

Jesse Walton joined CAT, Inc., a Delaware corporation, on May 16, 1957. Two years later, the company's name was changed to Air America, Inc. The company was owned by the U.S. government and administered by the Central Intelligence Agency. The government also owned Southern Air Transport (SAT), a Florida corporation. During his employment, Jesse was transferred to SAT, where he flew DC-4s and DC-6s.

In the early 1970s, SAT acquired a Boeing 727 commercial jet. Jesse told me he was excited about the opportunity to fly it, given his seniority with SAT. But it was not to be. The U.S. government also owned Intermountain Aviation, an Arizona corporation that employed several former CAT, Inc. employees. Some of those pilots had more seniority than Jesse, and they were transferred to SAT to fly the 727. Jesse was then relocated to Vientiane, Laos, to fly the C -123. No civilian company could have made such a switch without paperwork, but the U.S. government had options unavailable to private corporations.

Born in 1928, Jesse passed away at the age of 98. He is survived by his wife, Somporn; his daughter, Janie Stifler, and her husband, Jim; his grandson, Jimmy; and his granddaughter, Annabel. Jesse loved his family, home on Marco Island, and his precious memories of Air America and the many friendships he cultivated throughout his flying career.

I never met a kinder man than Jesse Walton. Although I did not know him personally during his years with these companies, we communicated often after I began researching Air America. He shared information about CAT, Inc. that I did not have—and that I doubt anyone else had either. Later, he wrote an account of his experiences after Air America, which I am sharing here.

Rest in peace, Jesse. You will be missed.

Respectfully,

Allen Cates

Flying for Bellomy-Lawson, Miami, back in the 1980s

Things have changed over the years. Bellomy-Lawson is now long gone.

It was about eight hours of flying time from Miami to Georgetown, Guyana, with a short refueling stop in Puerto Rico, about halfway there.

Bellomy-Lawson Aviation had contracts to fly general cargo in its DC-6 aircraft. The cargo included a lot of baby chicks. I asked why so many baby chicks were needed. Couldn't they raise chickens in Guyana? The answer was that they had all the diseases known to man. It was better just to buy the baby chicks.

Guyana, formerly British Guiana, was a poverty-stricken country on the north coast of South America at the time. It is thought to be the only English-speaking country in South America.

We landed at the Georgetown, Guyana, airport. A crew bus drove us to a hotel. We were warned not to go outside the hotel because of the serious crime problem. We would be lucky to make it back to the hotel.

Rupert McDeci was a European type of guy. His wife was a Bombay, India, type of lady. Both were very nice people. Rupert worked at the airport and liked to make friends with the aircrews, often asking favors of those bringing things down from Miami.

On one trip, Rupert and his wife came to the hotel to ask a favor. Rupert said he was too embarrassed to ask, so he let his wife do the asking. She explained that she liked to sing at church but didn't have a church songbook. Could I bring her a songbook from Miami?

On my next flight to Guyana, I brought a songbook, and it brightened the day for Rupert and his wife. Rupert also asked me to bring them a small radio with batteries. Small, everyday items were treasures to them.

Rupert and his wife invited us to lunch at their house. Rupert also took us to visit the local zoo, which had many creatures I had never seen before.

I had been rebuilding my old wooden sailboat, built in Yokohama, Japan, in 1960. Rupert said he would get me a load of lumber for the rebuilding job. I was also interested in the beautiful macaw parrots. In most cases, we returned to Miami empty, so bringing the lumber and parrots wouldn't be a problem.

Bellomy-Lawson had other contracts flying cargo to the islands of the Caribbean. There were also charter contracts to fly racehorses to Bogotá, Colombia; electronics to Cúcuta, Colombia; medicine to Nicaragua; United Nations supplies to Havana, Cuba; and cargo to Chetumal, Mexico. The chief pilot scheduled me for some of these flights.

The flights to Colombia were always a problem. When we landed at Barranquilla for fuel, a couple of guys in black suits met the airplane and asked to look over the cargo. They claimed we were carrying contraband that would be confiscated and that we would be going to jail.

However, the guys in black suits said that if we gave them $500, they would make things right.

They refused to sell us fuel.

The company gave me $5,000 in cash to pay for fuel, landing fees, and such. There was no money for guys in black suits.

We had already filed a flight plan to fly to Cúcuta without any problem. The tower gave us taxi clearance, and we waved goodbye to the guys in black suits.

Unable to refuel at Barranquilla, we were nearly out of fuel when we landed at Cúcuta, only to be told that no fuel was available there. The Cúcuta customer was happy to receive his cargo, and Bellomy-Lawson got paid.

They were short of parking space at the airport, so they found us enough fuel to fly to nearby Aruba. The cost of fuel was less than at other places. I offered to pay a bit more, but they refused the additional money.

Several months had passed since I had flown to Guyana. I asked the chief pilot to schedule me for the next flight there, but he refused, saying that I had to fly to Aruba.

While in Aruba, we received news that the Guyana flight I had requested had crashed in St. Lucia, killing everyone aboard. The DC-6 had taken off from St. Lucia, lost two engines, and never made it back to the airport.

Aircraft maintenance at Bellomy-Lawson was good. I never had any problems. I was aware that these were old airplanes. No doubt there were overweight takeoffs and landings and other abuses.

After my friends were killed in the crash at St. Lucia, I decided to hang up my wings and call it a day.

Jesse