Supporting the "Secret War"

CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974

William M. Leary

The largest paramilitary operations ever undertaken by the CIA took place in the small Southeast Asian Kingdom of Laos. For more than 13 years, the Agency directed native forces that fought major North Vietnamese units to a standstill. Although the country eventually fell to the Communists, the CIA remained proud of its accomplishments in Laos. As Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Richard Helms later observed: "This was a major operation for the Agency . . . It took manpower; it took specially qualified manpower; it was dangerous; it was difficult." The CIA, he contended, did "a superb job."

Air America, an airline secretly owned by the CIA, was a vital component in the Agency's operations in Laos. By the summer of 1970, the airline had some two dozen twin-engine transports, another two dozen short-takeoff-and-landing (STOL) aircraft, and some 30 helicopters dedicated to operations in Laos. There were more than 300 pilots, copilots, flight mechanics, and air-freight specialists flying out of Laos and Thailand. During 1970, Air America airdropped or landed 46 million pounds of foodstuffs—mainly rice—in Laos. Helicopter flight time reached more than 4,000 hours a month in the same year. Air America crews transported tens of thousands of troops and refugees, flew emergency medevac missions and rescued downed airmen throughout Laos, inserted and extracted road-watch teams, flew nighttime airdrop missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, monitored sensors along infiltration routes, conducted a highly successful photoreconnaissance program, and engaged in numerous clandestine missions using night-vision glasses and state-of-the-art electronic equipment. Without Air America's presence, the CIA's effort in Laos could not have been sustained.

A Distorted View

Air America's public image has fared poorly. The 1990 movie Air America is largely responsible for this. It featured a cynical CIA officer who arranged for the airline to fly opium to the administrative capital of Vientiane for a corrupt Asian general—loosely modeled on Vang Pao, a military leader of the mountain-region-based Hmong ethnic group. The film depicts the CIA man as having the opium processed into heroin in a factory just down the street from the favorite bar of Air America's pilots. The Asian general, in return, supplied men to fight the war, plus a financial kickback to the CIA. Ultimately, we learn that the Communist versus anti-Communist war in Laos was merely a facade for the real war, which was fought for control of the area's opium fields.

Air America pilots in this film are portrayed as skilled at landing damaged airplanes, but basically as a wildly unprofessional menagerie of party animals, including a few borderline psychotics. These ill-disciplined airmen are not the villains of the story; they are merely pawns in a drug game that they either disdain or oppose outright.

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The story of the real Air America begins in 1950, when the CIA decided that it required an air transport capability to conduct covert operations in Asia in support of US policy objectives.

If the CIA was not involved in the drug trade, it did know about it. As former DCI William Colby acknowledged, the Agency did little about it during the 1960s, but later took action against the traders as drugs became a problem among American troops in Vietnam. The CIA’s main focus in Laos remained on fighting the war, not on policing the drug trade.²

How It Began

The story of the real Air America begins in 1950, when the CIA decided that it required an air transport capability to conduct covert operations in Asia in support of US policy objectives. In August 1950, the Agency secretly purchased the assets of Civil Air Transport (CAT), an airline that had been started in China after World War II by Gen. Claire L. Chennault and Whiting Willauer. CAT would continue to fly commercial routes throughout Asia, acting in every way as a privately owned commercial airline. At the same time, under the corporate guise of CAT Incorporated, it provided airplanes and crews for secret intelligence operations.³

In the 1950s, the CIA’s air proprietary, as it was known on the lexicon of intelligence, was used for a variety of covert missions. During the Korean war, for example, it made more than 100 hazardous overflights of mainland China, airdropping agents and supplies.

Supporting the French

CAT also became involved in the French war against Communist insurgents in Indochina. In April 1953, the French appealed to President Eisenhower for the use of US Air Force C-119 transports and crews to fly tanks and heavy equipment to their hard-pressed forces in Laos. “Having such equipment,” the French emphasized, “might mean the difference between holding and losing Laos.”⁴

While reluctant to commit American military personnel to the war in Indochina, the Eisenhower administration was anxious to assist the French. This led to a decision to use CAT pilots to fly an airlift in US Air Force-supplied C-119s. In early May, a group of CAT personnel arrived at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines for 72 hours of concentrated ground and flight school on the unfamiliar C-119s. On 5 May, they flew six of the transports, now bearing the tricolored roundels of the French Air Force, to Gia Lam air-base, outside Hanoi.

