risks against the options. Yeah, he replied, a Twin Otter with extra gas tanks, and bring it in at roof-level.

Then it was time for his best skill: flying.

Rhyne was perhaps the greatest pilot no one ever heard of, the only person to win the CIA's top two medals for valor and a veteran of Air America, the notorious airline secretly -- and later not-so-secretly -- owned by the CIA.

The company was perhaps best known for supporting the agency's clandestine war in Laos in the 1960s and early 1970s. Rhyne played a central role there.

He also is part of the answer to a North Carolina mystery that has puzzled people across the world: How did Aero Contractors Ltd. end up amid the tobacco fields of Johnston County?

Part of Rhyne's job was helping the CIA establish small air transport "proprietarys." He moved to Clayton in 1979 to start Aero Contractors, tucked away at the small Johnston County Airport, just minutes by air from Fort Bragg with its Special Forces and secretive counterterrorism Delta Force.

The air-charter company is widely reported to be a smaller CIA successor to Air America. Its most controversial suspected mission is flying prisoners captured in one foreign country to be held -- and perhaps tortured -- in another. This practice is known as extraordinary rendition.

Many of these prisoners have been suspected members of al-Qaeda, but at least one was a case of mistaken identity. The flights have led to several investigations in Europe. A German court indicted several members of the company's air crews in February.

Rhyne died in a plane crash -- the circumstances are disputed -- not long before the 9/11 attacks. It's unclear whether the company was involved with renditions when he was alive.

His death attracted little attention outside the discreet world of Air America veterans and a tight circle of CIA types. But within those small groups -- where he was regarded as nearly a deity -- the ground shook.

"I seriously considered giving up flying when I heard he was killed," said Richard Secord, a former Air Force major general who was once assigned to the CIA Laos program and later became a central figure in the Iran-Contra scandal. "I figured that if the gods of aviation are



Jim Rhyne flies an Air America Douglas B-26 above the Mekong River in Laos on April 13, 1968. Rhyne started Aero Contractors in 1979 in Johnston County. Photo Courtesy of Frank Bonansinga

going to strike him down, they're sure as hell going to get me."

How good was Rhyne? Secord makes a telling comparison. Former air show pilot Bob Hoover is known as one of the fathers of modern aerobatics. Chuck Yeager called Hoover the best around. Famed Air Force Gen. James Doolittle introduced him as the "greatest stick and rudder pilot who ever lived."

But Secord, who flew with both Hoover and Rhyne, said, "There's no comparison: Jim could fly rings around him."

And Hoover had two legs. Rhyne had only one.

Love of flying

Rhyne was the son of a pharmacist in tiny La Fayette, Ga. In his early teens, he and his friend Paul Robinson began hanging around a local airport, begging rides whenever they could, doing odd jobs. Eventually they scraped together a few hundred dollars for a Piper J-3 Cub, a small plane famed for its simplicity. The boys were 13 or 14 years old, too young to fly alone legally, said Rhyne's older brother Bill, but that didn't stop them.

Jim Rhyne joined the Air Force in 1954, according to an unpublished interview with historian William Leary in 1990. When budget cuts in 1958 made the Air Force cut flights for each pilot to two a month, Rhyne said, he decided to quit. While running a small airport in Georgia in 1960, he heard about Air America and applied for a program that used planes specially designed to fly from rough, extremely short runways.

He flew in India and other places, but beginning in 1962 he spent more than 10 years flying over the landlocked kingdom of Laos, where the CIA was running the largest paramilitary operation in the agency's history. In short order, he was a senior pilot supervising some of the company's best pilots on its most secret programs.

Among other things, his team dropped sensors along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and monitored the devices around the clock from above. The trail was a huge supply line from North Vietnam south through supposedly neutral Laos and Cambodia to move supplies and communist troops fighting U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. He and the pilots under him also dropped supplies to surveillance teams along the trail, said Jim Glerum, who was a CIA liaison to the airline working undercover as an Air America executive.

Air America also flew CIA agents and paramilitary officers in and out of hundreds of tiny strips hacked out of jungles and mountainsides in Laos, and dropped both supplies to indigenous forces fighting the communists and food to their villages. Some of the more unusual planes were designed for gut-wrenching landings and takeoffs in strips little longer than a soccer field.

The company's motto was "Anything, anytime, anywhere, professionally." Understatement was part of the culture. Guns and ammo were "hard rice" and food was "soft rice." The CIA was "the customer." A mission in which you took heavy incoming fire was "sporty."

The airline also moved freight and passengers in the open. It also was sometimes the only resource available for rescuing downed U.S. pilots.

