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CIA honors Reno pilot for role in 'secret war'

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A Reno pilot and other veterans of Air America are scheduled to gather Friday at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., to unveil a painting of an unusual air battle and honor the memory of a war that never was.

The painting by British aviation artist Keith Woodcock memorializes an encounter between an Air America helicopter and two North Vietnamese biplanes over Laos in 1968. Air America was a CIA-owned company that supported American intelligence agents. The copter shot down the two enemy planes -- the only time that gunfire from a helicopter shot down a fixed-wing plane.

The pilot, Reno stockbroker Ted Moore, 68, said he's honored that he had a part in a battle chosen to commemorate the work of Air America.

"It feels pretty good," Moore said. "I'm glad to see the recognition and that the government at least accepts the fact that we were part of the combat operations in the (Vietnam) War."

Moore joined Air America after six years as an Army helicopter gunship pilot in Vietnam and a flight instructor at Fort Rucker, Ala. Although they often flew in combat conditions, the civilian employees weren't supposed to engage the enemy.

But Moore and his crewman, Glenn Woods, shot down a North Vietnamese plane as it was attacking a secret American radar base in Laos in January 1968.

The base, called Site 85, was at Pha Thi, about 160 miles from Hanoi. The radar was used to direct U.S. warplanes to strikes in North Vietnam.

On Jan. 11, 1968, a North Vietnamese plane flew over Site 85; and the next day, two Russian-built "Colt" biplanes swooped in. One carried bombs, and the other had missiles and machine guns, Moore said.

"It blew me away to see biplanes," he said. "It was like we traveled back in time to World War I Europe."

Moore was flying a UH-1 (Huey) helicopter and was moving ammunition at the base during the attack. He chased the two biplanes while Woods, his flight engineer, fired an AK-47 rifle at the Colts.

One of the planes caught fire and crashed. The other flew beneath the helicopter and slammed into a mountainside, Moore said.

Americans salvaged electronics from one of the crashed planes.

"They reverse-engineered the stuff, and that allowed American planes to know when the MIGs were headed in for an attack," Moore said. "That saved a lot of American air crews. I think that's the best thing that happened."

Moore also helped rescue thousands of civilians in Laos in March 1968, picked up downed American pilots and delivered and picked up CIA teams that were infiltrating positions along the Laos-Vietnam border.

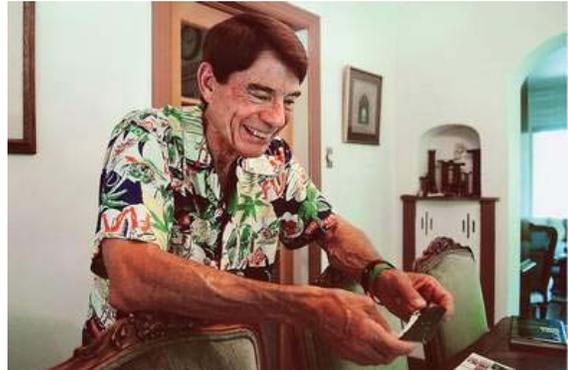
The painting "depicts a singular aerial victory in the Vietnam War and will soon be on display as a lasting and inspiring reminder of the heroism and courage of the employees of Air America," said George Little, a CIA spokesman.

Such victories were costly. At least 86 Air America personnel were killed in action, beginning with flights over China, Korea and Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam, and continuing through the Vietnam War, government sources said.

Former employees are seeking civil service benefits, but courts have ruled they were not federal employees. Efforts by U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., to get Congress to change their status have failed.

"Typical Washington politics, we exist up until it comes to benefits, then we don't exist again," Moore said. "I'm doing OK, but some of these guys could use the benefits, and there's fewer than 500 of us left."

Moore said the unveiling of the painting will be a step toward acknowledging the contributions of Air America veterans.



Former CIA pilot Ted Moore of Reno holds a piece from one of the two aircraft that he helped shoot down during the Vietnam War. (ANDY BARRON/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)

Reid has continued to reintroduce legislation that would classify the Air America veterans as government employees.

"Air America personnel performed heroic service to our nation, executing dangerous flight missions in communist China, during the Korean War and throughout the Vietnam War," Reid said.

"These are American heroes, many of whom were killed in action while flying dangerous missions for the CIA. They deserve to be recognized as such and, at a minimum, receive the same benefits that other federal employees receive."