

Local Air America veterans lose another battle

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CIA Airline Employees Seeking Government Benefits

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• By: Alan Cohn

TAMPA - They performed daring, dangerous and covert missions during the Vietnam War, but the men and women of Air America have lost yet another battle here at home.

A report commissioned by the Director of National Intelligence is recommending hundreds of elderly veterans of a CIA-owned airline be denied government benefits.

The I-Team last October reported on the plight of several aging former employees of Air America , who left military careers and gave up the opportunity to earn military pensions to join the CIA operation in the 1970's.

"Our understanding is, it would couple with military time and that would put me over 22 years," retired pilot Jack Knotts told us.

Knotts, who flew missions in Vietnam and Laos, is disabled and lives in a Tampa apartment. "I am faced with having to make two or three decisions about not renewing a prescription," he told us when describing his financial struggles.

Efforts in Congress to pass legislation giving Air America vets like Knotts benefits and civil service status have failed, but Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) was able to pass legislation directing the Office of National Intelligence to study whether former employees of the CIA owned airline deserve them.

According to the newly released report, while Air America employees "supported U.S. operations and worked alongside government and military employees, this study finds no factual basis to support the claim that employees of Air America were or should be considered Federal employees."

"We're hoping people will take up our cause," Gary Bisson, a former Air America employee tells the I-Team.

Bisson says he and others are only seeking in the range of a million dollars to help the declining number of surviving pilots and mechanics who worked for Air America.

He says the long-delayed report by the Director of National Intelligence is a blow to the effort. "Congress can go forward, but it makes it tougher."

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These courageous individuals risked their lives to rescue downed airmen in N Vietnam when the U.S. Air Force did not have the capability to do the mission. These folks worked for a CIA owned and operated airline. Air America employees were not contractors like Blackwater USA or Brown and Root employees of the present era. The CIA owned Air America from 1959 to 1975. Folks that worked for Air America worked for the U.S. Government and risked their lives on a daily basis in the secret war in Laos. Now the same Civil Service employees that work for the Director of National Intelligence is denying them the benefits that the CIA employees receive. How is that for patriotism and fairness? 240 or more Air America and Civil Air Transport employees gave their lives and this is the thank the Director of National Intelligence is giving them.



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