Pilot Ted Mauldin said he once took off and landed 45 times in a day, and that 30 or more missions in a day wasn't unusual. "A lot of times, we'd just leave the engine running when we were taking on fuel," he said.

Rhyne was known as a disciplined, careful pilot who was always planning for the next day. He would take a drink or two, but seldom more -- there was always a flight coming up, after all. He was known for a sense of humor and, perhaps not surprisingly, for being unflappable and tight with information about himself.

"He was something of an enigma," said friend and former Air America flier Ward S. Reimer of Las Vegas. "I don't think anyone really knew him in depth. What you knew about him, he let

you know."

A terrible wound

One thing that was obvious about Rhyne, though, was a love of aviation that was extreme, even by the standards of a calling that breeds devotees. In rare moments of leisure, Rhyne could be found flying model airplanes or doing aerobatics in the little Pitts Special biplane that he had disassembled and sneaked into Southeast Asia as his official Air America household goods allowance. At Rhyne's house, Secord said, he screened aviation movies and played the theme song from "Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines" again and again.

In northern Thailand, with CIA permission, he started a small factory with 50 sewing machines to make the parachutes used for Air America's thousands of supply drops each month. John Melton, a former Air America executive who lives in Chapel Hill, said that made him think Rhyne was already secretly a CIA officer, a second layer of the clandestine life.

On Jan. 15, 1972, while pushing leaflets offering a reward for a missing air crew out the back of a plane, Rhyne was badly wounded by anti-aircraft fire. The pilot turned the damaged plane toward Thailand as another Air America worker drove his knee into Rhyne's groin and held it there to slow the bleeding from Rhyne's shredded leg. That kept the flier alive but was so painful he had to clamp his teeth on a mouthful of leaflets.

Within six months, Rhyne was back, flying with a prosthetic leg.

Once, a small U.S. Special Operations team that had been inserted for a mission near the North Vietnam capital, Hanoi, needed to be resupplied. Military fliers tried repeatedly and failed. Secord, who was then the CIA's senior air officer at Air America's northern Thailand headquarters, called in Rhyne, figuring he would assign one of his best night pilots to the task because it was so deep in enemy territory.

Instead, Rhyne flew it himself. In the daytime.

"He calculated that you can get away with anything once, and that daylight was better and safer," Secord said.

Flying just above the treetops, Rhyne navigated by checking his altitude and comparing it to maps showing elevation.

"Jim flew nap of the earth before they called it nap of the earth," Secord said of the ground-hugging style.

Rhyne could fly anything. Helicopters, prop planes, jets, one engine, two or four, it didn't matter. He had so many ratings for different aircraft that when he held his license above his head -- he was more than 6 feet tall -- the accordion folder touched the ground, Secord said.

In 1973, the United States agreed to begin withdrawing troops from Vietnam. A cease-fire agreement quickly followed in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. The next year, Air America shut down its Laos operation.

Rhyne told Leary that he then moved to Saigon, where Air America flew until the city fell in April 1975.

In 1976, the CIA decided that Air America, its cover long since blown, was no longer useful.

"When Air America was closed down because it was known as a CIA entity, it was necessary to sever all connections, including the people," said Glerum, who by then had risen high in the agency back in Virginia.

Rhyne, though, was simply too good to fire.

"I felt that Jim and a couple of the others were just too valuable to let go and we found places for them," Glerum said.

Secord said that Rhyne's new job included setting up small air transport companies for the agency. It was just three years after Air America's demise that Rhyne started Aero Contractors.

Glerum declined to describe Rhyne's later work. Much of it is still classified. But the fog lifts in places.

Ill-fated mission

In the Iranian desert that night in 1980, there were tense moments as two men strung out the remote-controlled lights for the landing area and Rhyne stood guard with an M-16 assault rifle.

Rhyne flew in and out without any problems, another risk properly calculated. Not so the pilots who followed later. Some got lost, the engine failed on a helicopter, and then, when commanders aborted the mission, a giant RH-53D chopper went out of control and crashed into a transport plane, killing eight people.

Rhyne, who been awarded the CIA Star for his work in Laos, was secretly awarded another medal, the CIA Cross, for his role. For U.S. Special Operations, meanwhile, it was a humiliation. Later it was determined that a major problem was a shortage of helicopter pilots skilled at the art of flying low-level missions with night-vision goggles.

And because it was an art that involved flying, Rhyne was, of course, a master at it. Secord was asked to help plan a second rescue attempt, he said, and practically the first thing he did was demand that the CIA lend him Rhyne. Soon Rhyne was in the Nevada desert tutoring H-53 pilots.

