
In Gratitude to the Crews of Air America: A Speech to an Air America Symposium

Craig W. Duehring

The following was a speech Mr. Duehring delivered to participants, including many veterans of Air America service, in a symposium held at the University of Texas at Dallas on 18 April 2009.

As a presidential appointee, I usually speak from a position of having access to the latest policy, or at least I have the implied aura of representing a subject that I deal with every day. In layman's terms, the audience assumes that I know what I'm talking about. This audience is very different. Here I am speaking to a group of peers—of people who have assembled here because of their common experience during a unique period of American history. This period burst on the scene because of countless factors, now visible only through a close examination of history, which provided an opportunity for each person in this room. Like the Robert Frost poem, we faced a fork in the road and, for whatever reason, we chose our destiny. The consequences of this choice still evolve and, indeed, bring us together tonight.

So, what I thought I would do was give you a glimpse into what a Raven saw when he looked at the people who made up Air America. For you were certainly a major, major player in what we accomplished in the 6–7 years that the Raven program and its predecessor, the Butterfly program, was in existence.¹ As I think back to my time at Long Tieng, every picture includes a vision of an Air America aircraft.

My first tour out of pilot training was in III Corps where I flew O-1 Bird Dogs for the 25th ARVN Division stationed in the farming village of Duc Hoa, about half way between Saigon and the Cambodian border. It was August of 1969 and, because of the ferocity of the fighting in that area during Tet of 1968, the area was rather peaceful with irregular actions, by the Viet Cong, mostly. We had some action but even being shot at was a cause for great discussion at the little army bar that was the venue of our nightly rendezvous. After several months, I learned of a program that involved flying somewhere outside of Vietnam and since I faced the double incentives of a boring war and a boss who I detested, I followed my ambition and applied for the "Steve Canyon" program, or "Project 404," which were the official titles of the Raven program. I waited for word to leave which, inexplicably, never came. In desperation, I flew to Bien Hoa to determine the cause of the delay.

¹ The Ravens were US Air Force forward air controllers flying covert missions over Laos from air bases in the kingdom.

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I was told that they had tried three times to reach me but, communications being what they were, I never received the message, and so they sent the number-two guy on the list. My only recourse was to extend for a second tour because the next opening wasn't projected to come up for several months. Imagine my surprise a few short days later when I received an urgent call to pack my bags and head to Udorn in early April 1970.

After "sanitizing" in the men's room of base ops, I met the guys at Detachment 1, near your own compound as I recall, and a day later flew to Vientiane. My new boss welcomed me with the news that I was to be assigned to Long Tieng to fly for Vang Pao and the Hmong people. I was thrilled. Action, at last! His second message was to tell me that the pilot who had preceded me there, Dick Elzinga, had disappeared along with the pilot he was to replace, Hank Allen, on his very first mission. To this date, their bodies have not been found. This was only one of many "silver bullets" that I dodged during the next 11 months at Long Tieng.

My first encounter of a group of Air America pilots was in the Purple Porpoise, run by the British owner and probable intelligence provider, Monty Banks. As I stepped through the circular door I was greeted with his famous call, "Shut the bleeding door." We joined a group of your folks, one of whom was celebrating his first \$100,000 with the company. I was extremely impressed but tried not to show it since he was buying.

Long Tieng under siege was a new experience for me. We flew hard. In fact, on my first day on the job, I directed airstrikes on a site northwest of Long Tieng that was being attacked by a large group of NVA soldiers. After putting in three sets of A-1s, the attack was broken off and, according to the Hmong forward air guide on the ground, an estimated 200 enemy soldiers were killed. In retrospect, I believe those figures are suspect but, after only 24 hours in country, it was enough to impress this young pilot, I assure you.

From that point on, our lives were totally intertwined with yours. We ate often at the Air America hostel where you could get the best fried rice ever made, party at the bar or, more importantly, brief up a hazardous resupply mission or even a search-and-rescue mission.

