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16 April 2014

Mr. Bruce T. Brown
Executive Secretary
DOD Civilian/Military Service Review Board
Joint Base Andrews NAF, MD 20762

Dear Mr. Brown:

(U) 1. This letter responds to your request for Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) review and comment regarding statements submitted by "U.S. and Foreign Employees of Air America, Inc." CIA subject matter experts have researched applicable data bases, examined relevant published and unpublished CIA materials, and discussed these claims with knowledgeable retired Agency officers.

(U) 2. Background. Air America was a CIA proprietary company that was created in 1959 to provide unique aviation support to Agency operations throughout Asia. The company was sold in 1976. In 2001, senior CIA representatives publicly presented the members of the Civil Air Transport Association and the Air America Association with a Unit Citation Award. Signed by George Tenet, Director of Central Intelligence, the citation proclaimed that Civil Air Transport and Air America had provided "unwavering service to the United States of America." Further, "They did so despite often outdated equipment, hazardous terrain, dangerous weather, enemy fire, and their own government bureaucracy. Their actions speak eloquently of their skill, bravery, loyalty, and faith in themselves, each other, and the United States of America."

(U) 3. In the years following this official acknowledgement, CIA has continued to honor Air America with both internal and public presentations. For example, a joint CIA-University of Texas at Dallas symposium in 2009 focused on Air America's wartime role in search and rescue (SAR) operations. Other CIA public events, in 2009 and 2011 at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, further publicized Air America's singular accomplishments. Within the Agency, new and current employees are offered regular briefings on what was once CIA's largest proprietary. Agency officers and visitors to CIA Headquarters also find

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the company commemorated in the holdings of the Intelligence Art Collection, where several paintings depict the resourcefulness and courage of Air America employees. CIA will always be proud of its association with Air America.

(U) 4. Air America flew missions in Laos as a private airline from 1959 to June 1974. While non-CIA employees largely handled day-to-day supervision of Air America, management and responsibility for the proprietary's activities remained under the authority of senior CIA officials. In addition to CIA-specific aviation tasks in Laos, Air America also generated revenue by flying support missions for other U.S. government entities. This included daily work, often interspersed with Agency missions in the same geographic areas, for the Departments of Defense (DOD) and State (DOS) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

(U) 5. Given the unique political environment in Laos during this time period and the corresponding need to conceal any overt American military activity, the U.S. ambassador to Laos had special oversight authorities regarding DOD actions. To preserve U.S. national security equities and still fulfill important aviation tasks, successive U.S. ambassadors sought permission from higher authority to use Air America in military support duties. Given the international restrictions placed on the U.S. military and their lack of in-theater capability, Washington often approved these U.S. Embassy Vientiane requests. At all times, however, Air America activities in Laos were based on CIA directives, which, in turn, were authorized at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Neither the DOS nor the DOD ever exercised exclusive operational control over Air America. Air America employees had the right to refuse any assignment. Moreover, as with any civilian company, resignation was a standing employee option.

(U) 6. Air America, like other airline companies, required its employees to wear specified uniforms. These

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distinctive hats and insignia, worn even as they flew dangerous missions in Laos, advertised the civilian nature of the company. To attract the very best personnel, Air America offered employees pay and benefits equal to or greater than compensation paid to other airline professionals. These included discounted travel on other airlines for themselves and their dependents and monthly housing and dependent education allowances. Because many Air America employees chose to have their families join them in Thailand, the company operated an elementary-through-twelfth-grade school at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. In Laos, Air America employees with school age children received an educational stipend to offset international school expenses. While their aircrews often worked alongside U.S. government personnel, Air America was always recognizable as a private company with its own regulations and unique "can do" culture.

(U) 7. Air America Activities. The following comments are directed at the six (a-f) programs and activities mentioned in your request for review and comment. While each of these accounts describes the close nature of the CIA-U.S. military relationship in Laos, all but the SAR efforts refer to specific Agency requirements. With regard to SAR, discussed in detail below, Air America was not contractually obligated to conduct U.S. military-related rescue missions. Nonetheless, with no special remuneration, Air America personnel performed dozens of dangerous wartime rescues in Laos, for which they certainly earned and underscored their motto, "Anything, Anywhere, Anytime, Professionally."

