

The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War - Yablonka
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This story is courtesy of "Military Heritage Magazine" and Marc Philip Yablonka.

The ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE VIETNAM WAR contends that during the Vietnam War the Central Intelligence Agency's wings in Indochina, Air America, "transported opium grown by U.S.-backed Hmong tribesmen in northeastern Laos. The sale of opium was key to the Hmong's financial survival, and Air America proved vital to this drug-based lifeline."

However, the Encyclopedia is not the only publication to have maligned Air America so grossly, its former personnel feel, as regards what they did, not only in Laos, but also in Cambodia and Vietnam. In addition to several other books perhaps spurned by the secretive nature of their work, they say their image was tarnished even further by the 1990 Carrolco Films release AIR AMERICA, starring Mel Gibson and Robert Downey, Jr., adapted from a far more credible book by historian Christopher Robbins. The film painted them as fanciful, crazed, drug-profiteering pilots. They feel the real Air America bore no resemblance to how they were portrayed by Hollywood. "The word on the street was that Hollywood had it out for the CIA and since we were an extension of that, we got the brunt of it," said former Air America pilot and Richmond, Calif. resident Joe Mish who flew in Vietnam between 1964 and '67.

Though some former Air America personnel have admitted to having been "lightly entertained" by the film, Willie Parker of Fairfield-Suisun, Calif., a former Air America crew chief, was not entertained in the least. Parker, today a San Francisco International Airport-based aircraft systems maintenance controller responsible for the air-worthiness of United Airlines' entire worldwide fleet, put it succinctly: "I would be satisfied if you took out everything the actors did in the film. Absolutely nothing that happened in it was accurate."

Just what is accurate about the real airline? This much is declassified: Air America was a conglomerate of the CIA, to be sure. However, its evolution can be traced back to its predecessor, Civil Air Transport. CAT was noteworthy because it was the brain child of General Claire Chenault, World War II founder of the Flying Tigers. Chenault established the contract carrier of troops and materiel in 1947 in support of the efforts of Chiang Kai-Shek, against the eventual take-over of China by communist forces led by Chairman Mao. In 1949, when China did fall and the Generalissimo escaped to Taiwan (then Formosa), CAT went with him. In 1950, Chinese and American share holders of the company sold it to the CIA.

By the late 1950's and early 1960's, the emergence of Air America basically paralleled the expanding U.S. involvement in Indochina. The clandestine nature of its mission in Indochina was further enhanced by its steadfast refusal, unlike in Vietnam, to capitulate to an increasing suspicion over its efforts by an inquisitive press corps. No one from the media was ever allowed to accompany an operation. "Air America supported covert and paramilitary activities, flying missions in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, where it ferried people and supplies when the use of U.S. Military aircraft was undesirable. Personnel carried by Air America included visiting VIPs (e.g., former Vice President Nixon in 1965), prisoners, U.S. casualties and CIA operatives from Special Operations Groups (SOG) and the Phoenix Program," according, accurately, to the ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE VIETNAM WAR.

Air America was also noted for carrying employees of the United States Agency for International Development as well. USAID took it upon itself to supply villages throughout Indochina with vastly needed food stuffs and material with which to repair villes that had been blown asunder by the war. Their job, Indochina hands agree, was one of positive

psychological warfare designed, as President Lyndon Johnson had declared, to "win hearts and minds."

Perhaps, in the case of USAID's agenda, hearts and minds were won, even if only temporarily and until the next fire fight destroyed their homes again. Nonetheless, it was Air America that facilitated that good, whether it meant bringing in cement for buildings or rice for impoverished villagers to eat.

And one is hard-pressed to find publications that speak of the heart with which Air America's personnel, from pilots to ground crew, did these jobs. The film certainly did not. It made no mention of the fact that Air America personnel being civilian (though most had prior military experience as aviators) did not have to be there. It did not say that, contrary to the GIs they often ferried into battle and the Saigon brass that observed the war from afar, they could walk away at a moment's notice. Few if any did.

