

Beetle Bailey

M.A. Bailey, nicknamed Beetle, was an Air Freight Specialist with Air America operations in Laos. Commonly called 'kickers,' their primary job was to load aircraft with various types of cargo that included rice for refugees and ammunition for troops fighting a war against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. The task involved ensuring the aircraft was loaded according to weight and balance specifications and to unload the plane at destinations throughout Laos. Often these loads were airdropped, and the kicker's job was to kick the cargo out the back or side of the aircraft depending on the aircraft type. Thus, the nickname 'kicker.' It was a demanding and strenuous task, and they were at the mercy of the pilots hoping they knew what they were doing, and the wartime conditions in Laos. Most hits from enemy gunfire occurred in the fuselage where the kickers were located making them more vulnerable than the pilots. All of them carried parachutes, and some survived a stricken aircraft by jumping, but most perished along with the pilots when a plane was shot down.

Air America's kickers were physically tough and mentally alert. They were an integral and necessary part of the crew and well respected for their ability.

And, sometimes they were used for other types of special project missions.

Tapping into the phone lines near Vinh, North Vietnam was planned for weeks. It was a hazardous mission. A Hughes 500 P helicopter flown by Dan Smith and Lloyd Lamonthe carried personnel into North Vietnam at low level under cover of night. The nap of the earth flight was accomplished using night goggles, and LORAN C, abbreviated for Long Range Navigation developed during WW-2. S-58T helicopters were used for search and rescue if needed but remained in Laos. The Hughes helicopter had a two-fold mission. Drop the technicians near the phone line and wait for them to tap the line. Then, bring them out and drop an antenna into a tree at a higher elevation that would transmit the signal from the tap. The dark green antenna folded out when released and resembled a spider web that blended in with the foliage.

A de Havilland Canada DHC-6 Twin Otter was used to monitor the signal and transmit it to a ground station. It too had LORAN C, but it was not integrated into the plane's instrument panel due to its size and had to be located in the back of the aircraft and monitored by a technician. The Twin Otter was equipped with terrain following radar that allowed the aircraft to operate and maintain a relatively constant altitude above ground but at low altitude. The equipment often failed, and the pilot had a choice of either climbing to avoid hitting the ground or compromising the mission by exposing the operation to North Vietnamese radar and possibly getting hit with anti-aircraft guns.

Chief Pilot Jim Rhyne asked Beetle to volunteer for the mission. He accepted, and on that night, he was the technician monitoring the LORAN C in the back of the Twin Otter.

The mission was taking longer than planned. No one understood why. The phone tap technicians were trained for wooden telephone poles and carried the appropriate equipment to perform the tap, but discovered to their dismay the poles were concrete. Aborting at this stage was unthinkable. It had taken months to plan the mission with numerous setbacks. That night and weather condition was the only window of opportunity available. It was now or never, and they had no way to communicate with anyone for guidance. They were illegally in North Vietnam in the dark and susceptible to capture at any time. It was a tense situation. One of the technicians had a roll of electrical tape, and they elected to attach the tap hardware to the pole using the tape. They signaled for pickup, and the helicopter scampered out of the area to a designated tree in Laos where they placed the spider web antenna. Beetle monitored the signal, and the mission was deemed a success. None of the Air America crew knew what was heard, but supposedly information was received from the tap to assist Henry Kissinger during the Paris peace talks. They all had a big laugh when they heard about the tap technicians plight in North Vietnam, but it could have ended up in a disaster.

Beetle was a Marine Corps Para-Marine with 1st Anglico FMF before Air America. He served in Vietnam for two years. He was awarded the Air Medal and Navy Accommodation Medal with Combat V for valorous actions in direct contact with an enemy. After Air America, Beetle enlisted in the Air Force and served for thirty-two years achieving the rank of Chief Master Sgt. E9, which is the highest noncommission grade in any service.