

AIR AMERICA®

An Historical Account

Extensive research was conducted on the history of Air America while preparing a request for veteran status under a law passed by the 95th Congress that permitted this status. Several historical records, including Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, by Earl Tilford, Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1992, 1980, and Air Commando One: Heinie Aderholt and America's Secret Air Wars, by Warren A. Trest, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000. These sources stated that presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon ordered Air America to support U.S. military troops, but then their authors contradicted themselves by describing Air America as a "CIA proprietary," as if that ownership was assumed without regard to supporting evidence. There was a lack of detailed proof and both books glossed over Air America's real character.

Through research, it was discovered Air America's story began shortly after World War II and spanned over thirty years. The most revealing historical records were the handwritten "Panzer notes" discovered in Dr. William Leary's collection held at the University of Texas at Dallas. According to the Panzer notes, in the late 1940s, the CIA needed an airline in China to augment its intelligence gathering activities, but it could not purchase one without U.S. Department of State approval. Such approval was not forthcoming because the State Department did not want an apparent direct connection. So, a scheme was devised to capture ownership indirectly.

Air America was set up in this fashion. A legal corporation called Airdale was created in Delaware, which then formed a subsidiary called CAT, Inc. This subsidiary purchased 40% of Civil Air Transport, co-owned by General Claire Chennault and Whiting Willauer. All personnel of the company became employees of CAT, Inc. This arrangement made the organization two times removed from the U.S. government. In 1957, Airdale's name was changed to Pacific Corporation, and in 1959, CAT, Inc.'s name was changed to Air America. Within the Panzer notes several statements point to direct U.S. government ownership of Air America, in contradiction to the common belief that the airline was owned by the CIA. The following excerpts were taken directly from the Panzer notes.

"After months of consideration by high CIA officials, who were staggered by the "appalling" costs of sustaining CAT, which was in desperate financial condition, on 1 November 1949 an agreement was formally signed between the United States Government and Civil Air Transport (CAT)." (page 2, Summary, Panzer)

But Secretary of State Acheson rejected subsidization of American airlines in China; he specifically refused to approve assistance to CAT. The Office of Policy Coordination (OPC within the CIA) recommended indirect aid of CAT, by way of subsidy. State Dep't seemed to approve. (page 3, Panzer)

"OPC was awaiting approval from State. (On the next page it reads, referring to a meeting with CIA and Under Secretary State Webb & S.W. Walton Butterworth.) Latter was very negative but said he would not object to a minor amount of covert support if it would enable CIA secret operations to be effective. So, informal approval was given by the State people." (Panzer)

The Panzer interview notes shed new light and provide a fresh perspective to the popular assumptions about Air America. They clearly show that without State Department approval, the CIA could not have transacted the purchase of Civil Air Transport. While the initial intent was for CIA operations, it was soon realized that the asset was too valuable for clandestine intelligence gathering only. U.S. government ownership of the airline provided a perfect opportunity for the use of the asset for other purposes. The Panzer notes reveal that the primary interest the CIA had in this airline was its use in clandestine operations, they clarify concerns at the time for keeping the company solvent, and they show the necessity for sources of income beyond those of the CIA. There is no doubt the CIA used Air America for clandestine operations, but the strategically created organization's primary objective was to perform as part of the long-term U.S. military operations. Additionally, it is essential to recognize that the CIA does not have a foreign policy separate from that of the Executive Branch.

According to the Panzer notes, the new airline was too big for the CIA needs alone. President Eisenhower recognized the Communist threat to the Pacific Rim during the 1950s. International trade and American interests were at stake. Yet, the country could not under any circumstances be considered an aggressor. Eisenhower and every president after that for thirty years saw the need for a military force in the region that would not be viewed by the public as a fighting force. Air America was the answer.

Initially, the U.S. government concocted a story that portrayed Air America employees as mercenaries operating a commercial enterprise for profit. When it became evident that this description was inaccurate, the company was promoted as a CIA proprietary. This definition worked. The CIA's clandestine nature invited journalistic sensationalism, and the explanation allowed Air America to operate U.S. military aircraft in combat conditions while the public was fed cloak and dagger chum.

In 1964, President Johnson was faced with the same dilemma of his two predecessors. The situation in Laos was deteriorating, and the war in Vietnam was escalating. Admiral Sharp accepted the duties of Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) from Admiral Felt. It was an awesome responsibility. He had more than 940,000 military personnel of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force under his command, in addition to more than 7,500 operational aircraft and 560 significant ships. Admiral Sharp answered to the Joint Chiefs, who responded to the Secretary of Defense, who answered to the President. Also, Admiral Sharp had to deal with the Secretary of State and the CIA, and in Laos, he had an active Ambassador who declared authority on his own. Added to the Admiral's challenges were the civil war in Laos and the posturing for control by various participants. A major sticking point was the Geneva Convention and the 1962 Geneva Accords, which meant no U.S. military force could operate in Laos. The United States needed a reason to escalate. The Gulf of Tonkin response was Admiral Sharp's recommendation that permitted the escalation.

Laos was a problem. The North Vietnamese were using Laos to infiltrate troops and supplies into South Vietnam. The United States needed reconnaissance flights over Laos. In mid-1964, a Navy RF-8 Crusader was shot down, and the pilot captured. He later escaped, but it was apparent that a search and rescue force was essential in Laos. U.S. Air Force search and rescue helicopter crews were champing at the bit. This was what they were trained for, and they were good at their job. But the Geneva Accords stood in the way.