One such devoted pilot was Vince Clark. Clark had been a World War II flyer before signing up to fly the seven-seater Twin Beech, C-46, 47 and De Havilland Caribou cargo plane for AA. "One time I was up at Dong Ha on the 17th Parallel and flew a bunch of Marines out. They were crying, saying 'I'm going home.' Man they were so grateful," Clark recalls.

So too were the hundreds of Vietnamese refugees that he helped get out of Saigon on a C-130 bound for Guam on 14 April 1975, only 16 days before Saigon fell. By then a staffer at the Defense Attaché's Office of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, where he was posted after being grounded for high blood pressure, Clark did not stop at loading passengers onto the plane. He went with them all the way back to El Toro Marine Corps Air Station in Orange County, Calif. "The C-130 had no seats. All the baggage was in the back, hundreds of refugees knee to knee," he reflects. "We were so overloaded, we were glad to get to Guam."

Now 76, the Novato, Calif. retiree, even as a young pilot, could never have fit the description of an opium-running customer of the infamous White Rose Saloon in Vientiane. (It was there that Laotian bar girls were known to pleasure, literally under the tables of the famed establishment, anyone who aided the war effort against the communist Pathet Lao).

To be sure, rogues existed in Air America, but they would be the first to tell you that they were rebels WITH a cause. Mish, a 66-year-old building contractor who flew the Twin Beech and DC-3s during his post-USAF tenure in Air America, stressed that it did far greater good than bad. He does admit that he himself "pulled the devil's tail" from time to time. "I would fly down back roads with an empty load in a Twin Beech and fly through Viet Cong road blocks. I'd look right into their faces as they would be swinging around to fire."

Yet there is another side to Mish. He recalled a mission where his DC-3 served as a troop transport taking some badly needed replacements to a practically deserted outpost near the DMZ in Quang Tri Province. This was a mission that not only did regular Air Force pilots not want; they would not have had permission granted them even if they had. He flew to the outpost with no lights so as to avert a Viet Cong attack in a tropical downpour typical of Vietnam; visibility near zero. But there placements got to the deserted outpost safely. A year or so later, a famous battle involving the U.S. Marines and a massive loss of life would take place in that outpost which came to be known as the Siege at Khe Sanh.

Meanwhile the covert Laos connection to the war, one that Washington claimed never existed, paralleled Air America's efforts in Vietnam and Cambodia. The Hmong tribesmen supported the covert operations of the CIA in Laos against the Pathet Lao. And while no one in Air America denies that opium could conceivably have been transported from battle to

battle along with those who were known to grow it, AA is adamant that, unlike their portrayal in the film AIR AMERICA, no one transported it for profit of any kind.

"I never knowingly transported any opium," said former Air America chopper pilot Ted Hellmers from his home in San Diego, from which he sells real estate since a helicopter crash not of his own making terminated his career flying for the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

While doing "stick time," as chopper pilots refer to it, assisting in putting out a fire, Hellmers' bird suffered a mid-air collision with a U.S. Forest Service helicopter, plummeting him and his co-pilot, a fellow Air America alumnus, to the ground. The co-pilot died in the crash. Hellmers' desire was to keep on flying afterwards, but the FAA was sufficiently concerned about his ability to fly future, more technically advanced helicopters in view of the mishap. It pulled his ticket.

"We hadn't the time nor the right to search anyone's baggage when we transported them. Plus there was a war going on," Clark stressed. "We were a one-man band too. Do the paperwork, run the passengers' manifest, put oil in the engine. Can you imagine that? In a bleep in' war zone?" Mish added.

Still the misfit image followed many personnel home from the war. For crusty and colorful characters like Marvin "Windy" Wingrove, 78-year-old Novato, Calif. retiree who flew everything from P-38's in Africa to P-51's in Europe during World War II, it was no different. "I went looking for a new car and the salesman flat out insisted that I had hauled dope all over Southeast Asia," Wingrove said.

