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Air America fights new foe

CIA-run crews demand military recognition, civil service benefits

BY R. NORMAN MOODY
 FLORIDA TODAY

Merritt Island resident Marius Burke was at the controls of an H-34 Sikorsky helicopter, flying deep into Laotian territory at the height of the Vietnam War.

His mission: Rescue two downed Navy pilots from across the heavily guarded Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Air Force fighter jets responded to Burke's call for air cover, but quickly withdrew because he and his crew were civilians about whom the fighter pilots knew nothing. Burke's mission, which failed because of the lack of backup, was secret.

Burke and crew worked for the CIA-operated Air America. Under the guise of a commercial airline, its employees also served alongside U.S. and allied intelligence agents and military personnel in the Far East, often in dangerous combat and combat-support roles.


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Giving aid. Judy Porter of Titusville shows a photo she took of an Air America helicopter delivering USAID materials to a remote village in Laos in 1973. Those who worked for the CIA-operated airline get neither military recognition nor civil service benefits for their service. Rik Jesse, FLORIDA TODAY

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But unlike the veterans of the armed forces, Air America's alumni get neither military recognition nor civil service benefits for their service. More than 30 years after the war, they're fighting again -- this time for equal treatment.

"We were all doing the same thing," said Burke, among as many as 500 former Air Americans nationwide and about 25 who are retired and live in Brevard County. "There is that common bond."

Air America was formed from what was first known as Civil Air Transport -- a commercial airline similar to today's Delta and American airlines -- that was started in the 1940s.

"In 1950, they were purchased by the Central Intelligence Agency," said Jim Glerum, a retired senior CIA agent who lives in McLean, Va.

He was an operations assistant for Air America.

"They were for all practical purpose the agency's air arm," he said.

Air America operated like any other airline, ferrying passengers and cargo in Asia.

There were several regular customers such as the Air Force, the U.S. Consulate, USAID and other nongovernmental organizations.

Those who flew for Air America did not hold military ranks, but had civilian titles common with airlines, such as captain and first officer.

Air America crews transported tens of thousands of troops and refugees, flew emergency medical missions and rescued downed airmen throughout Laos.

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Missions

- Civil Air Transport, predecessor to Air America, began commercial airline operations in China using surplus war aircraft in 1946.
- In 1950, the CIA bought the airline to use in missions to fight communism in Asia.
- The airline was renamed Air America in 1959.
- Air America consisted of pilots, copilots, flight mechanics, and airfreight specialists who flew aircraft out of Laos and Thailand.
- In 1975, Air America helped to evacuate U.S. military, government workers and South Vietnamese refugees during the fall of Saigon
- Air America ceased operations in 1976. Source: Air America Association

Movie not imitation of life

Many people may only know Air America from the 1990 action-comedy of the same name, starring Mel Gibson and Robert Downey Jr.

The plot: A young pilot is recruited into a secret and corrupt CIA airlift operation in Laos during the Vietnam War.

The movie wasn't a hit with the real Air America veterans.

"It's terrible. It's too stupid to even comment about. It's totally fictitious," said Judy Porter, secretary for the Air America Association who now lives in Port St. John.

-- R. Norman Moody, *FLORIDA TODAY*

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'Huge undertaking'

Through Air America, the United States supplied villagers in Laos, delivered ammunition during the Vietnam War and conducted intelligence operations in Asia, said Steve Maxner, deputy director of the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University.

"It was a huge undertaking," Maxner said.

Intelligence-gathering missions were routine and sometimes required flying low within reach of enemy fire.

"We had old World War II cameras," said Steve Stevens of Rockledge, who piloted Air America helicopters and other aircraft for 10 years.

"Probably one of the most important jobs we had was search and rescue," he said. "Essentially, we wound up doing what the military couldn't or wouldn't do."

The United States had been part of the Geneva Accords, which meant neutrality in Laos. The U.S. military was supposed to stay out, so Air America flew the missions that supplied villagers who held the North Vietnamese at bay, Burke said.

Coming clean

In 1980, Air America was dissolved, but Burke and others weren't eligible for benefits because they weren't appointed into civil service.

Changing that would have required revealing CIA ownership of Air America.

"There was such an aura of secrecy in what we did," Burke said.

It wasn't until 2001 that the CIA publicly acknowledged the role Air America played during the Cold War.

The Air America Association, which represents former Air America and Civil Air Transport employees and their spouses, has turned to lawmakers to come through with benefits, which have been denied by the



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Military aid. Marius Burke of Merritt Island was a pilot with Air America, often in dangerous combat and combat-support roles. Rik Jesse, FLORIDA TODAY



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Twin Otter. The DeHavilland STOL Twin-Otter 300 Series served Air America reliably in a number of air-taxi feeder airline and utility roles. It was able to carry up to 21 passengers plus baggage and operate from short, unprepared fields. Judy Porter, for Air America 1974



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The aircraft. A freelance photographer's 1974 work for Air America shows aircraft utilized by the CIA-operated airline. Those who flew for Air America did not hold military ranks, but had civilian titles common with airlines, such as captain and first officer. Air America veterans are hoping to get some of the same benefits their military counterparts have. Judy Porter, for Air America

federal Office of Management and Budget in Washington, D.C., and through the legal system.

'Fearless'

Air America veterans have begun a lobbying effort through Florida Sens. Mel Martinez and Bill Nelson and 24 U.S. representatives, seeking support for two bills pending before the Senate and the House.

Nevada lawmakers are the sponsors of the bills.

Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada, where as many as 30 former Air America employees live, introduced a bill that would grant the group civil service retirement.

The Air America veterans also have tried to be classified as military veterans, so they could be entitled to benefits.

The Air Force recently agreed to review the request.

Retired Navy Rear Adm. Henry Glindeman Jr. of Juno Beach flew airplanes off carriers during the Vietnam War.

He knew about Air America then and supports their benefit claims today.

"If a pilot went down somewhere he was not supposed to be flying, they often counted on Air America crews to rescue them. They would go anywhere," said Glindeman, who was an F-4 Phantom pilot and later the air wing commander on the USS Coral Sea.

"They were the most fearless pilots I've ever known," he said.

Didn't ask

Pilots and ground crews were recruited for Air America through word of mouth and advertising.

"We knew the CIA was in there," said Judy Porter, secretary for the Air America Association and a resident of Port St. John. "But it wasn't defined. We didn't question all the ins and outs."

Porter worked as a contract photographer for Air America while her late husband, Jack Porter, was a ground crew chief.

"Some of our people were in there for 10 to 15 years," she said.

But no one expected to be there long so they did not worry about retirement, said Bill Merrigan, who was an attorney for Air America between 1962 and 1976.

Merrigan still works for the Department of Defense and has 37 years in civil service. He continues to support his former colleagues from Air America and has helped as they push to get a bill through Congress.

"I'm still hoping it will go through," he said.

Many lost

The federal government has recognized the service of the men and women of Air America, 86 of whom died in action in China, Korea, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.

A commendation issued by the CIA in 2000 reads:

"During the hottest days of the Cold War, the air crews and ground personnel of Civil Air Transport and Air America gave unwavering service to the United States of America in the worldwide battle against communist oppression.

"Their actions speak eloquently of their skill, bravery, loyalty, and faith in themselves, each other and the United States of America."

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