The U.S. State Department was fearful of repercussions if a U.S. military pilot was found to be involved with military operations in Laos. According to historical accounts, the arguments were fierce among high-level military commanders, the Departments of State and Defense and the U.S. Ambassador to Laos. Who would support military advisors on the ground and supply food, water, ammunition, and all the items necessary to conduct a war without a military force? Who would have jurisdiction and control?

Admiral Sharp was an outspoken critic of the way the Vietnam War was handled, and he often clashed with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, but he understood the logistics role of Air America. He might not have agreed with it, but his duty was clear, and Air America was under the command of CINCPAC while it supported U.S. Armed Forces and operated U.S. military equipment. It was his responsibility to see that Air America was adequately equipped with what it needed, including military aircraft, to execute its role in the pursuit of American foreign policy objectives. The aircraft assigned to Air America was not FAA certified, but they did not need to be since Air America was not a commercial airline.

It was never clear to the public that the CIA was part of the Executive Branch, operated by the State Department and funded by the Department of Defense. This chain of command made Air America a U.S. government proprietary and, in that regard, little different from the Army, Air Force, Navy & Marines. While the CIA used Air America for covert operations, most of the time the asset was used either to support the U.S. military or to act as a military force in areas the U.S. military could not go due to diplomatic restraints.

The Air America operation was always bound up with written contracts to shield the fact that the U.S. government contracted itself and paid itself back while appearing to be an uninterested bystander. The ultimate commander in chief of Air America was the President of the United States, and he delegated his authority through the State and Defense Departments. They, in turn, delegated authority to the Ambassador in Laos, Joint Chiefs of Staff, CINCPAC and the CIA, but not necessarily in that order.

Published sources share in their descriptions of heated arguments between all the parties involved concerning who had authority over the war and the various assets in Laos. For Air America, the workload was split in this fashion. Each day a senior Air America Operations Manager met with a representative from the CIA, a U.S. Air Force Attaché and a U.S. Army Attaché. They decided what aircraft were needed where and a flight schedule was produced. Each representative had individual requirements, and each used U.S. military aircraft bailed to Air America as ordered by the President of the United States. The use of U.S. military aircraft that were not FAA certified by a supposedly private company set a new precedent, but it was

considered justifiable by the President in 1954. This practice was continued by each presidential successor until the end of the war.

A Solution to a Problem

Air America's role in 1964 can be better understood by looking at the events a decade previously. President Eisenhower had a problem. In 1954, the Geneva Convention was in full swing, and the French Union needed military assistance in an area of Vietnam that the French author Bernard B. Fall described in his book by the same name as "Hell in a Very Small Place." There was no way to support the use of U.S. military pilots openly. So, Eisenhower ordered military C-119 Boxcars painted in French Republic colors to airdrop supplies to the besieged French garrison known as Dien Bien Phu. The pilots were CAT/Air America. Some were wounded, and others died. CAT/Air America pilots James McGovern nicknamed "Earthquake McGoon," and Wallis Buford was killed when their C-119 was shot down. They became the first casualties of the Vietnam conflict.

When President Kennedy took office in 1960, he knew that Laos was the linchpin for control of Communist encroachment into Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Kennedy authorized a secret group of Special Forces advisors to Laos to train Laotian military in tactics with the hope that they could defend Laos against the Viet Minh and prevent Communist takeover. They had to be supplied, and the U.S. military could not be seen in Laos permanently. Again, Air America was given the nod. This was their first use in direct support of U.S. troops in a combat area, though few people knew hostilities were even occurring.

When operations in Laos required helicopters, Kennedy ordered Marines to the area with their first line of UH-34D helicopters. However, diplomatic constraints would not permit the presence of Marines, and Air America was the solution. Kennedy ordered Marine H-34s delivered to Air America's station just south of Vientiane, Laos at Udorn, Thailand. Some of the Marine H-34 pilots stationed in Okinawa separated from the Marines and went direct to Air America.

The Geneva Accords were signed in 1962, and all military troops from every nation were required to leave. American military forces withdrew, but the North Vietnamese remained in defiance. Air America personnel stayed, too. As a cover, the State Department leaked to the public that these individuals were mercenaries and soldiers of fortune that the U.S. government did not control.

After considerable wrangling, it was decided that Air America would provide primary search and rescue for all Yankee Team operations in Laos using the UH-34D. Secretary of State Dean Rusk ordered T-28 aircraft configured to carry bombs and rockets, and a select group of Air America pilots was ordered to pilot them. This tactic continued for about two years.

Concern that a civilian might be caught performing combat operations, coupled with a growing desire of U.S. Air Force search and rescue units to see action resulted in Air America accepting the official role of secondary search and rescue. However, since a U.S. military force

could not be openly stationed in Laos, precious time was often wasted when a downed pilot had to wait for a U.S. military helicopter to fly in from Vietnam. Air America was called upon when there was no other way. It was necessary for these non-FAA certified U.S. military aircraft along with their Air America flight crews to remain in Laos throughout military operations from 1964 to 1974.

Documented Proof

A single paragraph in the introduction section of *The War in Northern Laos*, by Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton, explains the complexity and rationale for Air America. It details reasons why the U.S. government needed Air America and why to this day subterfuge, and deception remains.

