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## Air America unveils heroism

Employees part of secret operation U.S. used to combat communism

BY R. NORMAN MOODY  
FLORIDA TODAY

CIA-run Air America operated in such secrecy alongside the military in Asia that one of the most singular feats in its history was kept under wraps until now.

Today, at CIA headquarters, former Air America employees from Brevard will help unveil a painting that reflects that extraordinary act of heroism almost 40 years ago -- the downing of two attacking enemy planes over Laos during the Vietnam War, with nothing but an assault rifle fired from a helicopter.

"For a long time it was not talked about, it was secret," said Marius Burke of Merritt Island, who served as a helicopter pilot for Air America. "It's significant because it exhibits the kind of things Air America folks had to do."

Air America worked under the guise of a commercial airline as part of U.S. efforts to fight communism. Its employees served alongside U.S. and allied intelligence agents and military personnel in the Far East, often in dangerous combat and combat-support roles.

But they received neither military recognition nor civil service benefits for their service. The crews, who held civilian titles such as captain and first officer, continue to fight for that equal treatment and many see today's event as a giant step forward.

The 28-inch-by-38-inch painting, commissioned for an estimated \$7,500 by Burke and south Florida resident Boyd Mesecher will be displayed in the CIA's Intelligence Art Gallery.

"It's of great significance," said Judy Porter, who worked as a contract photographer for Air America while her late husband, Jack Porter, was a ground crew chief. "We were in the shadows for so many years."

The painting by artist Keith Woodcock depicts an improbable battle on January 12, 1968 in Laos, showing the Huey helicopter chasing the enemy planes over the mountains.

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**Commissioned painting.** The Air America painting by artist, Keith Woodcock, was commissioned for an estimated \$7,500 by Marius Burke and Boyd Mesecher. The painting depicts the downing of two enemy planes over Laos during the Vietnam War, using an assault rifle from a helicopter. The operation was done by CIA-run Air America employees. FOR FLORIDA TODAY

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### Missions

- Civil Air Transport, predecessor to Air America, began commercial airline operations in China using surplus war aircraft in 1946.
- In 1950, the CIA bought the airline to use in missions to fight communism in Asia.
- The airline was renamed Air America in 1959.
- Air America consisted of pilots, copilots, flight mechanics, and airfreight specialists who flew aircraft out of Laos and Thailand.
- In 1975, Air America helped to evacuate U.S. military, government workers and South Vietnamese refugees during the fall of Saigon.
- Air America ceased operations in 1976. -- *Air America Association*



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**Part of history.** Marius Burke looks through his scrapbook memorabilia at his Merritt Island home. Burke was a pilot with Air America. He and another resident commissioned the painting above. RIK Jesse, FLORIDA TODAY file

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Two North Vietnam AN-2 planes had set out to destroy Lima Site 85, a sophisticated radar site on Phou Pha Thi operated indirectly by the U.S. military.

"They wanted it gone," Burke said of the North Vietnamese. "They had bombs, they had rockets and machine guns."

As the North Vietnamese pilots attacked the radar site, killing four and destroying equipment, an Air America crew in a Huey helicopter was in the air nearby.

As a signatory to the Geneva Accords, the United States had an official policy of neutrality in Laos. But Air America flew undercover missions to supply villagers, who held the North Vietnamese at bay, Burke said.

The Air America helicopter piloted by Ted Moore, flying above the North Vietnamese planes, gave chase.

The Americans "had an AK-47, which technically they weren't supposed to carry any weapons," Burke said.

Glenn Woods fired the weapon through the helicopter's open door as Moore chased.

Riddled with bullets from the AK-47, both North Vietnamese planes crashed. It was one of the most unusual incidents in the war.

"It's never been done before and has never been done since," Burke said.

Two months later, the radar site was attacked again and overrun and 12 Air Force technicians were killed.

The painting will be one of the first to be housed in the CIA headquarters' Intelligence Art Gallery, CIA spokesman George Little said.

"It reflects the heroism and courage of the employees of Air America," he said.

Air America crews transported tens of thousands of troops and refugees, flew emergency medical missions and rescued downed airmen throughout Laos.

The federal government has recognized the service of the men and women of Air America. But efforts continue before Congress to win them civil service benefits.

"The fact that they've invited us to participate in this ceremony is a milestone," said Porter, a Port St. John resident.

Burke said commissioning the painting was worth it.

"I'm hopeful that maybe this would open a few doors and bring a little more recognition," he said.

#### STORYCHAT

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There are multiple companies doing the same thing in other places today as Civil Air Transport turned Air America did in Indochina many years ago. Contract pilots and other employees working for CIA sponsored companies sign a secrecy agreement, get paid not much more than their government employed counterparts, plus a 401K type plan in exchange for serving their country in an anonymous, sometimes risky, sort of way.

To maintain secrecy and "plausible deniability," contractors don't work for the government per se, thus don't typically receive government recognition for their heroic deeds or benefits when they retire.

Contract employees have a cover job, like cargo pilot, and are forbidden to discuss details of their job until released from their secrecy agreement. Welcome to the world of covert operations if you're willing to do so and able to obtain an appropriate security clearance.

Posted by: **craven** on Fri Jul 27, 2007 11:54 am

These were real HERO'S and should have received some kind of pension. They worked for the CIA so why do they not receive the same benefits as any other agent? They may have been undercover but even undercover cop's and secret CIA Agents receive benefits. This is very sad way to treat a hero all they get is a painting to look at. 😞

Posted by: **dwil132830** on Fri Jul 27, 2007 8:09 am

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