Operation SQUAW began the next day. It continued until 16 July, with CAT pilots making numerous air-drops to French troops in Laos.
With the waning of the Vietminh offensive, which was due more to the weather than to French resistance, the CAT crews were withdrawn. 9

The war in Indochina, however, continued to go badly for the French. In November 1953, French paratroopers occupied Dien Bien Phu in northwestern Vietnam, 10 miles from the Laos border, and established an airhead. Gen. Henri Navarre, the French military commander, wanted to lure the Vietminh into a setpiece battle in which superior French firepower could be used to good effect. Among the many mistakes made by the French in placing their troops 220 miles from Hanoi was their miscalculation of the air transport resources needed to keep their isolated forces supplied. Col. Jean-Louis Nicot, head of the French Air Transport Command in Indochina, lacked sufficient aircrew to meet the Army's demands. Unless additional assistance could be obtained, the French garrison could not be kept supplied. 10

In early January 1954, Washington alerted CAT for a possible return to Indochina. Under a contract signed with French authorities on 3 March, CAT would supply 24 pilots to operate 12 C-119s that would be maintained by US Air Force personnel. Operations from Hanoi's Cat Bi airfield to Dien Bien Phu got under way just as the Vietminh began their assault on the French position. Between 13 March and the fall of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, CAT pilots flew 682 airdrop missions to the beleaguered French troops. One plane was shot down in early May, and the two pilots were killed; many other C-119s suffered heavy flak damage, and one pilot was severely wounded.

Laotian independence suited the policy of the United States, so long as the government remained non-Communist. CAT operations continued in Indochina after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Between mid-May and mid-August, C-119s dropped supplies to isolated French outposts and delivered loads throughout the country. CAT also supplied 12 C-46s for Operation COGNAC, the evacuation of civilians from North Vietnam to South Vietnam following the signing of the Geneva Agreement on 21 July 1954. Between 22 August and 4 October, CAT flew 19,808 men, women, and children out of North Vietnam. It also carried members of the CIA's Saigon Military Mission north of the 17th parallel. Attempts by the CIA to establish staybehind paramilitary networks in the north, however, proved futile. 11

Concern About Laos

The Geneva Conference of 1954, in addition to dividing Vietnam at the 17th parallel, confirmed the status of Laos as an independent state. The nation would be ruled by the Royal Lao Government from Vientiane on the Mekong River. Members of the pro-Communist Pathet Lao would regroup in the northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly pending integration into the central regime. The French were allowed to maintain a small military presence in the country to train the Royal Lao Army (FAR).

Laotian independence suited the policy of the United States, so long as the government remained non-Communist. Laos represented one of the dominoes in Southeast Asia that concerned President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Although the country had little intrinsic value, its geographical position placed it in the center of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. If Laos fell to the Communists, Thailand might be next, according to the domino theory. And the collapse of Thailand would lead to Communist domination of Southeast Asia—and perhaps beyond. 12

US Aid

Under an agreement signed in 1950, the United States had been supplying economic and military aid to Laos. Following the Geneva Conference, Washington decided to expand this program. In January 1955, it established the United States Operations Mission (USOM) in Vientiane to administer economic assistance. At the end of the year, the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO)—staffed by reserve or retired military officers and akin to a Military Assistance Advisory Group—was set up within USOM to handle military aid. 13

CAT soon became involved in USOM's aid program. In July 1955, USOM officials learned that a rice failure threatened famine in several provinces in Laos. Because a number of these areas were in remote, mountainous regions, airdrops would be the only feasible means to delivering essential supplies of rice and salt. Three CAT C-46s arrived at the northeastern railhead of Udorn, Thailand, on 11 September to begin the airlift. By the end of the month,
By June 1960, it had become clear that helicopters would form a permanent part of Air America's operations in Laos.

CAT had flown more than 200 missions to 25 reception areas, delivering 1,000 tons of emergency food. Conducted smoothly and efficiently, this airdrop relief operation marked the beginning of CAT's—and later Air America's—support of US assistance programs in Laos.