"The war in northern Laos was complex and confusing, with three separate factions contending for power and territory. The 1954 Geneva Agreements on Laos recognized Laos as a neutral state but prohibited it from forming military alliances with other governments. The Royal Laotian Army in 1955 numbered around ten thousand, but the French, who trained the army before 1955, had not allowed Laotian officers in positions of authority. The Laotian Army Air force, an air force in name only, was a small section of two hundred. As the United States struggled to overcome these deficiencies because the Geneva accords prevented the establishment of bases or even advisory groups, subterfuge and deception became common, and the irregular forces often were the most effective and determined. Finally, because of the Geneva restrictions, the U.S. Ambassador in Vientiane evolved as the final authority on any overt Air Force action, an inefficient and difficult situation that persisted throughout the entire period of U.S. assistance to Laos. This book describes the triumphs, frustrations, and failures of the Air Force in northern Laos between January 1955, when the United States Operations Mission began to coordinate military aid, and in April 1973, when the B-52s and F-111s flew the last bombing sorties over northern Laos." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

The civil war in Laos, its strategic location concerning Vietnam, China, and Thailand and the Geneva Accords were significant issues. There were other problems, and the Anthony/Sexton book discusses them at length. The U.S. military resented civilian intervention in their war. They did not appreciate the Ambassador, the Secretary of Defense, and the President telling them what to do. U.S. military personnel were trained to fight, there was an intense rivalry between the Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marines, and Air America was not generally considered a player or deserving of credit for what the various armed services personnel found to be their job. Yet, no historian could write a historical document about Laos without talking about Air America. The United States could use "subterfuge and deception," but it could not act like a bull in the china closet. There had to be justification, and this book explains it. The authors state the following on page 20:

"Officially, the United States refused to sign the Geneva Accords. Unofficially, it agreed to respect them if everyone else did. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles placed little faith in communist promises and soon began laying the groundwork for a collective defense treaty for

the area. In September 1954, representatives of Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, France, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and the United States met in Manila and formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). One of the treaty's chief requirements was that the signatories would view an armed attack on Laos as an attack upon themselves. Thus Laos—neither represented nor consulted at the conference and forbidden from entering into any alliance by the Geneva agreements—suddenly found itself under SEATO's protection. Following the signing of the SEATO treaty, Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff their view on what size Laotian armed forces the United States could support." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

The authors on page 23 describe the extent to which the United States was willing to go to appear to abide by the Geneva Accords and to introduce CAT/Air America to the mix. They also explained why military uniforms, insignia, and courtesy were not used in Laos, but these practices did not mean the personnel were not military or not under military command. The term "CIA proprietary" is not explained, but it is written as if the explanation were unnecessary.

"The United States now embarked on the monumental task of building and supplying an indigenous army of twenty-three thousand men from a rural society whose officers and men were poorly educated and trained and possessed little in the way of military heritage. Such a program could not be handled by USOM, and a MAAG was prohibited by the Geneva accords. Some way had to be found to circumvent these obstacles.

In December 1955, a semi-covert group known as the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) was set up as a section of USOM. In reality, this office was funded by the Defense Department and operated as a separate arm of the U.S. mission. The PEO somewhat resembled a MAAG and was able to meet the requirements of the Mutual Security Act concerning supervision and end use of military equipment furnished the Royal Laotian Government. The Chief of the PEO retired Brig. Gen. Rothwell H. Brown, advised the U.S. Ambassador on military matters and served as a member of the country team just as if he were a MAAG chief. He also maintained a direct line of communication to CINCPAC in Honolulu. Training for the RLA, however, continued to be the bailiwick of the fifteen hundred officers and men of the French Military Mission (FMM).

To keep some adherence to the Geneva agreements, the PEO was staffed by twelve retired and reservist U.S. military personnel in civilian status. Although the Royal Laotian Government approved the PEO, it frowned on members exposing themselves to public view. A low profile was adopted, a condition that soon became a way of life for every American to serve in Laos.

The most fertile source of information for the Booster Shot crews proved to be the pilots flying for Civil Air Transport (CAT). Founded in China in 1946, this airline was an offshoot of Gen. Claire L. Chennault's Flying Tigers. It flew missions of every type for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and went with him when he fled to Taiwan in 1949.

A year later, CAT was reorganized under a CIA proprietary company called the Pacific Corporation. {Not exactly correct} Most of the airline's ground personnel were Chinese nationalists, but nearly all its pilots were Americans, invariably ex-military. The transport crews

spent many evenings with these experienced bush pilots (and with Laotian Army officers) poring over the charts to pinpoint drop zones.

The last-minute decision to extend the airlift beyond its initial span caused other complications. Personnel, aircraft, spare parts, and rigging gear were all tailored to an operation of less than a week. Assigned aircraft posed the thorniest problem. Two has just enough flying time left to complete the original five-day mission before returning to Japan for periodic inspection. To save the remaining hours, the entire operation was relocated to Wattay Airfield in Vientiane on April 4. This transfer of USAF personnel into Laos violated the Geneva accords, so the men swiftly donned civilian clothes and substituted the term “mister” for all military titles—an act that was to be repeated many times during the next decade by USAF personnel assigned to Laos." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

On page 29, the authors remove any doubt about who controlled U.S. military activity in Laos, including Air America, when conducting work under military contracts.

