

washingtonpost.com

Finally, Public Honors for a Long-Secret Victory

By Steve Vogel
Sunday, July 22, 2007; LZ11

On Jan. 12, 1968, as helicopter pilot Ted Moore watched in amazement, a formation of North Vietnamese air force AN-2 Colt biplanes attacked a secret U.S. Air Force radar base on a mountaintop in Laos.

Two Russian-built biplanes dropped mortars, fired rockets and strafed the field with machine-gun fire, seeking to destroy a critical outpost in the U.S. air war against North Vietnam.

To Moore, who was in the air flying an Air America Bell helicopter -- a civilian version of the UH-1 Huey -- the scene was reminiscent of a different time and place.

"It really did look like World War I," Moore, 68, recently recalled. "It was a Red Baron type of attack."

The remarkable aerial fight that ensued has been memorialized in a new painting by artist Keith Woodcock. Next week, Moore and other veterans of Air America will attend the work's unveiling in the new Intelligence Art Gallery at CIA headquarters in Langley.

Moore was an Army helicopter pilot who had been recruited to fly for Air America, a CIA-owned and -operated proprietary that supported intelligence agents and military personnel in Asia for more than 30 years during the Cold War.

Site 85, a secret radar station 15 miles from the North Vietnamese border atop one of the highest mountains in Laos, gave American bombers the ability to attack in all weather, a critical capability during the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign. Moore and his flight mechanic, Glenn Woods, were on a mission delivering artillery ammunition in the area when they spotted the drab-green biplanes attacking the base. Moore radioed a warning to agents on the ground, but the attack killed several Hmong guerrillas defending the base.

Moore's helicopter was supposed to be unarmed, but Woods had packed a piece of contraband -- an AK-47. "When Glenn told me he had an AK-47 with him, I decided we'd make chase," Moore recalled.

Moore said he never had a chance to ask Woods why he was carrying the assault rifle, though it was not a huge surprise. "If you go down and don't have a weapon, you're toast," Moore said. "Some of the crew chiefs packed heavy."

The Colts -- versatile, Russian-built biplanes first flown in 1947 -- were faster than the helicopter, Moore said, but he gained on the planes when they flew low and then tried to climb in the mountainous terrain.

Advertisement

The Orange Savings Account

4.50% APY
No Fees. No Minimums.

ING DIRECT
Save Your Money

Open Now Member FDIC

"I closed on them and made a dive," Moore recalled. "I knew I had one chance to get them, and if I missed, I was a goner."

Woods fired the AK-47 from the door of the Huey. One of the planes immediately crashed and burned, while a second plane, also hit, flew on for several miles, then crashed into a ridge.

Moore and Woods thus had shot down fixed-wing aircraft from a helicopter -- "a singular aerial victory in the entire history of the Vietnam war," according to historian Timothy N. Castle, author of "One Day Too Long: Top Secret Site 85 and the Bombing of North Vietnam."

Moore was hauled before superiors and interrogated, but after initial consternation his actions were commended. "I was a little out of line in what I did," he recalled.

When Woods made it back to his home in Thailand, his wife, Sawang Reed, knew something had happened. "He was happy about something, but he'd say, 'Honey, I can't talk about it,' " she recalled.

Two months after the aerial battle, Site 85 was destroyed and 12 U.S. Air Force personnel were killed during a raid by North Vietnamese commandos.

Woods died the following year in a helicopter crash, leaving behind his wife and infant daughter. Reed, who remarried and now lives in California, has recently reunited with members of the Woods family and will attend the July 27 unveiling with her daughter.

"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.

Some 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, according to William Merrigan, 72, a McLean resident who served as legal counsel for Air America from 1962 to 1975.

"A lot of them were killed down there, and they deserve recognition that they really haven't received," said Merrigan, now a Department of the Army attorney working in Alexandria. Former employees are seeking civil service benefits, but courts have ruled they were not federal employees. Efforts to get Congress to change their status have failed.

Moore said the unveiling of the painting will be a step toward acknowledging the contributions of Air America veterans. "There's some recognition that we did exist, a recognition that these guys were in combat," Moore said.

Bolling Opens Arnold Gate

In 1934, Army Air Corps Lt. Col. Henry "Hap" Arnold took off from Bolling Field in Washington, leading a flight of 10 B-10 bombers on a mission to Fairbanks, Alaska.

The 8,290-mile round-trip mission, aimed at demonstrating the long-range strategic bombing capabilities of the new aircraft, earned Arnold a second Mackay Trophy, the prestigious flight award. Arnold would serve as commanding general of the Army Air Forces during World War II and later would become the first and only five-star general in the history of the U.S. Air Force.

More than 70 years after the historic Alaska flight, Arnold has returned to Bolling. At a ceremony July 9, the Bolling Air Force Base main gate was named the Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold Gate.

Robert Arnold of Sonoma, Calif., the general's grandson, helped unveil a plaque depicting the general. He noted that his famous grandfather never took himself too seriously, though he is a fixture in documentaries about World War II. "Sometimes the History Channel looks like Arnold's home movies," Robert Arnold remarked.


The gate did not previously have a formal name, although it was often unofficially called the Malcolm X gate because of its location at the end of Malcolm X Avenue.

The gate reopened after a 10-month renovation that Bolling officials say will improve the flow of traffic coming onto the base during the morning rush hour.

Military Matters is published twice each month in the Extras. Steve Vogel may be reached at vogels@washpost.com.

Post a Comment

Ad

Join the discussion. Sponsored by Cisco.  welcome to the human network. CISCO.

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Your washingtonpost.com User ID will be displayed with your comment.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Register](#)

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[1/20/09: End of an Error](#)

Anti-Bush messages - funny and not. Bumper stickers, buttons, t-shirts.

www.cafepress.com/beatbushgear

[Coffee Exposed](#)

A shocking secret coffee co's don't want you to know.

www.coffeefool.com

[Peace Ringtone](#)

Send this ringtone to your phone right now!

RingRingMobile.com