

**EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF
THE AIR AMERICA
REQUEST FOR MILITARY STATUS**

By: D. Larry Fraser

Background:

I worked in Laos, as an H-34 helicopter pilot, for Air America (AA) from August 1968 through December, of 1972, and I remained working in Laos until the summer of 1974. I was a Viet Nam (VN) US Marine Corps veteran. I piloted H-34 helicopters for the Marine Corps in Viet Nam, and I was a T-28 flight instructor 1966 -1967. I left the USMC on late 1967 because of a family emergency intending to return to active USMC service. In summer of 1968, however, I was offered a job with AA which I accepted. I came to Air America expecting essentially the same missions I had performed as a Marine in Viet Nam (VN). My expectations were accurate.

Reference:

About five years ago I provided an interview to the Oral History Project of the Texas Tech University. It has been published by that institution. The page numbers that I provide in this paper are references to that Oral History publication. It is possible that the page numbers of my draft copy do not quite match the page numbers of the final publication, but they should be quite close.

Overview:

AA was the entity by which the United States (US) provided direct aviation support to the allied combatants in Laos during the VN -- war precisely as such support was provided by the US military to US and ARVN forces in VN. This paper will be focused on the support specifically provided by AA to US Military personnel that were, themselves, in Laos or involved with the war there. But, in fact, most of the things that AA did was military in nature and in direct support of Allied combatants.

The weapons and munitions we hauled to the combatants came from the US military. They were in military boxes, loaded on AA aircraft in Thailand (by US military personnel overseeing local workers), distributed "upcountry" by smaller AA aircraft to combatants who often had on-site US military and/or US civilian advisors. AA helicopters supplied these soldiers and took them into battles (with US military close-air support) that were planned with the assistance of US military and civilian advisors. AA extracted them and/or their US advisors when they were wounded or being overrun and AA provided food and medical supplies to their families.

Everyone in Laos was focused on the war. Often the supply missions would be a combination of rice, supplies, and ammunition. The processes of just living and of waging war were thoroughly amalgamated at that time and place (p56-57). Just as in the USMC, I flew more "support" missions than "combat" missions, but I did fly a significant number of purely combat missions too. We called them "special" missions, and we received some additional compensation for these special missions, most of which were planned and briefed by the US military. A few of them were, without doubt, more hazardous than anything I did while in the Marine Corps (p52-53).

Support for the Ravens:

The Ravens were a group of Air Force pilots who lived and worked in Laos. They flew small single-engine observation aircraft, and their main purpose was to direct the US military fighter-bomber air strikes (p53). It was very important that they be there because the fighter-bombers flew too high and too fast to pick many of the targets without their help. They had to fly low and slow. This made them vulnerable and it also meant that, when they were shot down, they would be in close proximity to

the enemy. It was very important, therefore, that they be picked up as soon as possible if they were down.

Air America helicopters picked up quite a few of them. We provided most of the logistical support to all the sites so we were usually working somewhere within radio range, and we were usually able to get to them much sooner than the Air Force rescue helicopters, the "Jolly Greens." Of course, we provided logistical support to the Ravens, just as we did to virtually every group in Laos that was related to the war effort. We brought them medicine, food, aircraft parts, weapons, fuel, comfort items, etc.

But "support" was a two way street at that time and place. The Ravens also supported Air America on some of our more hazardous missions. The military fighter-bombers often accompanied us so as to provide close air support and the Ravens were also often there to direct the fighter-bombers (p54). In one instance I and my crew were tasked with extracting some Thai combatants that had been wounded near LS69A. The fighter-bombers were somehow delayed and nightfall was close. Because we believed that some of the wounded could not survive the night, we elected to do the extraction without the close air support. The Raven was here, though, and said that if we took fire he would try to suppress it with his "Willy Pete" (white phosphorus) target-marking rockets. We completed the mission, but we did, indeed, take fire. In fact, the enemy was laying in wait for us and the situation was such that they would have certainly shot us up severely if not for the Raven. He spotted them and, with an almost impossible aerial maneuver, he shot his rockets into them just as they sprang their trap (p51).

This 69A mission typifies what we did and how we did it. Sometime in the early 70's it was decided that our AA helicopters needed armed gun-ship helicopters to support them on some of the more hazardous missions (p54-55). The US Army provided one of the Thai agencies with some UH-1 gun-ships (I don't remember which agency – maybe the Thai Army, but I seem to recall it was the Border Patrol) A cadre of US Army gun-ship personnel trained Thai pilots and support personnel to operate them these armed Hueys. As I recall, it was these Thai piloted gun-ships, which were first tasked with supporting us on this 69A combat med evac mission. So, there we were in Laos supporting Thai Army troops who were advised by American CIA personnel and awaiting Thai helicopter gun-ships (probably of a civilian agency) to provide us cover. When the Thai gun-ships were unable to be there, some fighter-bombers were requested (maybe the US Air Force, or maybe the Lao T28s, I'm not sure). When the fighter-bombers did not arrive, we made do with just the Raven. He pulled us through. If the Thai piloted UH-1 gun ships had shown up, they would have been accompanied by another UH-1 which would have contained the US Army aviators who were training and advising the Thai gun-ship pilots. By the way, the commander of the US Army contingent that was training the Thai pilots was Special Forces Major Bob Moberg – the former Captain Moberg that was advising the artillery unit that we extracted from Muong Soui back in 1969 (see the Special Forces section below).