"U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor had long recognized the deficiencies of the Laotian armed forces and was convinced that the American military air program was too slow and cumbersome to be effective. The authorized strength of the PEO had been increased to sixty in 1957, but procurement of qualified retired personnel was difficult and turnover excessive. Peak strength did not surpass thirty until 1959. In November 1958, he persuaded the Joint Chiefs to send Brig. Gen. John A. Heintges, USA, to Laos to survey the situation. After a month in country, Heintges proposed reorganizing the PEO by staffing it with active duty military personnel and using them for field training of the Laotian armed forces. This training was to be a joint Franco-American venture with special teams working with each of the twelve RLA battalions. Particular stress was to be placed on internal security training. Heintges also recommended sending a logistics team to inventory equipment and speed delivery of needed items. The plan was later approved by the new CINCPAC, Adm. Harry D. Felt, USN, who urged that an active duty general officer be designated chief of the Programs Evaluation Office. Heintges was subsequently appointed. The plan was also approved by the new U.S. Ambassador to Laos (Horace H. Smith), by Laotian civil and military officials, and by the French embassy and French Military Mission." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

Pages 33 through 35 explain the plans by CINCPAC and disagreements between the services. The following text taken from page 35 corroborates the claim that inner service rivalry prevented the truth about Air America’s involvement to be publicly exposed. History has been distorted because of the Executive Branch’s desire to keep secret the nature of Air America’s ownership.

"The divergent views within the JCS and CINCPAC over roles and missions reflected traditional inner service rivalries. To the U.S. Army, using Marines to hold land areas after they were assaulted and captured encroached on its mission. Failure to bring reconnaissance and fighter forces into the plan meant that the Navy and not the Air Force would have the chief air combat role. Limited to airlift, the Air Force saw itself as nothing more than a logistic feeder service for ground forces. While most of the complaints against CINCPAC’s plan were later

rectified, they illustrated that each service was jealously guarding its roles and seeking to expand them whenever possible." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

On page 39, the text shows Air America being used for military operations. U.S. Military personnel staffed the PEO. Therefore, Air America was supporting the U.S. Military, and there were casualties indicating combat conditions.

"On September 16, a new element was injected. The Pathet Lao ordered forces loyal to Souphanouvong to avoid encounters with the Souvanna/Kong Le troops and, wherever possible, to attack Phoumi's. The Pathet Lao 2d Battalion (having escaped from the Plain of Jars the previous year) at once came out of hiding and struck the Sam Neua garrison. When the first PEO reports painted a dismal picture of the garrison's plight. Defense and State quickly authorized the release of military supplies from stocks in Thailand direct to the FAL units in the field. Due to the FAL's cumbersome logistic pipeline, the urgent situation and the lack of LAAF airlift (King Le had captured five of the eight C-47s during his coup), Air America (the new name for CAT) was given the re-supply mission. To avoid any misunderstanding on Phoumi's part, Ambassador Brown stressed that the airlift was solely to assist in the defense of Sam Neua. Under no circumstances would the United States government condone the use of its equipment to attack the neutralists.

For the next ten days (September 17 to 27) the Air America airlift of two C-46s and two C-47s performed yeoman's service, transporting rice, ammunition, and some military personnel to areas throughout Laos. Casualties were often evacuated on the return trip." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

On page 43, the authors say the "United States countered by removing all restrictions on the use of Air America aircraft." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

The text on page 51 explains that the President, State, Defense and the U.S. military through delegated authority handled operations in Laos. The authors use "CIA" when speaking of Air America, but nothing in the book supports this inclusion. It is obvious the Executive Branch was using its Air America air force instead of the U.S. military to prevent public violation of the Geneva Accords. The following text supports the claim that the President of the United States was the Commander in Chief of Air America and had jurisdiction over this asset just as he did over all branches of the armed forces.

"Three days after the enemy offensive began, the service heads suggested five steps to assist the FAL. First, base sixteen "sterile" B-26 light bombers in Thailand to interdict enemy supply lines, dumps, and installations and contract with Air America to maintain these aircraft. (Air America pilots also flew these aircraft. The flights were limited and mostly used as reconnaissance flights over Laos, but some were fired upon. See "Air Commando One" by Warren Trest." (The contracts were deception since the U.S. government did not need to contract itself.)

"Second, turn over sixteen additional H-34 helicopters to Air America at Udorn, Thailand, as well as four C-130s, three DC-4s, and a C-47."

(Note, the helicopters and C-47 were not FAA certified and could not be operated by a commercial airline without being in violation and losing their operating certificate. Obviously, this was not a worry for Air America, but to a truly profitable enterprise airline such an act would be devastating and mean the airline closed and the owners fined.)

At the March 13 meeting also attended by Felt and Boyle, President Kennedy approved all of the recommendations under the code word Millpond. The Defense Department was tasked with supplying the CIA with sixteen H-34s for a bailment to Air America along with the transport aircraft. {The use of the word "CIA" without foundation is questionable. The President did not need the CIA's permission to use an asset the U.S. government-owned since the CIA is part of the U.S. government, directed by state and funded by Defense.} "...another CINCPAC proposal—that the pilots be selected from the Marine Corps—was approved." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

The following text on page 55 states:

"President Kennedy held back from accepting either of the two proposals. Certain precautionary moves were authorized, however. The commander of JTF 116 was to assemble and activate his staff, and the task force was placed in increased readiness. Included were two regiments and the headquarters of the 3rd Marine Division and Marine Air Group 16 (around fifteen thousand to twenty thousand men). United States Army troops included nineteen hundred men of the 2d Airborne Battle Group and three hundred of the 1st Special Forces group. Admiral Felt directed Admiral Sides to divert the aircraft carriers USS Lexington, USS Midway and supporting craft into the South China Sea. The carrier USS Bennington steamed to about one hundred miles south of Bangkok to be in position should the ship's helicopters be committed. On March 21, the 315th Air Division began a three-day airlift of personnel and equipment attached to Marine Air Group 16 at Okinawa. The Marines landed at Udorn, established a helicopter base, and turned over sixteen H-34s to Air America (the President's Millpond directive) including ten Army, ten Navy, and seventeen Marine pilots." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

The following on page 79 contradicts the claim that the CIA exercised authority over Air America at all times.