(U) a. "[S]upport of U.S. Army Special Forces in Laos as part of Operation Hot Foot and Operation White Star from 1959-1963."

(U) Operation Hotfoot and the follow-on White Star Mobile Training Team program were both U.S. efforts to use U.S. Army Special Forces personnel to train regular and irregular Royal Lao Army units. CIA paramilitary officers worked closely with these

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military advisors. Given the lack of roads and the mostly mountainous and jungle terrain of Laos, Air America was regularly tasked to transport Lao forces and their U.S. military trainers. Air America, at CIA direction, provided airlift services to these U.S. Army personnel until the 1962 Geneva Agreements ended such U.S. military training initiatives. These CIA and DOD activities were consistent with presidentially mandated policies during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.

(U) b. "[S]upport of the U.S. Air Force operating in Laos in the Steve Canyon Program (Ravens)."

(U) Air America employees and CIA officers were often co-located with U.S. Air Force forward air controller (FAC) personnel known as "Ravens." During the second Indochina War, this classified military program placed experienced Air Force pilots in Laos to assist in directing indigenous and U.S. airstrikes. In the course of their Agency assigned duties, Air America personnel sometimes worked with the Ravens, especially during SAR emergencies and the support of irregular forces. Although suggestions were made in the early 1960s to equip some Air America aircraft with "marking rockets" so they might be used in a FAC role, these ideas were officially rejected. CIA officials were concerned that such missions would compromise Air America's airline status. Some Air America pilots were assigned to fly U.S. military personnel on missions to identify and mark targets for U.S. strike aircraft. Such flights were infrequent, and the U.S. Air Force eventually halted these requests.

(U) c. "SAR and direct support for the Site 85 operation."

(U) Lima Site 85 (LS-85), also known by its Lao name, Phou Pha Thi, was the location of a top secret, U.S. Air Force-manned ground directed radar (TSQ-81)

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facility. The Air Force project name was "Heavy Green." The construction of the radar site in the summer of 1967 required the use of U.S. military and Air America helicopters to transport equipment and personnel. Once the site was completed, Air America fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft often transported Heavy Green personnel from their overt unit at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base to and from LS-85. Air America resupply of the military facility was sometimes undertaken in conjunction with aviation services for a nearby CIA-manned facility.

(U) Located on the edge of the western cliffs of Phou Pha Thi, the radar site was in full operation from November 1967 until communist forces overran it on 11 March 1968. Of the nineteen Americans at LS-85 (two CIA and seventeen U.S. Air Force), Air America crews rescued seven Americans, and U.S. Air Force helicopters picked up one American. Air America and Air Force helicopters also lifted out numerous indigenous personnel. Soon thereafter, eleven U.S. airmen were listed as missing in action. The surprise nighttime commando assault up the steep cliffs resulted in the largest single ground loss of U.S. Air Force personnel for the entire Vietnam War.

(U) Air America pilot Kenneth Wood and flight mechanic Loy "Rusty" Irons were responsible for the rescue of four Heavy Green airmen. Wood has stated that he and Irons were not part of any planned rescue effort at LS-85. Instead, while departing another operating base, Wood heard an emergency radio beacon and decided to fly his helicopter to the location of the signal. Once at LS-85, Wood displayed extraordinary airmanship as Irons skillfully raised four Air Force survivors by rescue cable into the hovering helicopter. As Wood pulled the helicopter away from the mountain, enemy gunfire struck CMSgt Richard Etchberger. Mortally wounded, Etchberger died while being flown to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base for medical treatment.