CAT's permanent presence in Laos began on 1 July 1957, when CAT pilot Bruce B. Blevins brought a C-47 to Vientiane to service a new contract with the US Embassy. Blevins found flying conditions primitive in Laos. At least Vientiane had a pierced steel plank runway and the only control tower in Laos. Elsewhere, he usually landed on dirt strips that had been built to support Japanese fighters during World War II. There were no aeronautical charts available, so he had to use French topographical maps. The only radio aid to navigation in the country was a 25-watt nondirectional beacon at Vientiane that was operated by employees of Air Laos, the country's commercial airline, who turned it on when it suited them.

Between 1957 and 1959, the unstable political situation in Laos led to a growing American presence in the country as the United States increased its support of the FAR. Air America—the name changed on 26 March 1959, primarily to avoid confusion about the air proprietary's operations in Japan—provided essential transportation for the expanding American effort in Laos. The airline's C-47s and C-46s passed more frequently through Vientiane to fulfill urgent airdrop requests. Blevins also was kept busy, landing throughout the country and making numerous airdrops to isolated FAR posts. He developed an especially close relationship with a CIA case officer who had arrived in October 1958 and who was assigned to support neutralist Capt. Kong Le's parachute battalion. The case officer frequently called on Blevins to carry personnel and supplies.

The summer of 1959 saw the introduction into Laos of a US Special Forces Group, codenamed Hotfoot, under the command of Lt. Col. Arthur "Bull" Simons. Twelve Mobile Training Teams took up duties at Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, and Pakse. The appearance of the Americans coincided with the outbreak of fighting between the FAR and Pathet Lao. In light of these developments, CIA officials in Laos requested additional air transport resources.

Increasing Air Support

In August 1959, CIA headquarters ordered its air proprietary to send two pilots to Japan for helicopter training. Robert E. Rousselot, vice president for operations, remembers being called into President Hugh L. Grundy's office in Taipei and shown the message. The requirement had "come out of the blue." He assumed that the CIA had a special operation in mind that called for the use of a helicopter and that it would be "a one-time deal." Little did Rousselot realize that this would be the beginning of a major rotary-wing operation in Laos.

Eventually, four CAT pilots were trained on US Air Force H-19A helicopters in Japan and the Philippines. The CAT contingent did not reach Laos until March 1960. Due to the operating limitations of the H-19s, the underpowered helicopters could fly only at lower elevations in the country. Generally, they were used to carry CIA case officers to meetings in outlying areas and to distribute leaflets during elections.

By June 1960, it had become clear that helicopters would form a permanent part of Air America's operations in Laos. It was equally apparent that neither the underpowered H-19s nor the inexperienced Air America rotary-wing pilots could do the job. Both Rousselot and the CIA recognized that better equipment and properly trained pilots were needed to accomplish the mission. Rousselot hired four experienced US Marine Corps helicopter pilots who obtained their discharges in Okinawa to fly the H-19s. Later in the year, the CIA arranged for the Marine Corps to transfer four UH-34 helicopters to Air America to replace the H-19s.

The Hello Courier

At the same time that Air America was trying to develop a rotary-wing capability in Laos, the company also was taking steps to introduce STOL aircraft into the country. Maj. Harry C. Adelholt, a US Air Force detailee with the CIA, had supervised the development of the Hello Courier while serving with the Agency's air branch. Convinced that the aircraft could survive the short, rugged
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Airstrips often found in remote areas, he became the foremost advocate for Air America’s adoption of the Helio Courier.21

Air America obtained a Helio for trials in Laos in the fall of 1959. The STOL program got off to a poor start. The Helio’s engines proved temperamental, frequently developing vapor locks on starting. Mud, rocks, and gravel tended to block the aircraft’s crosswind landing gear. The rudder needed modification so that it would not jam. Also, the first pilots who flew the airplane were used to multiengine transports and did not receive adequate training on an airplane that demanded special handling techniques.

Air America came close to abandoning the Helio. It was saved by Aderholt, who believed in the aircraft’s capability and was determined to see it work, and by Rousselot, who feared that the CIA would give the STOL mission to a rival company—Bird & Son—if Air America proved incapable of doing the job. Early in 1960, Rousselot assigned Ronald J. Sutphin, a talented light-plane pilot, to the project. Both Aderholt and Rousselot agree that it was Sutphin’s skillful demonstration of the extraordinary capability of the STOL aircraft that led the CIA to greatly expand the program.