"As instructed by Washington, General Tucker called on Phoumi three days later. After repeating what Brown said, Tucker presented a list of reforms (actually demands) he thought essential to rehabilitating relations between the advisory group and the FAR general. ...If Phoumi concurred, the FAR troops that fled Thailand would be repatriated using Air America transports." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

The CIA did have authority to use Air America for its clandestine operations, and much of this work was paramilitary in nature, but the CIA primarily worked with the Hmong. The U.S. military did use intelligence gathered by the CIA, and there was often coordinated duty, but the

overriding authority was with the President, and CINCPAC did not answer to the CIA, nor did any other military officer unless that officer was attached to the CIA for special duty. The CIA did not answer to CINCPAC either and there was constant bickering to the detriment to all involved.

General Tucker, under orders from Washington, was offering Air America to support FAR troops, which were being trained by U.S. Special Forces under operation White Star. General Tucker would not have held jurisdiction over Air America had the company been a commercial enterprise. The text on pages 80 thru 82 deals with the signing of the Geneva Accords and the understanding that all military units of all nations must depart Laos.

America complied with the Accords, partially. It was apparent the North Vietnamese did not comply. Washington needed to track activities of the NVA and decided to use Hmong (Meo is used in the text) trained by Americans as road watch teams to accomplish what Washington felt was necessary. The text reads, "Air America was allowed to stay since it was a commercial airline." It should have been visible even to these authors that Air America was not a commercial airline.

More military aircraft were sent to Air America to facilitate surveillance. Obviously, Air America was being used by the U.S. government to act as a fighting force in Laos where military troops were not allowed. This could be accomplished because Air America was owned by the U.S. Government. The text reads, the Pathet Lao allowed Air America to stay with the understanding there would be no re-supplying to the Hmong. But that was the whole idea, and when an Air America C-46 was shot down in 1963, killing the pilot and co-pilot, the political situation prevented the United States from rescuing the loadmasters, called kickers, who parachuted from the stricken aircraft. This was a highly questionable decision.

Defense Secretary McNamara made a similar decision when an RF8 Crusader was shot down in mid-1964. Admiral Felt objected and went directly to the President, who overturned the decision. Precious time was lost, and the Air America H-34 helicopters were unable to make the rescue due to intense ground fire and the absence of an air cap, which was denied due to McNamara's decision. One Air America kicker from the C-46 escaped more than three years later and was subsequently employed in security with Air America. The story, published in Smoke Jumper's magazine, concerning his ordeal describes literal hell.

Another kicker, Gene DeBruin, tried to escape and was never heard from again. It is unfortunate Admiral Felt did not interject in this instance, because Air America was just as much a part of his command as was the RF8 driver, but it is obvious when reading the text that Admiral Felt and Ambassador Unger had different views. On page 87, the text reads, "Ambassador Unger dispatched an Air America C-123 with food and supplies. It was shot down with only one survivor".

Washington decided to send in more supplies and include ammunition. Squabbles between Admiral Felt and Ambassador Unger ensued as to whether Kong Le's forces should be supplied with ammunition. On page 89, the text reads,

"Washington stood firm; however, CINCPAC was to furnish whatever supplies Unger, and the country team determined were needed. Felt was to consider Kong Le's and Phoumi's troops one and the same. By the end of February, Air America (under ICC supervision) was making regular deliveries once more to the Plain of Jars." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

Air America, therefore, was under the jurisdiction of CINCPAC (Admiral Felt) sometimes, and the Ambassador on other occasions, but both CINCPAC and the Ambassador acted under orders from the President of the United States.

On page 99, the text reads,

"In late 1963 President Kennedy, through consultation with CINCPAC, JCS, STATE, and DEFENSE elected to increase the helicopter fleet at Udorn with Marine H-34s. Air America would operate them with an understanding that indigenous crews would be trained." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

Pages 100 thru 103 describes the use of the T-28 and the fear of upsetting the balance by being too aggressive. Souvanna wanted Air America to dissolve, and a new airline formed where the employees could be transferred. This action was hoped to eliminate the stigma Air America had received through their military work in previous years. On page 103, the authors say, "State Department was lukewarm to removing Air America." This statement further corroborates the claim the CIA did not own the airline, and it was not a commercial enterprise.

Pages 110 and 111 deal with discussions between the Ambassador, CINCPAC, STATE, and DEFENSE concerning the use of T-28's and who should fly them. It was finally decided that Air America pilots would fly the T-28's in combat to keep within the confines of the Geneva Accords. U.S. military personnel controlled all missions under Operation Water Pump. There is mention of a Bird & Son employee, but John Wiren, one of the Air America T-28 pilots, said only Air America employees were used. Tom Jenny, another Air America T-28 pilot, stated they all used U.S. military flight suits for all T-28 missions, signifying that Air America personnel did wear military uniforms upon occasion.

The shoot-down of the RF8 Crusader in mid-1964 created an abrupt change in how America was going to handle the war in northern Laos.

