

DAYS AT LONG TIENG

By Dan Williams

GOD Created Aircraft Mechanics So Pilots Can Have Heroes too!

It's meant somewhat as a joke, but there's an element of truth in the statement. Air America's Mechanics were the lifeblood of the company. Without them, the operation would come to a standstill. Many of them only had a power plant license when they first arrived, but Air America was more than a flight operation. It also was a school, and not just for pilots.

Experienced mechanics received schooling in avionics, power plant, and airframe, and most of them departed Air America with more licenses than before they arrived. It would have been easier if Air America had only one type of aircraft, but they didn't. Air America's helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft were composed of both reciprocating and turbine-powered engines.

Mechanics seldom sat in air-conditioned offices drinking coffee in safe areas either. Often, we had to conduct maintenance near the battlefield exposed to the elements in the dirt. And we weren't immune to incoming rockets and mortars. We often observed the worst part of the war. Along with broken airplanes came broken people, and we learned first-hand the color of blood is the same regardless of race or ethnic origin.

For me, it all started at a secret base in the middle of Laos called LS-20 Alternate, and along with the grave nature of the job, there were also some laughable experiences.

Sam Jordan flew Stan Wilson and me in the Twin Commander to LS-20A in late 1968. We were going there at the direction of Jack Pearsall, Manager of Technical Services in Vientiane. The Steve Canyon program in Laos was in trouble due to many malfunctions with the O-1 aircraft. There were several engine failures, rough running engines, and a variety of other problems. Also, the Forward Air Controllers, known as Ravens, were unable in many cases to communicate with their target aircraft and ground personnel.

Our job was to find out what was going on with each of the O1's. If I remember correctly, there were six aircraft based at LS-20A and six in Pakse.

I don't think we were well received by the Air Force mechanics that were supposed to be maintaining the aircraft. The O-1 is relatively straightforward, but for some reason, they were having trouble with it.

The next day four Filipino mechanics arrived from Vientiane with their toolboxes, and we started to go thru each of the aircraft to try to figure out what the exact issues were. After a few days, the Air Force mechanics were no longer involved with the O-1 aircraft. They took over the T-28's, and the O-1's were exclusively Air America's responsibility. Stan Wilson then proceeded to Pakse to get that operation up and running while I stayed at 20-A.

We found many issues with each aircraft that more than likely was caused purely by improper maintenance. Cleaning or replacing dirty carburetors, air filters, and fuel filters, spark plugs, wheel bearings, and brake pads cured most problems. Resetting the engine timing and repairing avionics wiring and radios when necessary, healed many others. The trigger switch to fire the rockets seemed to be a problem also. But it wasn't all that easy either, and the working conditions were no better for us than the Air Force technicians.

The work area was a dusty, unpaved, noisy ramp past the control tower. The ramp was paved later when the T-28's moved in, but exposure to the elements remained. There was a long-sheltered building that was a motor pool building that we could use to get the nose of the aircraft into for engine changes, and that helped, but we were close enough to the battle to see it first-

hand. One of the more difficult tasks, not typically part of a mechanic's job description, was cleaning up blood in the cockpit from wounded warriors.

The routine maintenance and things such as pre-and post-flight inspections were carried out daily. We were also responsible for loading the rocket tubes in each aircraft. Sometimes this would be done four or five times a day. Battle damaged aircraft were repaired as fast and safe as possible. A sapper team blew up an airplane one night so we used what parts we could to support the others.

We worked alongside the Air Force pilots and soon became a team. Craig Duehring, former Raven and later Assistant Secretary of the Air Force wrote an excellent book called *The Lair of Raven*. Here is a quote from his book. "*Our aircraft maintenance was a curious mixture including American crew chiefs and maintainers in civilian clothes and assigned to work the AT-28's. For O-1's, we had a contract maintenance arrangement with an American, Danny Williams, in charge of a team of very good Filipino crew chiefs. All of our maintenance was excellent.*"

We didn't just work on Air Force aircraft. Air America black ops C-123's often landed at 20-Alternate at night where we added flame arrestors to the exhaust stacks to hide the blue exhaust gas fumes from enemy soldiers on the ground below. I don't know where they went and didn't ask, but I assume it wasn't friendly territory.

We were preparing an aircraft for a quick turnaround one day that was having some radio problems, so our radio mechanic [BUDDAH] was working that issue. Outside, another mechanic was loading the rockets. About the time he slammed one into the lock the radio guy must have pressed the wrong switch as the rocket took off across the valley and hit a house up by the King's summer home.

Holy Crap!

