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Air America alumni remember high times

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BY JAY PRICE - STAFF WRITER

Arthur Cheek, a Raleigh native who now lives in Weaverville after a life of globetrotting, flew harrowing missions all over Vietnam to secret jobs in dangerous places.

That wouldn't be odd except for one thing: He was a civilian, flying for a civilian company on missions that, in some cases, he s

"Let's see, how can I say this?" he said in a telephone interview. "We were inserting employees of USAID."



The airline he worked for did indeed fly people and But much of its work was for another federal agency.

Even now, more than three decades after Air Ameri employees of the company are still discreet, either i wants it.

The stories they can tell, though - and few people h told and told again this week at the Hilton North Ral convention, which runs through Sunday, is expecte their families.

Air America operated from 1950 through 1976, mos the same time as North Vietnam won the war.

That well-known photo of a helicopter on a Saigon r as many have said, a military chopper on the U.S. Embassy roof loading up the last diplomats. It was an Air America Huey on a

The company's motto was "Anything, anytime, anywhere, professionally." Among other things, it flew food and weapons to the CIA operatives into the jungle to work with locals, flew electronic eavesdropping missions and rescued downed air crews.

It also flew legitimate airline passengers and freight, living the corporate equivalent of a dual life. Indeed, some workers knew li former Air America executive who lives in Chapel Hill.

The pay was great, particularly for the pilots, who had a reputation for living hard and flying harder.

"They were living right on the edge, and I don't think too many people saved money up, they just lived to the hilt every day," Melton said.

Still, they were always professional in the cockpit, and sometimes their skill and bravery are forgotten in all the talk of drinking and partying.

"It was probably some of the toughest flying in the world, with minimal or no navigation aids, weather situations, smoke from all those F-4s shooting at you," he said.

'A normal childhood'

U.S. troops in Vietnam typically served a one-year tour of duty. Air America, though, was a civilian employer, so many of its workers stayed in Vietnam and lived together and the intensity of the job forged bonds that have held the association together.

"People were together for long periods, and in a situation no one else could really understand," Melton said. "Some flew upcountry and there was a chance they wouldn't come back."

Many brought their families over from the United States, or married locals.

There were so many families at Air America's Asian headquarters at Udon Thani, Thailand, that there was a K-12 school for all the children. Her stepfather, Jack Porter, was a mechanic who kept the aircraft flying and patched up all those bullet holes.

Her family lived in Thailand about six years, leaving when she was 14.

"It was a normal childhood, in my mind," she said. "I was the kid floating around in the monsoon on a raft made of styrofoam blocks, watching the F-4s, and being in awe of that blast of wind rushing past me."

Porter said that as a child, she didn't know about Air America's ties with the CIA, but it was clear that it had something to do with the war.

"There was all this security to get on the base, and the car traffic on the base would stop when a shot-up plane was coming in to land."

Much of the event this week is private, but if you happen to stumble into the bar at the Hilton, you might hear some of the stories. Moving the conference around the country and making it easier for new people to come often brings in fresh perspectives, Porter said.

The tales that the Air America employees will swap aren't all romantic derring-do and a few whiskeys too many at the Purple Palace. In 1970, 230 pilots and crew members were killed, and many of the tales have harsh endings.

Cheek tells one about the day he and his crew were sent to find the crew of a downed transport plane in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. They hovered a few feet above it, trying to see the crew.

They had been alive minutes earlier, talking on the radio. But U.S. ground forces trying to reach them had been driven away by the Viet Cong. Porter could figure out whether the Viet Cong had beat him to the wreck.

Suddenly he got his answer: a dark object soared up and bounced off his windshield. It was a hand grenade.

He got on the radio and talked the pilots of three F-100 jets that were passing nearby after a bombing mission into making sure they didn't hit the wreckage. He set his helicopter down.

There were still Viet Cong around the wrecked plane, and there was some shooting, he said without offering details.

He and his crew then found the U.S. pilot and Chinese co-pilot; both had been executed with shots to the head. The plane's thi

Times past

It was a harrowing day, and now Cheek figures that all those years since, living in the villa in Saigon, working in Saudi Arabia a over the U.S., they are all parts of a long and good life that easily might never have happened.

Cheek is 69 now. Lately, he said, he hasn't been feeling well, and the doctors want to take a good look at him soon because th

"That's OK, though," he said. "I left that rice paddy when I was 25 years old, and I figure every day since then has been on som

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