On page 119, the text reads,

"By coincidence, General Moore was visiting Udorn when the first distress call came in and monitored the rescue from the Air America operations center. When the call came in for more fighters, Moore got in touch at once with Gen. Jacob E. Smart, CINCPACAF, and Admiral Felt. With their approval, he launched three T-28s with Water Pump pilots and five Takli F-100s. Admiral Bringle added four Kitty Hawk F-8s and two Danang A-1s.

Tyrell (Col. Tyrell & Major Cochran were in charge of Water Pump and where to whom Air America T-28 pilots answered) called Unger and, after explaining the situation, asked for additional T-28s. Unger agreed to the use of Air America personnel, and the first pair of T-28s took off from Wattay at four in the afternoon, five minutes behind the T-28s with USAF pilots. A second pair was airborne fifty-five minutes later. As the weather worsened and the downed pilot could not be found, Admiral Felt issued a recall. He then stressed that, in the future, only non-military resources would be committed to SAR operations in Laos. The recall was of slight immediate consequence since Klusmann had been captured earlier by the Pathet Lao." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

This report is not absolutely correct. The delay in acting immediately to a SAR situation resulted in the capture and was caused by fear of the political ramifications if America was seen as an aggressor in Laos. It is fortunate that Klusmann, through his own ingenuity and resolve, was able to escape. The arguments back and forth on both sides were fierce, and the military was not about to let it happen again. The reconnaissance flights were deemed necessary and were continued but conducted differently.

On page 120, the text reads,

"The Navy flight of June 7 was escorted by carrier-based F-8s. The fighters very quickly got their chance to retaliate when the reconnaissance planes took ground fire. An F-8 piloted by Comdr. Doyle W. Lynn was hit on his second pass, and Lynn had to eject. Admiral Felt instantly lifted his day-old ban on using military assets for search and rescue. He sent four Da Nang A-1s to cover the Air America helicopters and dispatched tankers to refuel the F-8s orbiting over the downed pilot. The AOC in Vientiane diverted (blank) from searching for Klusmann (as yet there was no confirmation he had been captured) to the Lynn SAR effort. Washington approved an urgent request from Unger to commit Water Pump pilots and aircraft. The search proved fruitless, and the T-28 USAF pilots dropped their bombs on areas known to be held by the Pathet Lao. One group, for example, attacked Lima Site 22 near where Klusmann was shot down the day before. The Air America SAR commander cleared them to strike enemy flak batteries in the vicinity of the downed pilot. {This is an interesting comment, but not surprising to a former SAR pilot. The SAR pilot has control over the SAR situation, and he tells the other assets how to conduct business. In this case, the Air America pilot was a civilian flying a U.S. military aircraft, but it was not a commercial enterprise situation, and all assets were working together as a military unit.} Attacks by a flight of F-8s and eight USAF F-100s followed. Although this was the most U.S. air power sent into Laos, Lynn remained un-rescued.

"After returning to Wattay, Major Cochran, Water Pump commander, pondered the search for Lynn. He discovered that the Navy, unlike the Air Force, had a "warble beacon" that transmitted after a parachute opened. Air America's four C-7 Caribous carried ultra-high frequency (UHF) radios that could pick up the signal and home in on it. During the debriefing of the Air America pilots, Cochran learned that three of them had heard the beacon signal. Through triangulation, he plotted a new fix that was nearly forty miles from where the wingman reported Commander Lynn had bailed out. At dawn on June 8, the search resumed over this new area. Lynn heard the planes, fired a flare through the overcast, and was rescued by an Air America helicopter. His position was right in the middle of the triangulation." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

On page 132, the text reads,

"On June 29, 1964, the U.S. government formally endorsed Operation Triangle. Yankee Team missions over the Plain of Jars resumed and included night reconnaissance east of Muong Soui. U.S. Army and Air Force personnel were also allowed to serve as advisors to the Laotian troops, and the ambassador immediately detailed five artillery officers from DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to neutralist artillery at Muong Soui and Vang Vieng. Three USAF detachment members from Udorn were dispatched to Muong Soui, Vang Vieng, and Luang Prabang as "attachés" to work with the three columns as ALOs controlling air strikes. An air operations officer and an intelligence officer were added to the Vientiane AOC by General Moore, 2d Air Division commander. The (blank) battery, flown in by Air America's new C-7 Caribous, was the last unit to arrive before the field was closed." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

The text above leaves no doubt Air America was part of the military structure supporting U.S. troops in combat conditions.

On page 138, the text reads,

"Two days later (August 20), another pair of T-28s were shot down. Unger instantly sought formal State and Defense approval to use Air America T-28 pilots in recovery operations. Apart from the professional USAF rescue force, Air America personnel were better suited for the task than (blank) the Laotians (blank) because they spoke English and could be properly coordinated by control aircraft." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

On page 139, the text reads,

"Unger's dual request was staunchly supported by Admiral Sharp, the Joint Chiefs, and (to the surprise of some) the State Department. On August 26th, President Johnson consented to the use of Air America pilots if Unger said they were indispensable to the success of search and rescue." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

The above two paragraphs provide unquestioned stipulation that Air America was considered the primary SAR for Yankee Team operations by the President on down with no dissent.

