

Steve Sebelius

It's long past time to help Air America vets with retirement

By STEVE SEBELIUS LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

May 21, 2016 - 8:00 pm

After their RF-4C Phantom jet was shot down by an enemy MiG-21 over northern Laos in January 1972, Air Force aviators John Stiles and Bob Mock found themselves in a thick jungle, dodging enemy patrols and hoping for rescue.

Although they heard American fighters overhead, their maydays went unanswered; enemy forces had captured two emergency beacons, and were trying to use their signals to lure U.S. pilots into a trap.

“Early in the afternoon, the enemy showed up at the crash site and began their search for Bob and I,” Stiles recalled in an email written this year. “With little hope that anyone would answer our call, we suddenly heard the voice of an Air America pilot, telling us that Air America was coming in with two helicopters and they’d be back in an hour — the longest hour of our lives.

“I cannot tell you how grateful we were that Air Americans were there for us, without excuses and without unnecessary delay, and without regard to the fact that the cost they might have to pay could be with their lives,” Stiles added.

Stiles and Mock are far from the only Americans rescued during Vietnam by the pilots and crew members of Air America, a once-secret CIA airline that conducted classified intelligence missions throughout the Far East from shortly after World War II to 1975. During its years of operations, nearly 90 of its members were killed in action, and another eight are still listed as MIA. That photo of people climbing a ladder to a waiting helicopter on the roof of the American embassy during the evacuation of Vietnam? That was an Air America pilot.

Now, Air America veterans and their surviving spouses are fighting a new battle, this against bureaucracy that’s blocked them from getting federal retirement credits. Air Americans, as they’re called, were once considered to be federal employees. But in 1986, the federal Office of Personnel Management changed the definition of federal employee, and Air America pilots and crews were excluded.

Nevada U.S. Sen. Harry Reid has taken the lead on the issue, after he met with five Air America vets in Las Vegas more than a decade ago. But legislation to restore benefits for these vets has been bogged down in the Senate, either because bills failed to pass or because lawmakers were awaiting the results of a since-completed CIA study.

This year, volunteer lobbyists tried to get Armed Services Committee Chairman Sen. John McCain to put Air America retirement language into the defense-spending bill.

But that effort failed, as did an idea to amend the bill in committee, ostensibly because Senate staffers feared other committees might assert jurisdiction over the matter. (The cost for the measure — which must be made up by cuts elsewhere in the defense budget — is estimated at \$43 million over 10 years.)

So, likely this week, Reid will attempt what's being called a make-or-break move, amending the defense bill on the Senate floor. He's signed up fellow Democrat Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., as a co-sponsor, but there are Republicans sympathetic to the idea. (Neal Patel, spokesman for Sen. Dean Heller, said his boss "has not yet seen the details of this proposal, but is very supportive to ensure those who have risked their lives to protect America receive the benefits they have earned and deserve.")

It's hard to imagine how anyone — regardless of party — would say no to Americans who served their country, albeit covertly. It seems like offering federal retirement credits and back pay is quite literally the least we can do to recognize the bravery and skill of pilots who flew in the shadows, but were there when our soldiers and aviators needed them the most.

Steve Sebelius is a Review-Journal political columnist and co-host of "PoliticsNOW," airing at 5:30 p.m. Sundays on 8NewsNow. Follow him on Twitter (@SteveSebelius) or reach him at 702-387-5276 or SSebelius@reviewjournal.com.