Air America alumni remember high times

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 people 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 said in a telephone interview. "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...
"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," Me
Still, they were always professional in the cockpit, and sometimes their skill and bravery are forgotten in all the talk of drinking a
"It was probably some of the toughest flying in the world, with minimal or no navigation aids, weather situations, smoke from all 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 wo 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 upcour flight 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 whose 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 bo watch the F4's, 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 wit

"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 t

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 storie moving the conference around the country and making it easier for new people to come often brings in fresh perspectives, Port

The tales that the Air America employees will swap aren't all romantic derring-do and a few whiskeys too many at the Purple Pc 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 De into a hover 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 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 seve 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 thir

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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