On page 143, the text reads,

"On June 20, the Royal Thailand Government granted PACAF permission to uses its bases for search and rescue operations. Two days later, the Pacific Air Rescue Center at Tan Son Nhut worked out procedures for coordinating rescues between Air America and USAF assets. Under the agreement, Air America helicopters were scrambled either by the air attaché in Vientiane or by the HU-16." (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

On page 149, in the middle of the third paragraph, the text reads, “Eight days later, President Johnson decided to give Military Assistance Program, Laos, ten of these planes and give Air America five more H-34s for the search and rescue force.” (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

On page 159, near the end of the first paragraph, the text reads,

"Unfortunately, an F-100 and F-105 making guided missile runs with the Bullpups were shot down. The two pilots—Capts. Albert C. Vollmer and Charles L. Ferguson—were later recovered by Air America helicopters and returned to Udorn. (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

On page 163, in the first paragraph, the text reads,

“General Maddux strongly suggested to General Harris that all USAF operations in Laos (not just Yankee Team) be handled by the deputy commander since centralized control of air through his headquarters would speed up USAF responses to country team requests. The ASOC’s communications net linked directly with the 2d Air Division, the air attaché’s office in Vientiane, and all radar sites in Thailand. Also, Udorn was the ideal locale to coordinate Air America, (blank) and USAF planning and to evaluate results. The Thirteenth Air Force Commander concluded his appeal to Harris by urging that every effort be made to encourage the embassy to work with the Udorn headquarters.” (Anthony & Sexton, 1993)

Finally, on page 188, in the second paragraph, the text reads, “On August 5, 1965, Washington decided that due to ‘political factors’ Air America would continue all search and rescue work in the Barrel Roll area.”

Concluding Notes

The “political factors” never changed in Laos, but America became further embroiled in the war there and in Vietnam. The Air Force, with aircraft more suited for SAR, took on the responsibility of primary SAR, but could not officially be stationed in Laos. It was necessary to retain Air America for this duty. Air America was also ordered, not requested, to accept SAR duties for the secret radar site at Site 85. It was Air America who rescued many of the sheep-dipped military personnel when the site was overrun in 1968.

In 1969, President Nixon vowed to end the war through his Vietnamization program. He had to take the pressure off the army of South Vietnam and make it look like they could handle their own defense. This was accomplished by escalating the war in Laos along the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Steve Canyon program (Ravens) was instituted using Air Force pilots in civilian clothes to pilot O1E light aircraft and act as Forward Air Controllers for the attack aircraft operating in Laos. They had to be supplied with food, water ammunition, and other essentials. Air America began receiving more equipment from the military. C-123 aircraft were modified to the K model, which included two jet engines for better performance. Bell HU1D helicopters, as well as turbine engine modifications to four of the H-34s, were added. CH-47C heavy-lift helicopters were sent to Air America from the Army. The fixed wing group in Vientiane group

now included USAF C-130 transports and turbine engine Twin Otters. Ammunition for the Raven aircraft, which was mostly white phosphorous rockets for spotting, came from Pepper Grinder in Udorn. The ammunition was loaded on U.S. military transports by U.S. military personnel and flown to outlying fields in Laos by Air America pilots where the Ravens were located. The Ho Chi Minh Trail became a hot spot and interdiction raids by carrier-based Navy aircraft, as well as USAF C-130 Spectre gunships operated day and night.

Nixon's plan worked, and the North Vietnamese poured into Laos to support the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was their chief lifeline to support their troops in South Vietnam. Air America took on the role as a combat air force supporting the Lao Army fighting the invading NVA force.

Air America had been fighting a war in Southeast Asia for twenty-five years, and thirty-five percent of Air America employees killed in action occurred from 1969 to 1973.

LS-85 was a top-secret radar and navigation facility on a mountaintop in Northeastern Laos. Tactically it was a great success supporting more than half of all bombing raids in the Hanoi area, and it was understandable why the North Vietnamese wanted it shut down.

The secrecy surrounding the operation was surrealistic and lopsided. Those who should not have known did, and those who should have known didn't. The Air America crews tasked with providing search and rescue (SAR) for USAF personnel serving at LS-85 and anywhere else in Laos were assigned this by the Secretary of State in a written document that was Top Secret at the time. They were professionals and expected to conduct SAR when asked or when the situation arose. Nobody told them they had jurisdiction and authority from the National Security Council because it was a secret, but it should not have been confidential to those involved. The families of the USAF technicians operating the site were not told the truth for several years. America's idea of compartmentalization to save lives may have instead been pernicious.

America did not want the public to know they were violating the neutrality of Laos agreed to in the 1962 Geneva Accords, but the North Vietnamese were aware because they were in violation themselves. America would not have been there at all if the North Vietnamese had not illegally used neutral Laos to transport troops and war materials into South Vietnam to kill both South Vietnamese who opposed their invasion and American soldiers. Why wouldn't the U.S. Government have a security force equivalent to Navy Seals, or Army Special Forces, if this site were that vital? If we were going to violate the Accords anyway, then why not do the whole gig? Was political correctness so crucial that we were willing to compromise the safety of American technicians who trained for years to develop their expertise? And why continue with the charade about Air America fifty years later?

Three U.S. combat units were working in Laos. USAF Ravens and the technicians at LS-85 wore civilian clothes to hide their U.S. Military connection. Air America was the third, and although the government tried to make Air America appear as a private for-profit enterprise, it was not. They wore uniforms, but not military uniforms. All three units conducted military activity at the direction of the President of the United States. Their actions were top secret then but should not be today.

America recognized the Ravens and the LS-85 technicians as they should have done. But Air America remains a secret.

