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Pilots' Newest CIA Mission Is To Get Benefits

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ST. PETERSBURG - They come to Siam Garden restaurant once a month, having developed a real love for the cuisine while flying out of Thailand for the Central Intelligence Agency.

“Lies and war stories,” says Charlie Weitz. That's the usual talk among these veterans of Air America and other CIA-run airlines that operated in Southeast Asia from 1950 to 1975.

“It used to be women and drinking and carousing around, but we can't even remember that,” deadpans Weitz, 71.

The Marine veteran with the gray flattop rescued 11 downed American fliers as a civilian helicopter pilot.

Weitz, a Sarasota resident, still wears a thick gold bracelet bearing his last name. A lot of the Air America crews wore them. If they were captured, the chain links might bribe natives to help them escape. That was the story, anyway.

“If you got caught, they'd just cut your arm off and take the bracelet,” Jim Hyder says.

The 65-year-old Tampa resident served as a flight mechanic on CIA missions.

Most of the comrades reminiscing over curry chicken and Thai-style salmon flew airplanes or helicopters as civilians during the Vietnam era. They supplied food and arms to the Laotian military factions and tribal allies who fought North Vietnam-backed Communists in Laos. They transported troops and evacuated wounded and rescued U.S. airmen.

France recently awarded the Legion of Honor to seven Americans - including two South Florida residents - who flew for Air America's predecessor, Civil Air Transport. The honorees braved withering fire to supply besieged French soldiers at the 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu. The defeat in northwest Vietnam ended France's colonial rule in Indochina.

In 2001, the CIA finally recognized all who flew with Air America by awarding them a Unit Citation. At that event, the airmen received commemorative medallions bearing the number 243 - for the fliers who died in missions for CIA-controlled airlines. The survivors complain that Uncle Sam hasn't really recognized them. Represented by the Air America Association, an affiliation of former employees of Civil Air Transport and Air America and their families, they're pushing two bills in Congress to grant them civil service status and retirement benefits for their CIA years.

“There's only 500 of us, so it's not like millions and millions of dollars,” says Jack Knotts of Tampa, the association's immediate past president. Knotts, 80, flew with Air America from 1965 till 1969.

Perks And Perils

Though some say they knew the dangers when they volunteered, Hyder says he didn't. In 1966, he answered a Miami Herald classified ad seeking aircraft mechanics to work in Southeast Asia.

“And it was all noncombat flying. They told me, 'You'd be hauling schoolbooks and rice and Peace Corps volunteers in Laos,'” he says.

“Well, the first time up- country, when I started getting shot at, I realized it wasn't exactly what was happening.” They shipped a lot of rice and a lot of “hard rice” - ammunition.

But the money was right. Hyder says he made \$36,000 one year - the equivalent of more than \$100,000 today - flying 160 to 170 hours a month. He was young, single and admired the Thai women.

“I'm making good money and I loved every bit of it.”

Henry Melish felt the same.

“We were young kids then. We didn't know any better. It was fantastic.”

The 66-year-old Treasure Island resident rides a Harley, wearing a vest with the insignia of CIA-controlled airlines. He flew C-47s for Southern Air Transport in the 1960s, stationed at various times in Thailand, Vietnam and Taiwan.

Grant Walters loved the perks. The 66-year-old Tampa man trained pilots on various kinds of aircraft, including STOL aircraft - short takeoff and landing - capable of using 200-foot jungle airstrips.

He got a month's vacation each year and three months extra every three years, plus he could fly anywhere for a pittance. ` I went around the world on TWA for \$212, ` he recalls.

Not Like In The Movie

The veterans find it unfortunate that most of the world knows about them only from the 1990 Mel Gibson movie ` Air America, ` which linked the CIA to the opium trade in Laos. It was based on a 1979 book by Christopher Robbins.

` It's bull, ` Melish says.

Corrupt pilots operating on their own were quickly sent packing, he says. Any time pilots grew suspicious of the cargo, they called drug-tracking dogs to check it out.

` We had trained dogs at every facility. `

The local veterans' monthly gatherings draw up to 20 people, including wives, girlfriends and regular guests, such as World War II cargo pilot Peter J. Goutiere.

Goutiere, 90, of Port Richey, flew 680 trips over The Hump, the 20,000-foot-plus Himalayan mountains, where winds could reach hurricane force.

Some wouldn't mind returning to that edgy sort of flying; it made body and mind work together in ways just not possible in U.S. suburbia. Weitz says he tried to volunteer for duty in Afghanistan after Sept. 11, but was told he was too old. The recruiter told him he could get shot down.

` I said, 'You didn't [care] when I was shot down three times in Laos -- why are you worried about me now?' ` Philip Morgan can be reached at (813) 259-7609.

This story can be found at: <http://www.tampatrib.com/Baylife/MGBNOQ79S7E.html>

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