Supporting the Anti-Communists

In August 1960, President Eisenhower complained at a press conference that “Laos is a very confused situation.” Civil war had broken out between the neutralist forces of paratroop commander Kong Le and rightwing Gen. Phoumi Nosavan. The Communist Pathet Lao supported Kong Le, while the US military and CIA lined up behind Phoumi. As Adm. Harry D. Felt, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, explained: “Phoumi is no George Washington. However, he is anti-Communist, which is what counts most in the sad Laos situation.”22

As Phoumi prepared to march on Vientiane from his base in Savannakhet, US assistance to the rightwing general increased sharply. Special Forces personnel conducted intensive training of Phoumi’s troops, while Air America transport flew in supplies from Bangkok. Phoumi also obtained support from his close friend, Thai Prime Minister Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who sent teams from the elite Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit to work with Phoumi’s soldiers.

Heavy fighting took place in December as General Phoumi drove Kong Le out of Vientiane. By the end of the year, Kong Le—now receiving support from a Soviet airlift—had retreated north to the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ), securing the vital airfield complex in that area.23

The appearance of the Soviets alarmed American military authorities. Admiral Felt cabled the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 29 December: “With full realization of the seriousness of the decision to intervene, I believe strongly that we must intervene now or give up northern Laos.” Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Arleigh Burke agreed. “If we lose Laos,” he told the Joint Chiefs on 31 December, “we will probably lose Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia. We will have demonstrated to the world that we cannot or will not stand when challenged.” The effect, Burke warned, would soon be felt throughout Asia, Latin America, and Africa.24
President Eisenhower was looking for ways to stabilize the situation in Laos without having to introduce American troops into the conflict. He therefore viewed with favor a CIA proposal to arm and train Hmong tribesmen.

The PARU Program

The Hmong project was primarily the work of CIA paramilitary specialist James W. (Bill) Lair. A veteran of World War II, Lair had joined the CIA at the outbreak of the Korean war. Assigned to Thailand, he had worked as a civilian instructor with the Thai Police Department in a CIA-sponsored program to enhance the organization’s ability to deal with threats from Communist insurgents. Attached to the Border Police, Lair soon encountered the problem of assisting remote border outposts. When police units in outlying areas of Thailand were attacked by Communist guerrillas, it often took a week to get reinforcements to the stations. Lair argued that it would be better to have a parachute-trained unit for such emergencies. Although the Thai Army was not happy about the appearance of a paramilitary police organization, Thailand’s government approved its creation. Aware of the Army’s sensitivity, Lair selected an innocuous name for the new organization: Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU).25

Lair was proud of his role in developing the PARU program. He selected a training camp in south Thailand and initiated a rigorous program to create an elite paramilitary force. At one point, the PARU program was in danger of losing CIA support. It was saved through the intervention of Desmond FitzGerald, chief of the Far East Division in the Clandestine Service. By 1960, the PARU force numbered more than 400 highly trained individuals.

Enter Vang Pao

The key to the Hmong program was Vang Pao, a Hmong military leader who commanded the FAR’s 10th Infantry Battalion on the PDJ. A talented and ambitious officer, Vang Pao had earlier come to the attention of Americans in Laos. In April 1957, the PEO had selected him to attend a six-month counterinsurgency training program at the Scout Ranger Base in Manila.

When fighting broke out in Laos at the end of 1959, Vang Pao had grown concerned that the Hmong were likely to suffer reprisals from the Communists because of the Hmongs’ previous close association with the French. Encouraged by General Phoumi and assisted by a US Special Forces team, he began to organize a Hmong staybehind force on the southeastern edge of the PDJ. If the Communists occupied the Plaine, Vang Pao intended to relocate the Hmong to seven strategic mountain tops surrounding the PDJ and carry on the fight.26

Aware that Vang Pao was seeking General Phoumi’s assistance, Lair decided to look into the possibility of an expanded program with the Hmong commander. In late December 1959, Lair met with Vang Pao, VP, as he was known to the Americans, and reported the contact to station chief Gordon L. Jorgensen. As it happened, Desmond FitzGerald was passing through Vientiane en route to Vietnam. Jorgensen suggested that he and Lair get together with FitzGerald for dinner. FitzGerald told Lair that the PARU’s assistance to General Phoumi during his campaign against Kong Le had been worth everything that the CIA had spent on the program. Lair then outlined a program to support the Hmong. FitzGerald asked him to write up the proposal and send it to Washington.27

