

# Extra Duty with Air America

By Francisco Barangan

## *Forward*

*Very little is written about the flight mechanics employed with Air America. The military called them crew chiefs, combat air crewmen, or load masters. The responsibilities were multiple, and with Air America, they soon became a master of many trades. Air America's helicopter flight Mechanics performed many of the same duties as the big bird kickers but stayed up country with their aircraft. Very often, after a full day's work, a flight mechanic's job was just beginning. While the pilot went to his quarters to take a hot bath, eat a hot meal and relax, the flight mechanic was performing scheduled or unscheduled maintenance on his aircraft. Usually, this work was conducted outside, with poor lighting and primitive conditions. The incentive to do a good job was part of his work ethic, but he had personal reasons also because the next day he had to fly in the bird he maintained. Flying with Air America wasn't routine. The situation was unpredictable and required experience and expertise. It's understandable why you often hear about the plight of the pilot just like you hear more about the quarterback than the linebacker, but one can't perform without the other. The flight mechanic flew looking at where they had been, blind to where they were going, and hoping the pilot didn't run out of altitude, airspeed and ideas all at the same time. He was a flight crewmember, provided another set of eyes and ears, and often aided in decision-making, but in effect was a passenger, and forced to accept the consequences as determined by the pilot. Ground mechanics were often sent into Laos to perform maintenance on downed aircraft in enemy held territory. The Filipinos were dedicated and hardworking, but they received little recognition. Here is one man's story from Manilla.*

When I joined Air America in February 1966, I was scheduled to take flight training at PAL Flight School in that same year in July after passing the prerequisites. When I was given a chance to go abroad, my friends with PAL Engine Overhaul Division enticed me to go with them instead. My eagerness to fly to another place like Thailand sounded intriguing. I was sent to Ramp Crew, and parked aircraft in and out of the Air America parking area the whole day. There was no challenge, and the job bored me. I was sorry for myself for choosing this road. I couldn't go home without finishing a year to qualify for a vacation, and my chance to go back blew my chance in flight school. Flight mechanic Rudy Legaspi was my only buddy in Udorn, and the rest were assigned in Okinawa, Vientiane, and Saigon. I was assigned to work with the UH-34D helicopter as a ground mechanic and assigned to recover downed helicopters in Laos. My life in outstation was full of horrifying experiences, and I don't know if Air America ever paid me an extra dollar. These personal accounts as a ground mechanic told me that their life was also in danger when sent outstation when their actual job description was performing heavy maintenance for Helicopter and Fixed Wing aircraft, which was in support of the covert war in Laos, but in a safe area. Just like the flight mechanics, their numbers dwindled as time passes and the few living are just waiting for their final trip. A few of them were waiting for recognition just like us IF possible.

1. My first aircraft recovery was an engine change in a place somewhere in Laos. The engine was placed about 20 meters by a US Jolly green before we arrived in the muddy field 4 to 6 inches thick. The engine change went smoothly. Lao soldiers had fun to see how we work. The engine was removed and dropped in the mud by the use of an A-frame. Then we assembled the A-frame over the new engine and pulled the airframe of the helicopter to match the height with the help of soldiers guarding us. Luckily some wooden planks were available nearby that prevented the A-frame from sinking in the mud. I think we replaced the engine in two day's time. I tasted sleeping in outstation first time, and this was in LS-20, Sam Thong. My shoe soles separated, and my next casualty I lost some tools sinking in the mud. I didn't have any extra shoes and had to fasten a safety wire around them that prevented me from getting my feet injured. The difficulty of changing an engine in this condition was unbelievable and how we did it lies in our

strong determination to do a job well done. They are right to say sometimes you have to spend your own money just to accomplish a job beyond expectation and cannot be reimbursed. This kind of work entitled us no monetary favor and not even a commendation to uplift our spirit from our superiors.

2. My second encounter was the recovery of UH-34D Hotel 15 somewhere in Laos. The chopper lay on its right side with all the blade debris scattered around and the stronger part of the blades still attached. The co-pilot sliding window was on the ground while the Captain's sliding window was still attached and probably broken underneath. I assumed the crew managed to get out of the chopper thru the co-pilots window. Authorities decided to recover this chopper after a month or so when the place was finally under control with friendly troops. Before we could disembark from the helicopter that took us from Udorn, two military men in civilian clothes used their knife to check for mines that could have been placed around the chopper body. Soon afterward they gave us the thumbs up signal to start our work. I remember due to my unfamiliarity with mines I didn't have the full confidence of stepping around the place and every step made I was waiting for a loud bang. We tied the main rotor head with nylon belts, and the Air Force technician hooked them up to the cargo hook while the other technician added a parachute at the tail to stabilize its flight in a straight direction with the Jolly Green. We had air cover above which stayed around the area while looking around for some bandits. The whole job took us may be 20 minutes or less We left the co-pilots window behind with the advice of the Air Force Technician because there might be some mines planted around it. The area around was in enemy territory and thank God there were no activities to harm us. Again, no commendation or anything to make us proud of our work.

3. My last personal account as a ground mechanic happened with the recovery of UH-34D Hotel 41 somewhere in northern Laos. I remember I brought along a magneto, battery, and a magneto timing instrument to change it with the recommendation of my superiors. An Air America helicopter brought us there with someone, his name I don't remember. The chopper was running with the main rotor engaged while waiting for us which meant the place was too dangerous to shut

down. Above, a pair of T-28's roamed around flexing their muscle. Before doing anything, it was customary to check and disconnect the battery and test the battery switch position. The battery cover was already removed, and there was a written message on it saying, "America go home" written by an enemy soldier. After replacing the magneto, a new battery was connected. I went up to the Captain's seat and tried starting the engine. There were cranking sounds but no start. The engine was not responding. I went down again and tried to time the magneto the second time. After finding out that the timing was properly made, I went up the cockpit and cranked the engine again twice may be thrice. Then suddenly incoming mortars came in with a loud bang deafening my eardrums. Two rounds hit to the left of the tail cone and one just a few meters aft of the tail, while two rounds or so landed far away. I saw our guards pulling back in front of us to the thick foliage. From the cockpit, I hurriedly jumped out to the ground on to the right main tire missing the support rod of the main landing gear. I hit the right tire with my body and right forearm. I went up and galloped like a horse over the stumps of trees cut at waist length. The helicopter was stretching it's leg ready to take off. I thought they would leave us that moment. Anyway, I was the first one to jump aboard the waiting chopper body first with the other guy following. I left my tool box, timing instrument, battery and the old magneto behind. From above as we gained altitude I could see traces of smoke where the mortars were. After we had been clear of the area, our escort bombed the surrounding hills and later destroyed Hotel 41 as well, with billowing smoke and fire. In this event, we stayed on the ground may be thirty minutes or so. I learned from my supervisor when I returned to Udorn that the probable cause may be the failure of the cam shaft. Any commendation? None. My only contentment and reward were AAM replaced my tool box and my standard set of tools minus some special wrenches I bought earlier.