The mission was scrubbed, Secord said, when the Iranians scattered the hostages to foil further rescue attempts.

Many secrets still

Eventually, when legal and political issues fade as they have with Air America, the story of Rhyne's later career may be told. Facts have started to emerge from investigations of the renditions, but those flights appear to have mainly occurred after Rhyne's death and make up only a fraction of the company's work. For now, there are only hints about the rest.

In an unpublished account Leary wrote that Rhyne often flew Special Operations soldiers from Bragg on training missions and operations.

W. Ashley Smith Jr. is founder of Jet Logistics Inc., a Raleigh-based aircraft management and charter flight company. In 1997, though, he was a captain with Midway, earning \$55,000, among the lowest pay in the industry. He heard Aero Contractors needed pilots and applied.

Documents he signed prevent him from talking about parts of his application. But he had three interviews, two were with Rhyne and the general manager and the third in Washington, D.C., in a Drug Enforcement Agency building. Smith didn't know the identity of his final interviewer or the branch of government he was with.

Rhyne, he said, was apparently semiretired, and his role with the company wasn't made clear, but he conducted Smith's flight test in Johnston County. Smith recalled Rhyne nonchalantly demonstrating a quick stop after landing. Smith had never before been in a plane that could stop that fast.

Aero Contractors pilots signed contracts for three-month tours of duty each year, tours that could mean camping in the jungle, or maybe a week in Europe, a week somewhere else, Smith was told. Some of the work was closer -- flying to Fort Bragg to take soldiers up for practice jumps, often after dark with the pilots using night-vision goggles.

Smith noticed some speedy twin-turboprop Beechcrafts while touring Aero's hangars at the Johnston County Airport. He was told they were used for "airborne surveillance" -- to listen to people on the ground. A mechanic was applying patches to one plane to repair bullet holes.

"Why the hell are people shooting at you?" Smith asked.

"Because they don't want to be heard," he was told.

That didn't sound like the right gig for a Kinston farm boy. Smith told them no thanks.

'Intrepid men'

In 1978, another unusually skilled former Air America pilot -- and the only one besides Rhyne to be asked to join the CIA -- was killed in a crash at Fort Bragg that Rhyne was originally scheduled to fly, a classified one with two hardened CIA paramilitary officers and a Special Forces soldier aboard. Rhyne gave the eulogy for his friend Berl King, who had 17,000 hours in the air. Years of flying the most dangerous, trickiest missions possible had honed King's skills to a degree no longer possible, Rhyne said, according to "The Book of Honor: The Secret Lives and Deaths of CIA Operatives," by Ted Gup.

"With his passing, the select ranks of these intrepid men are irreversibly thinned. ... The hard unforgiving school of unique flight operations is of another time -- an era past. ... The pipeline for their development is virtually gone."

Rhyne might have been talking about himself.

By 2001, he was 66 years old and had 25,000 hours -- nearly three years -- aloft. He was planning a Rhyne-style retirement. He and his wife, Jearanai -- who declined to be interviewed -- had moved to a home in Moore County at the end of an airstrip. He had built a fancy new hangar and was making plans for what to put in it, likely one fast airplane for travel, an aerobatics plane and maybe a restoration project, Secord said.

He painted the floor of the hangar, a finishing touch, on April 1 of that year. The next day, he went to Johnston County Airport to help an acquaintance. The Raleigh physician had just finished building a Steen Skybolt biplane, similar to Rhyne's old Pitts.

A new homebuilt's first flight makes pilots nervous, but the plane had passed an inspection and the motor had run flawlessly in three, 45-minute tests.

One last time Rhyne calculated the risks. One last time he decided in favor of flying.

The Skybolt climbed away from the airstrip, veered right and then slammed into a swampy forest.

An investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board found nothing wrong with the aircraft. The report said Rhyne's prosthetic leg had contributed to the crash.

More than a half dozen men who had known Rhyne for decades disputed that notion, though. Something may have gone wrong with the aircraft, or Rhyne may have had a heart attack, they said, but for nearly 30 years he had done things in the sky with one leg that no one else could do with two.

Secord said that crash investigations of such aircraft are perfunctory, and that the investigation report even placed the crash site on the wrong side of the runway.

So one last enigma remains in the life of a flying spy.

Rhyne was conscious when rescuers cut him out of the plane, but died little more than an hour later at Johnston Memorial Hospital. A seven-paragraph story about the accident in The News & Observer the next day quoted Patrick Harris, the Smithfield assistant fire chief.

"The pilot was very experienced," Harris said.

He had no idea.

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