Impressed with the Hmong commander, Lair returned to Vientiane and reported the contact to station chief Gordon L. Jorgensen. As it happened, Desmond FitzGerald was passing through Vientiane en route to Vietnam. Jorgensen suggested that he and Lair get together with FitzGerald for dinner. FitzGerald told Lair that the PARU’s assistance to General Phoumi during his campaign against Kong Le had been worth everything that the CIA had spent on the program. Lair then outlined a program to support the Hmong. FitzGerald asked him to write up the proposal and send it to Washington.27

Although Lair “never thought they would do it,” he quickly dispatched an 18-page cable. A positive answer, he recalled, came back “surprisingly soon.” Lair’s proposal also gained the...
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In April 1961, William R. Andersevic arrived in Vientiane to take charge of Air America’s Helio program. Under his direction, the number of STOL sites expanded rapidly. Andersevic would locate suitable areas, then arrange for local people to cut down trees and level the ground as best they could with their primitive equipment. By the summer of 1961, Andersevic had given Lair a firm foundation upon which to build what would become an extensive network of STOL fields throughout northern Laos.

Air America transports were also the key to feeding the people in the Hmong villages where the men had gone off to fight. Lair had enlisted the assistance of Edgar M. (“Pop”) Buell to deal with this program. An Indiana farmer who had arrived in Laos in June 1960 to work with the International Volunteer Service, Buell proved an inspired choice for the task. After a two-month trek around the perimeter of the PDJ, Buell arranged through Lair for Air America to make scheduled airdrops of rice to the Hmong villages.

The Diplomatic Track

While the Hmong program was expanding, President Kennedy had been seeking a diplomatic solution to the situation in Laos. At a meeting in Vienna in June 1961, Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev issued a joint statement of support for

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"a neutral and independent Laos." At the same time, negotiators met in Geneva to try to work out a settlement to the problem.

On 23 July 1962, a formal "Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos" was signed in Geneva. It provided for a coalition government and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country by 7 October. The United States pulled out its 666 military advisers and support staff, and Air America stopped dropping weapons to the Hmong. Assistant Secretary of State Averill Harriman, who was intent on ensuring US compliance with the Geneva accords, allowed the CIA to retain only two men in Laos to monitor Communist compliance with the agreement. 35

A Broken Agreement

Reports reaching CIA Headquarters from its two officers in Laos suggested that the apparent quiet was deceptive. It soon became clear that 7,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops had not left the country. In fact, the NVA was expanding its areas of control, attacking both neutralist and Hmong positions throughout Laos. As Hmong ammunition stores dwindled, William Colby, who was head of the CIA’s Far East Division, pleaded to Harriman to allow the resumption of air shipments. "My arguments became more forceful," Colby recalled, "reflecting the intense cables I was receiving from the two CIA officers who were still up in the hills observing and reporting on what was happening." Harriman reluctantly approved an Air America arms drop—along with instructions that it be used for purely defense purposes. Further shipments followed. As Colby pointed out, however, Harriman personally approved "each and every clandestine supply flight and its cargo." 37

Air America’s operations declined sharply in 1963. Restricted to food resupply to the Hmong, which averaged 40 tons a month by summer, the airline laid off people and mothballed airplanes. By May 1963, the number of UH-34s assigned to Udorn had dropped from 18 to six. Flight hours, which had averaged 2,000 per month before the Geneva accords, dropped to 600. As helicopter pilot Harry Casterlin wrote to his parents: "There are 37 of us over here and not enough work.... We are doing virtually no flying in Laos anymore." 36

Conflict Intensifies

As Hanoi sent additional troops into Laos during 1963, the Kennedy administration authorized the CIA to increase the size of the Hmong army, now headquartered in the valley of Long Tieng. By the end of the year, a reported 20,000 Hmong were armed. They acted as guerrillas, blowing up NVA supply depots, ambushing trucks, mining roads, and generally harassing the stronger enemy force. Air America again took a greater role in the slowly expanding conflict. "The war is going great guns now," helicopter pilot Casterlin informed his parents in November 1963. "Don’t be misled [by new reports] that I am only carrying rice on my missions as wars aren’t won by rice." 38