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(U) On the eve of the White House ceremony on 21 September 2010 to posthumously award the Medal of Honor to CMSgt Etchberger, CIA honored Air America pilot Wood and flight mechanic Irons. Deputy CIA Director Michael Morell officiated at the Headquarters event, which included the wives of Wood and Irons; members of the Etchberger family; John Daniel, a Heavy Green survivor of the attack, and his wife; and the two CIA officers rescued from LS-85.

(U) The Medal of Honor presentation ceremony was held in the White House East Room, where CIA Director Leon Panetta, along with current and retired CIA officers, joined with the Air America and Heavy Green groups. Once again, at the highest level, CIA demonstrated its pride in Air America.

(U) d. "High Altitude Relay Project (HARP)."

(U) This program, flown in 1967 and 1968 by Air America pilots operating Volpar turboprop airplanes, provided airborne relay of Laos-based indigenous ground force communications to intelligence collection stations. Known as "roadwatch" teams, these units were directed by CIA paramilitary officers to observe and report enemy movements along the Laos-Vietnam border. HARP allowed these important transmissions to be channeled to Agency officers for analysis and possible use by the U.S. military in the aerial bombing of communist forces and materiel transiting the Ho Chi Minh trail infiltration routes.

(U) e. "Photo Reconnaissance collaboration with 7th/13th Air Force and CIA."

(U) 7th/13th Air Force Headquarters and the 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment (JLD), the Agency's primary Laos mission support unit, were both located at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. The JLD had specific high-priority requirements from CIA

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Headquarters to obtain tactical photography of communist infiltration routes in Laos. Photoreconnaissance missions were assigned to Air America, which conducted these operations from late 1966 until March 1974 using several specially configured Volpar aircraft. Where relevant to military requirements, this photography was shared with 7th/13th Air Force intelligence officers for dissemination to appropriate military commands and units.

(U) f. "Search (SAR) Operations for U.S. Military flight crews from 1964 through 1974."

(U) Air America operated an aerial transportation system in Laos that daily had dozens of fixed and rotary wing aircraft moving about the country. Over a period of more than a dozen years, Air America crews developed a superb knowledge of the enemy's tactics, the forbidding terrain, and a considerable understanding of the harsh weather conditions. Air America crews were always prepared to undertake the rescue of their own personnel--a not uncommon occurrence. They were also willing to assist in the recovery of downed U.S. and indigenous military personnel. In the early years of the American "Rolling Thunder" bombing campaign against North Vietnam, Air America was often the only available SAR resource. Rescue activity in Laos, however, was closely controlled and managed by the U.S. ambassador. Moreover, particularly as bombing and reconnaissance missions increased in 1964, the ambassador was under strict instructions from the highest levels of the U.S. government.

(U) To maintain the company's civilian guise, considerable study was given to the use of Air America helicopters for SAR work, especially in North Vietnam. The risk to U.S. prestige was great as the crash of an Air America aircraft or, even worse, the capture of Air America personnel inside the communist country

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could have publicly exposed U.S. contravention of Laotian neutrality. Eventually, as the air war increased in scope and pace, U.S. military SAR aircraft were deployed to Thailand and South Vietnam. Nonetheless, because they were constantly operating over Laos, Air America personnel continued to participate in military rescue emergencies. Often already flying near the location of the bail-out or crash and knowing the terrain features and possibly the location of enemy forces, Air America crews could often respond much more quickly than the U.S. military. Most rescue missions were conducted in Laos, although under extreme circumstances, Air America did save Americans on the ground in North Vietnam.

(U) Because they did not have to adhere to the military's complicated multi-aircraft SAR procedures, and time was of the essence, Air America pilots often conducted rescues with a single helicopter. Without the armor plating and machine guns of the military helicopters, these actions were extraordinarily dangerous. Even so, Air America employees received no additional pay or incentives for this rescue work. According to many of the pilots and flight mechanics, they simply recognized other airmen were in peril and reacted accordingly. They believed that other flyers would do the same for them.

(U) 8. Should you have any questions regarding this response, please feel to contact me at 703-613-1791 or davidsr1@ucia.gov.

Sincerely yours,

David Robarge
CIA Chief Historian

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