On one occasion, we had two F-4 aircrew members who had spent a very cold night on the PDJ [Plane of Jars]. We planned the next day's mission using two sets of Ravens. The first primary and backup took off in the dark to direct the search and rescue by the Jolly Greens from Udorn. Two more of us launched with Air America helicopters to provide an immediate rescue force for any aircraft that might get shot down that day. We did this because the Jolly Greens had a nasty habit of pulling off and regrouping whenever one of their aircraft was shot up. This way, if we were there, we could keep the big rescue team on task while we tidied up the loose ends. In addition, we wrapped up a rifle, ammunition, food, water, clothing, and radios in blankets and stuffed them in a Pilatus Porter. The idea was, in case we were unable to pick up the crew members by the end of the day, the Porter would fly at extremely low level out of the setting sun and kick the bundles out the door so that our guys could survive the night. It was a nasty battle but the Jolly Greens were successful.

Of course, anyone who flew in that area knew that the primary rescue source was not the Air Force but Air America, simply because they were usually close by. All of us had your frequency set in our radios. When a plane went down, there was a call to Cricket and a call to Air America. Time and time again, you guys dashed into the unknown and saved American lives. After one rescue, this time of a Raven, the flight mechanic offered my friend a cigarette, only to have it refused. "I'm trying to quit" was the answer. At this point the flight mech laughed and said, "That's the funniest thing I've ever heard—a Raven quitting cigarettes—for his health."

There was more humor. One day I took off from Long Tieng in a T-28 and followed a C-123K on its way to Vientiane. I couldn't resist the urge to sneak up behind him and park off his left wing tip until he noticed me there with a noticeable jerk of the yoke. I laughed and pulled out ahead of him, feeling quite pleased with myself. A few minutes later I heard or, rather, felt something out of order. When I finally looked to my right, there he was—two props churning and the doors open on both J-85 pods. A flash of the trusty "bird" on his part brought about laughter in both cockpits, I'm sure.

In a more serious incident, my buddy, Chuck Engle and I were playing "high-low" looking for targets along Route 4 just west of Xien Kouang ville. In this silly game, one aircraft flies low and as fast as he can down a road while the other "flies cover" right behind him. All was well until Chuck took a load of AK-47 fire in the cockpit that shot out his side window. He claimed he could see the bullet pass in front of his face. Another round hit him just above the left ankle, passed completely through his leg and fell onto the floor. He recovered the bullet and had it mounted on a gold chain that he wore around his neck. Chuck pulled off while I shot a rocket in the direction of the soldiers. Then we began the 30-minute flight back to Long Tieng. Of course, our first call was to an Air America helicopter that changed course to intercept us. In the meantime, I tried to keep Chuck conscious, as nausea and pain took over. The entire story is written in the book, *The Ravens*. Eventually, a Huey came into position and I dropped back. The helicopter stayed with Chuck through the landing at Long Tieng. I remember that Chuck, as he saw the aircraft drifting off the side of the runway, took his useless leg and jammed it onto the rudder pedal, causing the aircraft to cartwheel and come to a stop. The flight doc and others pulled him from the aircraft and rushed him onto a waiting Volpar that took him to the hospital at Udorn. In retrospect, the stupid part of that entire mission was "our" doing, while the common sense part was compliments of the Air America team.

I'll tell one last story and then wrap it up. But, in this case, I've saved the best for last. And in this case, the professionalism of the Air America pilots saved my life. You may recall that, during the rainy season, the weather could get nasty for days. Even you guys were forced to sit it out once in awhile. During those times, we would move from the breakfast table to the poker table for an all-day session of dealer's choice, nickel-dime poker. Even on a bad day, you wouldn't lose more than about \$25. By 9 or 10 in the morning, the beer lamp was lit with one of us staying sober just in case the weather broke. As it happened, it was my day to drink Coke and, sure enough, sometime in the afternoon, an A-1 descended through a hole over the PDJ and said the area was full of active targets. Cricket