Full-scale fighting broke out in Laos in March 1964, when North
Air Operations

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Search and Rescue

While contemplating direct American military intervention, President Johnson ordered Navy and Air Force reconnaissance flights over the PDJ to provide intelligence and to send Hanoi "a message of American resolve." On 6 June, a naval reconnaissance aircraft was shot down over the PDJ. As the military services lacked a search-and-rescue capability in Laos, Air America undertook the responsibility.39

This unsuccessful attempt to rescue Lt. Charles E. Klusmann—who later escaped from his captors40—marked the beginning of what was perhaps the most demanding and hazardous of Air America's operations in Laos. The airline's pilots were neither trained nor properly equipped for the dangerous search-and-rescue task, but there was no one else to do the job. This mission became even more difficult during the first half of 1965, when the air war expanded into the northwestern portion of North Vietnam.

As Air America crews in helicopters, transports, and T-28s risked their lives to save downed US airmen, rumors grew that the civilian pilots were receiving a bounty of $1,500 for each rescue. This story apparently originated with a US Air Force captain in the air attache's office in Vientiane. Charged with briefing military pilots on rescue capabilities in Laos, he visited Air Force bases and US Navy carriers, spreading the word that airmen who were shot down over Laos did not have to worry about being picked up: Air America's pilots would be there to get them out, competing for the $1,500 bonus.41

When the story reached Air America, it created a good deal of resentment. In June 1965, after an especially hazardous long-range mission into North Vietnam in which two helicopters were badly shot up and a local Lao commander killed in what turned out to be a successful rescue of two Air Force officers from a downed F-4C, one of the Air America helicopter pilots wrote: "The AF doesn't, I'm sure, appreciate what we are doing for them at great risk to ourselves... What makes us mad is that the AF thinks we get $1,500 for a pickup. We get nothing—but ulcers."42

Not Very Secret

The year 1965 marked the beginning of major military activity in what became known as the secret war in Laos. Although the full extent of the conflict was not revealed to the American people until 1969-70, the war was not all that secret. News of the fighting frequently found its way into the pages of The Bangkok Post, The New York Times, and other newspapers. Congress was kept well informed. As former CIA Director Richard Helms has pointed out, the Appropriations subcommittees that provided the funds for the war were briefed regularly. Also, Senator Stuart Symington and other Congressmen visited Laos and gave every indication of approving what was happening. They believed, Helms noted, that "It was a much cheaper and better way to fight a war in Southeast Asia than to commit American troops."43

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Activity at Udorn

The Ambassador in Vientiane delegated responsibility for the tactical conduct of the war to his CIA station chief. The primary headquarters for supervising the war, however,
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was in Udorn, Thailand. Located adjacent to the Air America parking ramp at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, the 4802nd Joint Liaison Detachment was the CIA’s command center for military operations in Laos. Lair was in charge of the 4802nd until the summer of 1968, when he was replaced by his longtime deputy, Lloyd ("Pat") Landry.

Both Lair and Landry had excellent rapport with Gen. Vitoon Yasawatdi, commander of "Headquarters 333" at Udorn, the Thai organization in charge of that country’s forces in Laos. The Thai general, who had direct, private access to both the Lao and Thai prime ministers, had been identified by one senior CIA officer as "the single most important player in the Laos program."45

Weather and the War

The early years of the war took on a seasonal aspect. During the dry period, which lasted from October to May, the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao went on the offensive, applying pressure on the Hmong in northern Laos and on government forces throughout the country. During the monsoon, lasting from June to September, the anti-Communists took advantage of the mobility provided by Air America and struck deep into enemy-occupied territory. The situation was a mirror image of Vietnam. In Laos, the Communists acted as a conventional military force and were tied to fixed supply lines. The Hmong, at least at first, countered with guerrilla tactics.

The limited nature of the war was reflected in the modest losses—that is, modest in comparison to what was ahead—suffered by Air America during 1965, 1966, and 1967. Despite a rapid growth in personnel, Air America lost only 11 crew members in Laos during these three years, five of which were due to enemy action.