While he did not fly any narcotics around Southeast Asia, Wingrove did fly the noted Bell 204 and 205 "Huey" Series helicopters in the region, along with the fixed wing C-47 "Gooney Bird" out of Saigon, Vientiane and Udorn, Thailand. It was there that Air America maintained three of its strategic launching sites. Another was the secretive jungle hide away at Long Tieng, Laos. Also known as LS20A, short for Lima Site 20 Alternate, it was the base of operations for the fierce Hmong and their leader, General Vang Pao.

Wingrove had joined AA in 1965 and stayed with it until 1974. Prior to that, in 1959, still in the Army, he was charged with flying throughout Laos the late Dr. Tom Dooley, who wrote several books about his experiences administering to the health needs of Indochina's hill tribes. He flew the volunteer doctor in a "well-used" Piper Apache that had been the gift of the citizenry of St. Louis. But Wingrove would be the first to tell you that he also flew some of God's other creatures in Indochina:

"I flew pigs from one village to the next in Vietnam for one whole week and every damn take off, it never failed. By the time I would get to the end of the runway, they would crap everywhere. The next week I flew rice all around. I'll be damned if, right after that, rice didn't start growing in the floorboards of the plane."

For Wingrove, the humor doesn't stop there. "Anybody ever tell you about Shakey Calhoun?" he asks while taking a swig from a bottle of the GI's old favorite, Vietnamese Ba Muoi Ba (33) Beer, at Vo's Restaurant in Oakland, Calif., where he had congregated along with Clark and Mish.

"Shakey was a C-47 pilot. He smoked. In 1967 you weren't anybody in Air America unless you had a gold Rolex. They were 950 bucks in those days. While flying one day, he took off his watch to admire it, got a cigarette, reached in his pocket and got a book of matches with only one match left. He lit the cigarette and tossed his Rolex right out the window of his plane. The last time I saw him he said he was going to bronze that match for stupidity's sake."

But even a great storyteller like Wingrove gets wistful when he remembers one fact: "There was one thing you never got used to - getting shot at," he says. "Some of the guys up in Laos were there over ten years. Ten years of getting shot at every day," Mish added.

With imminent danger forever at hand, what was it then that enticed this remarkable crew of men, all now middle-aged or seniors, to take the risks they did for Air America?

"One good thing about flying over there was that, if you lived through the first year or so, you really got proficient because you flew hundreds of hours. I looked at my old logbook the other day. Twenty-one legs in the {Mekong} Delta in eleven hours," said Clark. "As far as I was concerned, it was just as challenging as flying combat in the Air Force. When you cracked that 300-foot ceiling, when there was no real good ILS (instrument landing) or landing strip, when you took a load in on a real short runway, it felt pretty good. I told myself 'man I did something.'"

(Air America pilots were notorious for bringing their aircraft in safely, landing on runways so short or at such high altitudes that it defied logic that they could walk away from their planes). In spite of that, there exists a memorial to 241 air and ground crew who did not return at the University of Texas in Dallas, which also houses Air America's archives. Because Air America personnel were civilian, their KIA's do not qualify to be added to the 58,000 names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

One of the oft-reprinted images of the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975 is of what many feel may have been the last helicopter out of South Vietnam before the communist encroachment. It is of a gray colored Huey atop one of the compounds inside the U.S. Embassy, rotor at bay, while frantic Vietnamese are climbing a ladder to its launch pad, scrambling to board her. While it is still, 24 years hence, unknown whether it was indeed the last chopper out, one unmistakable fact is that the photo is of an Air America helicopter flown by an unidentified Air America pilot.

Today, former Air America personnel and their families are lobbying the U.S Postal Service in hopes of getting that famous picture issued as a stamp in recognition of their deeds. Anyone interested in learning more about Air America can log onto the web site of the Air America Association: www.air-america.org.