did his thing by launching the fleet and I headed to Vang Pao's house to pick up a backseater. We made it to the PDJ and learned that the weather had improved well enough to start popping bad guys. Does the term "sucker hole" conger up any nightmares? We normally planned to get back to Long Tieng with at least one hour of fuel left, in case we had to divert. Well, Cricket kept laying on the fighters, and I stayed out a bit too long. It wasn't until I tried to make it home that I realized the weather had closed in behind me. I picked my way through mountain gaps that still appeared below the huge cloud banks now resting on the ridge lines. When the most direct route didn't work, I flew west to the lateral valley that formed a "V" with Long Tieng and Sam Tong in between, and attempted to come in what we called the "back door." That, too, was blocked, so I took advantage of the last opening I could find and popped out in the east-west valley that lies between Long Tieng and Sam Tong, just north of Skyline Ridge. The only sign of civilization was the winding dirt road that connected the two bases. I seriously considered crash landing on that road but decided against it because I knew that the wings would likely shear off and, as they pinched the fuselage, the flaps would come into the back seat and decapitate my backseater. So, I reemerged back into the valley west of Long Tieng and flew in circles with the clouds coming down on top of me, the fog filling in the valley below and daylight running out fast. I had 45 minutes of fuel and a one-hour flight to Vientiane, if I didn't hit a mountain on the climb out.

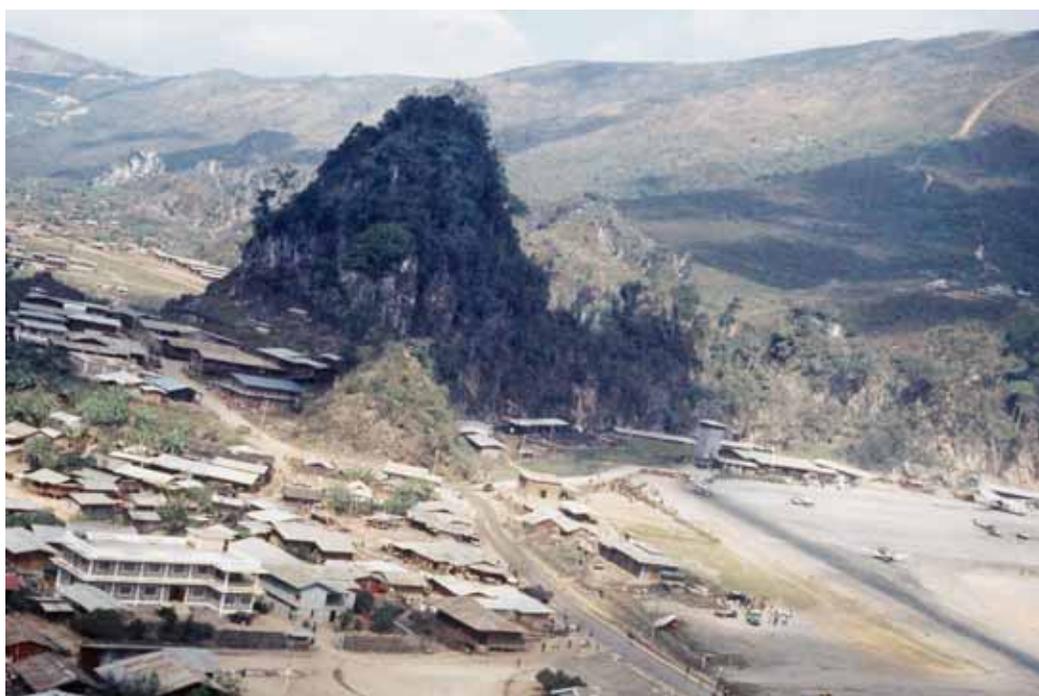
All the time this was going on, I was talking to the other Ravens in the Raven hootch. They said the rain was coming down mercilessly and that it was getting very dark. One of them volunteered to contact the Air America helicopter pilots to see if they could think of something. Shortly, I heard some chatter on the tower radio channel as three UH-1s cranked up on the ramp. Within minutes, they lifted off and flew in trail, slowly, out the "back door" to where I was orbiting in a space that kept getting smaller and smaller by the minute. "Hey, Raven" the first pilot called out, "I see you. Turn left...more...roll out. You are pointed at the back door. The gap is right in front of you." "You're nuts," I replied, "I don't see a damn thing except clouds and mountain." "It's an optical illusion," he said, "the gap is filled with heavy rain." I drove my little airplane straight at the mountain wall with my heart in my throat and past the hovering helicopter as I entered the point of no return. At the last possible second I saw a shimmering "V" coming down out of the cloud bank, only a couple of hundred feet tall. "Turn right, roll out...you are on track." I hit the heavy rain with an audible splash. Hell, everything is audible in an O-1. It poured off the wind screen in a constant torrent, but I found that I could see the ground flashing by on both sides and below me. "I have him," said the second helicopter pilot, "turn left...roll out... slightly right...watch out for that karst." Karst was right! It rushed by me below my left tire, far too close to be comfortable. I passed the second helicopter. "I've lost him," he said. "I've got him," the third pilot said. I was getting vectors from three Air America helicopter pilots hovering in trail of each other, in the heavy rain and fog. "Turn right...roll out. There. You are on extended downwind. Good luck." They headed on their way back to Vientiane, by what route, I have no idea.