North Vietnamese Pressure

The character of the war began to change in 1968. The North Vietnamese, impatient with the progress of the Pathet Lao, introduced major new combat forces into Laos and took control of the year’s dry season offensive. By mid-March, they had captured a strategic valley north of Luang Prabang, successfully assaulted a key navigational facility that was used by the US Air Force for bombing North Vietnam, and threatened to push the Hmong out of their mountain top strongholds surrounding the PDJ.

On 21 March 1968, CIA Headquarters issued a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) to top-level policymakers in Washington on Communist Intentions in Laos. Despite the presence of 35,000 NVA troops in the country, CIA analysts concluded that Hanoi was mainly interested in protecting its supply routes to South Vietnam and did not wish to destroy the general framework of the 1962 Geneva settlement.46

Events soon proved the SNIE to be correct. The NVA offensive ended with the onset of the monsoon in May. The Hmong, however, had suffered heavy casualties, losing more than 1,000 men since January, including many top commanders. A recruitment drive turned up only 300 replacements: 30 percent were between the ages of 10 and 14, 30 percent were 15 and 16, while the remaining 40 percent were all over 35. According to "Pop" Buell, those between those ages were all dead.47
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Offensive and Counteroffensive

As the strength of the Hmong waned, the United States tried to redress the growing imbalance of forces in the field through increased use of airpower. Between 1965 and 1968, the rate of sorties in Laos had remained fairly constant at 10 to 20 a day. In 1969, the rate reached 300 per day.48

During the rainy season of 1969, Vang Pao abandoned the use of guerilla tactics and launched a major offensive against the NVA/Pathet Lao forces, using the increased firepower to support a drive against enemy positions on the PDJ. Operation About Face was a huge success. The Hmong reclaimed the entire PDJ for the first time since 1960, capturing 1,700 tons of food, 2,500 tons of ammunition, 640 heavy weapons, and 25 Soviet PT-76 tanks.49

But the victory was short-lived. In January 1970, the NVA brought in two divisions that quickly regained all the lost ground and threatened the major Hmong base at Long Tieng. For the first time, B-52s were used to blunt the enemy drive.

NVA strength in Laos had reached 67,000 men, but CIA analysts continued to argue that the enemy did not want to risk a decisive action. "The Communists believe that when they obtain their objectives in South Vietnam," the CIA’s Office of National Estimates predicted in April 1970, "Laos will fall into their hands."50

Losing Ground

The monsoon season of 1971 saw the last major offensive operations by the Hmong, now assisted by growing numbers of Thai volunteer battalions, trained and paid by the CIA. Vang Pao again captured the PDJ in July and established a network of artillery strongpoints, manned by Thai gunners. Vang Pao’s hope of retaining the PDJ during the dry season went unfulfilled. In December 1971, the North Vietnamese launched a coordinated assault against the artillery bases. Using tanks and 130-mm guns that out-ranged the Thai artillery, the NVA quickly recaptured the PDJ.51

The last days of 1971 and early months of 1972 saw increased enemy pressure on the main Hmong base at Long Tieng. Air America suffered heavy losses during this period. In December alone, 24 aircraft were hit by ground fire and three were shot down. Between December and April, six Air America crew members died in Laos.52

The war also went badly in southern Laos, where the CIA recruited, trained, advised, and paid indigenous personnel who were organized into Special Guerrilla Units. Heavy fighting erupted in 1971 for control of the strategic Bolovens Plateau, with Air America providing the essential air transport for the CIA-led forces. By the end of the year, however, the NVA clearly held the upper hand following the capture of Pakson, 25 miles east of the Mekong River town of Pakse, on 28 December.53

On 24 April 1972, Air America’s vice president for flight operations sent a telex message addressed to all crew members. Noting that “the past few months have produced an appalling toll in lives and serious injuries," he urged all flight crews and supervisors to re-appraise the factors “which make flying in our operations a particularly unforgiving profession. We are called upon to perform under possibly the most difficult environmental conditions in the world considering the combination of remote, mountainous terrain, absence of modern navigational/communications and air traffic control facilities, active presence of hostile armed forces, absence of adequate means of reporting and forecasting the varied seasonal weather and winds, and marginal airfields and landing zones, to name a few examples.” Everyone, he warned, should exercise extreme caution when conducting flight operations in Laos.54