To this day, the USAF Judge Advocate General characterizes Air America employees as “unprivileged belligerents.” The term, does not appear in treaties of international humanitarian law, in neither the Geneva Convention 3 or 4, but it is generally understood to mean individuals who engage directly in armed conflict, who do not have combatant status and thus do not have the privileges of immunity from prosecution for lawful acts of war or the protections of prisoner of war status. President Bush used the term in the “global war on terror” to mean persons who can be attacked at any time and can be detained indefinitely without trial. The term is used interchangeably with “unlawful combatants.” The question with Air Americans is why the U.S. Government would classify Air Americans as “unlawful combatants” when they can more aptly be described as “combatants”: persons with a right to directly participate in hostilities in an international armed conflict.

Who is the U.S. Government keeping the secret from?

Air America was stationed in Laos with the expressed consent of the Royal Lao Government, the American Ambassador to Laos, the Secretary of State and Defense, and the President of the United States. They met the definition of “combatant” as “members of other militias” who 1) were commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates, 2) wore a fixed distinctive sign visible at a distance, 3) carried their arms open to the extent they carried weapons for defense, and 4) conducted their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war. They were combatants, not unlawful combatants. What about the USAF Technicians in civilian clothes? Were they also “unprivileged belligerents?” What about the USAF Ravens? Why this systemic separation of Air Americans then and now?

The evidence shows lives may have been saved at LS- 85 had there been a closer relationship between the USAF and Air America. On March 10, 1968, a North Vietnamese Sapper team in a surprise raid attacked the radar facility on the mountaintop. Their orders, according to North Vietnamese authors, were to execute everybody on the site. They were trained killers and had spent months studying how to take the installation and destroy it. Their training included endurance, stamina, and stealth. The thinking by the North Vietnamese was that the site was easy pickings, and they planned the raid precisely.

The USAF technicians, on the other hand, were not soldiers, and they were grossly unprepared to defend themselves. They should have died quickly, alone and afraid, but instead fought back valiantly to the best of their capability. The North Vietnamese referred to them as stubborn. Tenacious maybe and brave to the bone there is no doubt, but stubborn, no.

Two Air America helicopters, crewed by Captain Ken Wood in one with FM Rusty Irons, and Captain Phil Goddard with (it is believed) FM Louie Estrella in another launched out of LS-20 Alternate that morning and headed north. They had an inkling LS-85 was in trouble but no details.

Neither Phil or Ken were rookies, and they didn't hesitate. Phil had been wounded two years earlier in a firefight, and a year before that, he had braved a hail of bullets that rendered his helicopter useless trying to rescue two downed Navy pilots. That didn't stop him, and he boarded a USAF helicopter and directed them to the downed pilots and watched Sam Jordan, another Air America pilot, rescue Navy lieutenants Don Eaton and Don Boeker, who had spent a day and a night in hiding awaiting the Air America rescue. Both are now retired Admirals. Sam Jordan asked, "Why me?" The response was, "We knew you wouldn't quit."

Ken's helicopter had an external extraction hoist, and Phil's didn't. Therefore, Phil landed on the small airstrip used by fixed wing aircraft to service the site and rescued two CIA personnel while Ken and Rusty, both Vietnam Army veterans, with total disregard for their own safety hovered over the top portion seeking survivors.

Chief M/Sgt. Richard Etchberger was fighting his way toward the hovering helicopter, firing a weapon that until that day, he'd never used in combat. His bravery saved several people, and he finally was able to scramble aboard, but by a cruel quirk of fate, a bullet pierced the helicopter underbelly and mortally wounded him.

Fifty years later Barnes Center Enlisted Heritage Hall Maxwell/Gunter AFB, Montgomery, Alabama commemorated those who died that day for their bravery. M/Sgt. Etchberger had been awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously in a previous ceremony at the White House.

The CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence article about the fall of LS-85 states, "The loss of Site 85 was not really an intelligence failure because accurate information about the nature of the situation was available from the start. But it was a failure of command and control and leadership because the local forces did not have full authority for their own defense and depended almost wholly on local irregular troops led by CIA advisers."

That statement, while exact, needs elaboration. The war in Laos was not the CIA's secret war. It was America's secret war, and we all were in it together, but due to secrecy, compartmentalization, inter-service and interagency rivalry, and political correctness the participants never at any time got together and developed a plan with contingencies. As the referenced article states, "they had a plan A, but no plan B." The two Air America helicopters at LS-20A were never told they were part of the evacuation project and were not briefed on the exact situation when they launched that morning. There was never a briefing conducted by USAF rescue helicopter crews, Ravens, CIA, or attack aircraft personnel with Air America concerning the evacuation contingency. Yet they all counted on Air America, and Air America played a vital role in the rescue operation that day.

No one with Air America asked for accolades for conducting rescue work, but after all, was said and done, shouldn't they have received individual medals and commemorations, as did those in the military? Were they not patriotic veterans who risked their lives also? The CIA says the blanket Unit Citation was enough, but it's impersonal and most certainly, characterizing Air

Americans as “contract pilots,” or “mercenaries” later is a disservice to their achievements and nullifies the Citation. Within Air America's network, they had a system based on seniority that worked, but it would have worked even better had there been a closer relationship among all the participants in the war effort.

Air America's primary job was logistical support, and SAR was a sideline, but they accepted the responsibility with no regret. Any rescue effort and the will to live requires heart and guts because you can't train courage or demand obedience to do or die with any degree of continued success. They did not look upon themselves as heroes, but on that day, or any other day, orders or no orders they would have done it anyway and never looked back. That devotion to duty and humanitarian gesture was carried forward for twenty-five years representing the Air America Spirit.

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