I saw the ridgeline falling away a bit to the right, and at that point, I crossed over the compound below. A couple of the other Ravens raced out as they heard my engine, but the rain was too heavy to see anything even though I was much lower

than normal. I searched for the runway in the darkness and, miraculously, I saw a silver-blue ribbon to my front left side. It was the runway, totally covered in water, reflecting the last wisps of light that had forced their way through the clouds. Minutes later, all would be dark. I knew that, somewhere in front of me, another hillside loomed, and I needed to turn final just before I got there. I held on as long as I could then pulled the power back and established my best guess at a descending left turn to the opposite direction. As soon as I banked, the perspective changed and I lost sight of the runway. One potato, two potato, three potato, and I rolled out on heading. Again the runway appeared although somewhat shorter than I remembered. This was because I had turned early and positioned myself to land long. Never mind, the operative word was “land,” which I did, with the water spraying everywhere from my hydroplaning tires. Fortunately, the water was deep enough that it rapidly slowed me down so that I was able to turn off onto the Raven ramp.

I shut off the engine and sat there shaking. Finally, I climbed out of the airplane and just hung on to the strut while I contemplated how close to dying I had just been. My backseater bolted for VP’s house, while I searched for my jeep. I also took time to say a prayer of thanks to all those who helped me in my hour of need, especially those wonderful Air America pilots who came through—again.

When I departed Laos, I realized that I had served the longest tour at Long Tieng of any Raven—a record never broken. And, as I think back through a memory that is now getting a bit fuzzy here and there, certain images remain crystal clear—my



Long Tieng on a clear day. (File photo.)

fellow Ravens, the Hmong, VP, the mountains, the fear, the joy, and the bitter pain of loss. Always in the picture and in virtually every good war story I have, there appears a blue and silver bird or, perhaps, simply a silver bird that, even 39 years later stands as a towering symbol of courage, sacrifice, caring, skill, and honor.

Why did we do it? Why did we forsake all that was comfortable and well known to us to travel to a faraway land to risk our lives for people who will never know our names? Was it for our country? Was it for the money? Was it the feeling of knowing that you are the best at your trade? Or, was it for the fleeting thrill of being young and invincible? Perhaps it was all these. Certainly no one outside of our fold will ever understand, so why try?

Many beautiful words have been written which capture the emotion of this time from Rudyard Kipling to Lt.Gen. Hal Moore of *We Were Soldiers* fame. But, my choice is the poem by Robert Frost that I mentioned at the beginning of this speech entitled "The Road Not Taken." Let me close by reading the final stanza.

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your program and, on behalf of my Raven friends, thank you for always being there—anytime, anywhere, professionally.



For more information on the Air America Symposium, including a full transcript of the entire event, please visit http://www.intelink.ic.gov/wiki/2009_Symposium_on_Air_America. (U)

The declassified documents released in conjunction with the symposium are available at www.foia.gov/airamerica.asp, among the special collections listed in the FOIA reading room of CIA's public web site. (U)