

Opinion: Veterans of the CIA's secret air force denied again

BY JONATHAN MANTHORPE, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 29, 2011



The dwindling band of veterans of one of the Central Intelligence Agency's most successful clandestine operations have again been rebuffed in their efforts to get pension and other government benefits.

Photograph by: Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images, xx

The dwindling band of veterans of one of the Central Intelligence Agency's most successful clandestine operations have again been rebuffed in their efforts to get pension and other government benefits.

A report to the United States Congress by the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) late last month argued retirement benefits should not be given to the 500 or so surviving employees of Air America, the CIA-owned air force that was an essential part of the agency's operations in wars in Southeast Asia from 1950 until 1975.

The CIA created Air America to give military support and ferry supplies first to the French and later the American forces and their allies in Indochina.

Air America pilots, many whom were civilians as well as some who "retired" from the military for the purpose, played a major roll in supplying the government army and Hmong mountain tribesmen against the local Pathet Lao communist insurgents and the North Vietnamese forces using Laos as a backdoor

into South Vietnam.

Air America pilots also operated within North Vietnam, especially in efforts to rescue downed U.S. airmen, but also to gather intelligence.

Some of their stories are as heroic as any coming from that succession of wars in Southeast Asia.

Over its 25-year history Air America employed about 2,500 people and 240 pilots and crewmen were killed, most of them as a result of enemy fire in the secret war in Laos.

Many of the survivors are living out miserable retirements without adequate pensions or health benefits.

Yet even though the CIA's own official history honours the Air America personnel as undertaking hazardous missions in enemy territory with outdated equipment and with the added peril of "their own government bureaucracy," the veterans have been constantly refused government benefits despite more than a decade of campaigning.

The latest slap in the report by the DNI says "Granting such benefits would undermine the national security utility of proprietaries (CIA speak for an arms-length company that gives the agency deniability), create a costly precedent for granting such benefits to other proprietary employees, and would not withstand legal or public scrutiny."

These arguments are nonsense, says Gary Bisson, former Air America Assistant Legal Counsel, in an email message a few days ago.

"It is only hoped that in its wisdom, the U.S. Congress will disregard the report's recommendation ... and proceed with enactment of long-deserved retirement benefits for employees of the CIA's most illustrious proprietary."

Bisson says the DNI report uses three "specious criteria" as a basis for judging the veterans' claims.

The report argues that the utility to the U.S. intelligence agencies of arms-length, proprietary organizations like Air America is their distance from the government. This would be undermined by giving proprietaries' employees federal benefits or employee status.

Bisson disputes this logic, pointing out that during the operation of the CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services, "Corporations, even though established for cover purposes, were recognized as bona fide government companies."

And employees of other CIA cover operations such as Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia and the Asia Foundation were all credited with service time for federal benefit purposes.

By the same token, these examples undermine another of the report's arguments that there is no precedent for giving benefits to the Air America veterans, Bisson says.

The DNI report also explores whether there are any extenuating circumstances that would justify extending federal benefits to the veterans and decides there are none.

It notes that in 1962 the CIA Inspector General recommended that Air America set up a retirement plan in line with those of U.S. civilian airlines.

But, the report concludes, the fact that no such plan was ever introduced does not indicate "a management lapse on the part of the CIA."

The report also looks at the fate of the \$20 million in the Air America accounts which was returned to the U.S. Treasury when the company was wound up in 1976.

Veterans have argued that this money should have been assigned to a pension and benefit program for them.

But the DNI report points to Treasury rules requiring money to be used only for assigned purposes.

"It is our view that the question of returning these funds to former Air America employees is separate from the question of eligibility for Federal retirement benefits," says the report.

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