I went to see General Vang Pao and informed him what happened worried about someone being in the house that was burning. He said never mind he would take care of it. It was funny later, but it sure wasn't funny at the time.

I was playing darts in the hostel one night and we could hear an aircraft flying low in the valley around Long Tieng. It made several passes over the sleeping quarters, and to me, it sounded like a C-123. My first thought was that an Air America aircraft was having problems on its way south and was trying to land. EB, a customer, and I drove to the ramp to check out the runway lights to make sure they were on.

We then drove down the side of the runway to the O-1, T28, ramp. With the bright jeep lights on, we could see the aircraft had already landed. It was a U.S. Air Force C-123 and not Air America. The plane ended up in the middle of the runway about halfway down. No lights were on; both props were feathered, the front door open, and not a person around.

E.B. and I pulled up to the aircraft with jeep headlights shining on the nose.

We hollered asking, "where is everyone." No answer. We chatted for a bit, trying to figure out what was going on. We did hear some clicking sounds off into the darkness.

I guess the crew could hear us speak English, so they figured we were not the enemy. They could also see my white legs shining in the headlights as I was wearing shorts. They all came out of the darkness. Some had parachutes on, and all had weapons pointed at us. I believe the captain told me they had battle damage and ran out of fuel.

About that time, General Vang Pao showed up with a truckload of troops. He says to us in his pidgin English, "Dan, I think maybe Soviet Aircraft land." I told him that it was an American aircraft with a problem. He drove off.

We pulled the plane off the runway to the AAM ramp. We then took the crew up to the bar for a relaxing drink as they were still trembling.

When the sun came up, we went to the aircraft to inspect the battle damage.

We didn't find any, so we refueled the plane with some Air America gas. I already had the engine cowls open, and I asked one of the crew to turn on the boost pumps. Fuel was spraying from the right engine near the carburetor. The fuel filter cover was loose and had no safety wire attached. The aircraft was a flare ship out of Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. It had recently undergone an engine change and released for service with the fuel leak undetected. They were lucky and almost became a "flared" ship.

Air America ground support personnel were also involved in the repair and support of other U.S. Air Force battle damaged aircraft when they had to land at Long Tieng. These include helicopters, A-1E, and T-28 aircraft.



It was somewhere around late 1970 when I received a message that a Pilatus Porter aircraft at Sam Thong had some mechanical problems and needed assistance. I usually never had to go into the field and stayed at 20 Alternate, but there were no aircraft available to take a mechanic and me with a toolbox to LS-20, so we decided to drive. The drive took several hours as the road was washed out in many areas. We worked on the Porter and got the issue taken care of and sent him on his way.

A Caribou was conducting numerous trips in and out of the strip while we were working on the Porter and the prop wash would blast us with dust every time he landed or took off. At noontime, the crew went into the hostel for a bite to eat.

Red dust covered the mechanic and me from head to foot, and we were tired, dirty, hungry, and a little pissed off at the Caribou crew who seemed oblivious to our plight.

Going into the hostel to clean up a bit, I spotted a relatively small red-colored snake that had its mouth open, but it did not move. I had no idea what kind of snake it was, but I realized it was dead and harmless.

I picked up the snake and decided I would fix the crew on that Caribou.

I do not remember the copilot's name, but I can still picture the expression on his face. The Captain was Willy Utterback. He was always pulling pranks on about everyone in good humor and fun to be around, but I wanted to get some payback for the dusting.

I coiled up that stiff dead snake up with its mouth wide open and put it in the copilot's seat facing the pilot's seat.

We were standing in front of the airplane when the crew came out and got in the aircraft.

First, Willy gets in his seat and sits down. He still does not see the snake staring at him. Then the copilot goes to sit down and sees the snake and makes all kinds of noises and quickly exits the aircraft.

At the same time, I see Willy leaning against the left side window and hollering like crazy. He is afraid to exit his seat, thinking the snake will bite him when he passes by.

Eventually, he figured out the snake was already dead, and when he saw me outside laughing hysterically, he knew the joke was on him.

Of course, there were a few choice words spoken as we got in the Jeep and headed back down the dusty road.

It was worth the dust and the long drive back to 20 Alternate even though we had not eaten and still dirty, but I had a big smile on my face.

There is no doubt the Steve Canyon Program was saved from extinction by the dedicated ground staff of Air America. They include not only those at 20 Alternate but also those support personnel scattered throughout the Air America System. The United States Air Force and Air America were tied together in a common bond that was inseparable.

Undeniably, Air America's mechanics deserve equal recognition along with the pilots, Flight Mechanics, and Air Freight Specialists for their services.