Closing Down

At the same time that Air America crews were being reminded about the hazardous nature of operations in Laos, DCI Helms was deciding the fate of the air proprietary. On 21 April 1972, he ended a lengthy debate within the CIA over the continued need for a covert airlift capability, and ordered the Agency to divest itself of ownership and control of Air America and related companies. Air America would be retained only until the end of the war in Southeast Asia.55

On 27 January 1973, the Paris agreement on Vietnam was concluded, providing for the withdrawal of American troops. The following month, a cease-fire agreement was signed in Vientiane, leading to the formation of a coalition government for Laos. Although the end of the
war was clearly in sight, Air America continued to lose people. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that Air America suffered its heaviest losses in the two years following the CIA's decision to terminate the company. Between April 1972, when Helms issued his orders, and June 1974, when Air America left the country, 23 crew members died in flight operations in Laos.

On 3 June 1974, the last Air America aircraft crossed the border from Laos into Thailand. The end went well, Air America's operations office in Vientiane informed Washington "...and the departure of AAM from Laos was without incident, although some lumps are visible in the throats of those who put so much of themselves into the operation over the years.... We grieve for those missing and dead in Laos and regret that they too could not have enjoyed today." In all, 100 Air America personnel had died in Laos.56

The base at Udorn was shut down at the end of June. Operations in Vietnam continued until the fall of Saigon in April 1975. When plans for a new stay-behind company in Thailand, staffed by a contingent of
select helicopter and transport pilots, fell through, all Air America personnel were discharged. The company finally closed its doors on 30 June 1976, returning more than $20 million to the US Treasury.57

A Distinguished Record

CAT/Air America performed superbly for the CIA. The skilled aircrews and ground personnel of the air proprietary had given CIA the air transport capability required for a variety of covert operations in Asia. Although this “air complex” 58 had caused legal problems for the CIA’s Directorate of Administration, there is no question that personnel in the Directorate of Operations considered CAT/Air America as an essential tool for their work.

During the war in Laos, Air America was called upon to perform paramilitary tasks at great risk to the aircrews involved. Although lacking the discipline found in a military organization, the personnel of the air proprietary continued to place their lives at hazard for years. Some Air America pilots flew in Laos for more than a decade, braving enemy fire and surmounting challenging operational conditions with rare skill and determination. As pointed out by a senior Agency official during the dedication of a plaque to Air America personnel at CIA Headquarters in May 1988: “The aircrew, maintenance, and other professional aviation skills they applied on our behalf were extraordinary. But, above all, they brought a dedication to our mission and the highest standards of personal courage in the conduct of that mission.”59

The exploits of CAT/Air America form a unique chapter in the history of air transport, one that deserves better than a misleading, mediocre movie.

NOTES


7. For a detailed account of CAT, see Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia (University of Alabama Press, 1984).


13. Castle, At War in the Shadow of Vietnam, pp. 16-17.


16. See “Minutes of Meeting on Name Change,” 4 April 1959, in microfilm collection of Air America legal records, in the author’s possession.


23. Stevenson, End of Nowhere, pp. 110-120.

24. Felt and Burke are quoted in Marolda and Fitzgerald, United States Navy, p. 55.


27. Leary interview with Lair, 3 July 1993.

28. Ibid.


30. Castle, At War in the Shadow of Vietnam, pp. 29-30, 43-44.


34. On Budl, see Don A. Schanche, Mister Pop (New York: David McKay, 1970), and Warner, Shooting at the Moon, passim.


36. Casterlin to his parents, 24 January 1963, copy provided to the author by Captain Casterlin.

37. Colby, Honorable Men, pp. 192-95.

38. Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic Mountains, pp. 113-26; Casterlin to his parents, 11 November 1963.


43. Gittinger interview with Helms, 16 September 1981.

44. Stevenson, End of Nowhere, pp. 208-18.


46. CIA, Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 58-60, Communist Intentions in Laos, 21 March 1968, Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS), 1989: 1865. For a detailed account of the ground war in Laos, see Conboy and Morrison, Shadow War.


54. AYPFO/DFD TPE to All Chief Pilots, 27 April 1972, the papers of David H. Hickler, Air America Archives, University of Texas at Dallas.

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56. Telex, VP-NTD UTH to Chief Executive Office, 3 June 1974, Hickler Papers.

57. United States Senate, *Foreign and Military Intelligence*, p. 239.

58. An oft-used term at the time, encompassing all of the various elements of CIA's air proprietary in Laos.