Support for US Military Pilots:

AA pilots, generally, were very intent on picking up downed airmen, military or civilian (p59). Air America helicopters picked up many, many downed US Military pilots. I have been told that we picked up a greater number than the Air Force Jolly Greens did, but I do not know if that is a fact. I, personally, only remember picking up one. He was shot down about an hour's flight east of Vientiane, in the low mountains north of the Mekong River. It was not far from a Lima Site I think the number was LS 212 (p58). I specifically remember, however, quite a number that were picked up by other AA helicopter pilots. And I remember searching on the PDJ, with another AA pilot, for an Air Force pilot that was reported down in the area, but we never found him. The information about the downed pilot had come from a Military (I think Air Force) aircraft and was routinely available at high altitude – I think it was an everyday communications mission, and I think the call sign was "Cricket."

I don't specifically remember Cricket requesting that we conduct a Search and Rescue (SAR) mission, but it was clearly expected – by all present – that's the way things worked.

I attempted to pick up another Air Force pilot north of LS20A (I think his downing also came from Cricket). He was hanging in a tree by his parachute, and we were having a hard time getting the hoist down through to foliage to him. After a while the Air Force Jolly Greens showed up, and they were able to send a PJ down on their hoist for him (p58) (I don't remember what "PJ" means, but he was the crew member that would exit the aircraft on rescues).

I believe that we (AA) were specifically designated as a rescue service for the military in the 1960s. I do not know whether the formal designation continued once the Jolly Greens were fully activated and capable in that area or not, but I know that we regarded the rescue mission as a task that was ours. And I know that we picked up many who might not have made it out if we had deferred to the later arriving Jolly Greens.

Support for the Special Forces:

In my Oral History interview Mr. Maxner asked me if I knew about a Project 404 (p59). At that time I did not recall the term, but I now believe that it was the term used to refer some of the Special Forces personnel that were then working in Laos. Anyway, when Mr. Maxner then asked me about supporting Special Forces in Laos I told him about the Special Forces officer that was advising the Thai artillery unit at Moung Soui (LS 108, I believe). His name was Bob Moberg, and we (AA) provided a lot of support to him and that unit. In fact, AA helicopters, along with some US Air Force helicopters, extracted those personnel in the early summer of 1969 when they were about to be overrun by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) (p59-60). As I recall, that was the first time the NVA had used a significant armor force to assault on of our positions.

There was only one other Special Forces person that I specifically remember. He was a Sgt. named Larry Martin and he worked at Sam Thong (LS20). LS20 was the main site for USAID in the late 60, but there he was, in uniform, working side-by-side with Pop Buell (sp?) and the other USAID personnel. AA did a lot of work from LS20 while Larry Martin was there. This is another example of the amalgamation of all the forces that had occurred in Laos. AA was clearly supporting the Special Forces at LS20, in the person of Sgt. Larry Martin and he was clearly there to advance the military effort. But he was advancing the war effort, in part, by providing liaison and assistance to USAID who was providing "humanitarian" assistance to the refugees as well as food to the combatants. Clearly we were all supporting the war effort.

Having said that, I hasten to note that I often saw other Special Forces personnel at some of the other sites we working at. I just did not come to personally know any of them. I particularly remember a US Army personnel, whom I presumed to be Special Forces, on the Plain de Jars (PDJ) when we captured that area and then began transporting huge quantities of munitions there. This was in 1971 and/or 1972.

Special Missions:

These were the missions that were specifically expected to result in combat confrontations. Like in VN, many of the supply and transport missions resulted in hostile actions even bullet holes and dead or wounded personnel. But the "special" missions were consciously expected to be significantly more deadly. Insertions of combat troops into assault zones, extraction of personnel from sites being overrun, med evac missions in the face of hostile fire, and the transport of reconnaissance/observation teams over the flak-protected Ho Chi Minh Trail are examples (p52-53). The flights over the Trail warrant special mention. I personally was involved in at least 5 of these missions on which we were shot at by sophisticated flack producing anti-aircraft weapons. We were flying magnesium skinned helicopters with large tanks of high octane aviation fuel. When those black puffs began to materialize around us, I was more terrified than at any other time of my life. The fact that we continued to fly

these missions after the first or second time this occurred is, I think, strong evidence that we all regarded the AA job as more than just a commercial venture.

All these special missions that I participated in were precisely planned and most of the planning and briefing sessions that I attended contained military personnel. Most of the over-the-trail missions, for example, were briefed at the Air Force base in Nakom Phanom (NKP), Thailand by Air Force personnel. They were supported by US military fighter bomber aircraft, and we received additional monetary compensation for them.

It is easy to determine the precise US military beneficiary of many of these special missions, but not all. The extraction of the Special Forces advised artillery unit at Moun Soui in 1969 clearly benefited the US Army, and I noted it above in the Special Forces section of this paper. Similarly, the insertion of the observation teams along the Ho Chi Minh trail observably provided the US Air Force and Navy with bombing intelligence (and thereby enhanced the entire VN war effort). Although it is not possible to point to a specific US military unit whose efforts were enhanced by many of the missions, there is no doubt that the entire war effort benefited by fact that our combatants in Laos kept around 90,000 NVA regulars occupied during the VN war. Because these were troops that were not available to engage American soldiers in VN while we were fighting them in Laos.

Conclusion:

I am now retired from the Federal Civil Service and the US Army Reserve. I have the retirement and medical benefits associated with these retirements and I have VA benefits as well. I do not think I will personally derive a significant benefit if AA personnel are granted military status for their work, but I enthusiastically support the petition. I believe that we were, in fact, doing precisely the missions that the US military would have done except for political policy concerns. Please do not hesitate to contact me for any amplification or explanation of my paper. I travel a great deal, so the best way to reach me is Email (but regular mail and/or telephone message will eventually reach me too).

Respectfully submitted,

/D. Larry Fraser/