The Historical Collections Division (HCD) of the Office of Information Management Services is responsible for executing the CIA’s Historical Review Program. This program seeks to identify, collect, and review for possible release to the public significant historical information. The mission of HCD is to:

- Provide an accurate, objective understanding of the information and intelligence that has helped shape the foundation of major US policy decisions.
- Improve access to lessons learned, presenting historical material to emphasize the scope and context of past actions.
- Improve current decision-making and analysis by facilitating reflection on the impacts and effects arising from past decisions.
- Uphold Agency leadership commitments to openness, while protecting the national security interests of the US.
- Provide the American public with valuable insight into the workings of their Government.

The symposium, “Air America: Upholding the Airmen’s Bond,” comes on the heels of a decades-long effort to declassify approximately 10,000 CIA documents on the airline. These papers—many of which have never been seen by the public or scholars outside of the CIA—will join the History of Aviation Collection (HAC) at the Eugene McDermott Library at The University of Texas at Dallas.

It is a special honor that the Civil Air Transport (CAT) and Air America associations, whose members are former employees of the airline and their relatives, asked the CIA to give these papers to UT Dallas. The decision reflects the strong relationship that already exists between the CAT and Air America associations and the library’s Special Collections staff. In 1985 the HAC became the official repository of the Civil Air Transport/Air America Archives and CAT/Air America survivors raised $15,000 for a large memorial plaque featuring the names of the 240 employees who lost their lives as civilians during their service in Southeast Asia. In 1987 the plaque was dedicated at McDermott Library during a solemn ceremony.

The prominence of the Rosendahl holdings attracted members of the CAT/Air America associations to select the HAC for their official archives and memorial. This prestige further boosted the HAC’s significance and research value to students and scholars and prompted additional significant donations.

Now with the newly declassified CIA documents, the History of Aviation Collection has strengthened its position as holding the premier archive on Civil Air Transport and Air America.
Quietly and courageously throughout the long and difficult Vietnam War, Air America, a secretly owned air proprietary of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), remained the indispensable instrument of CIA’s clandestine mission. This legacy is captured in a recent CIA Director’s statement that the Agency’s mission is to “accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others cannot go.” While some of Air America’s work may never be publicly acknowledged, much of the company’s critical role in wartime rescue missions can now be revealed. This joint symposium with the CIA and The University of Texas at Dallas provides a forum for the release of thousands of pages of heretofore unavailable documents on Air America’s relationship with the Central Intelligence Agency.

Moreover, the symposium brings together many Air America veterans, a number of men rescued by Air America, and the CIA “customers” who often placed their lives and missions in the hands of this once-secret air proprietary.

Air America crews were not required to monitor military emergency radio calls, fly to the location of military personnel in distress, or place their lives at risk of enemy ground-fire and possible capture. They received no extra compensation for rescue work and sometimes lost wages for their efforts. However, in their flying community it was enough to know that a downed aviator was in trouble and that airmen should always come to the aid of other airmen. It was simply the Airmen’s Bond.
PRE-FLIGHT CHECKLIST
CAT makes its first official flight. A C-47 piloted by Frank Hughes and Doug Smith takes off from Shanghai to Canton.

The city of Mengtze, China falls to Communist forces. Bob Buol, Jose Jawbert and Lincoln Sun are captured.

CAT inaugurates its first scheduled flight from Shanghai to Nanking-Wuchang-Chengchow-Sian-Lanchow.

CAT's first international flight. A C-46 airlifts 4,482 pounds of tin from Kunming to Haiphong.

According to Aviation Week, CAT is the world's second largest air cargo carrier.

Bob Buol, Jose Jawbert and Lincoln Sun are captured.

A C-46 airlifts 4,482 pounds of tin from Kunming to Haiphong.

CAT Incorporated (CATI) and Airdale Incorporated are organized under the laws of the State of Delaware. Airdale Incorporated was to be a holding company for CAT Incorporated.

CAT begins Operation Booklift, a massive airlift operation in Korea to support UN forces.

Norman Schwartz and Robert Snoddy are shot down and killed while flying a covert mission over China to pick up a Chinese Agent.

Robert Caron with crew member O. B. Harnage, takes off from atop the Pittman Hotel.

The withdrawal from Vietnam draws to a conclusion Air America's operational activities... Air America appropriately named has served its country well.
AIR AMERICA FACTS

- In 1970, Air America had 80 airplanes and was "The World’s Most Shot at Airline."
- Air America lost 240 pilots and crew members to hostile fire.
- Captain Weldon "Big" Bigony, a native of Big Spring, Texas, was one of the first pilots hired by CAT.
- In July 1950 the CIA formed the Pacific Corporation (not its original name) and a month later purchased CAT to use in clandestine missions to fight communism in the Asia theater. The price was under a million dollars—a real bargain for a company with a book value of three or four times that amount.
- Before the fall of Dien Bien Phu to the Viet Minh on 7 May 1954, CAT pilots flew 682 airdrop missions to the beleaguered French troops.
- Following the signing of the Geneva Accord on 21 July 1954, it also supplied C-46s for Operation Cognac, during which they evacuated nearly 20,000 civilians from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.
- 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.
- In Vietnam, according to Robbins, AAM had about 40 aircraft and served about 12,000 passengers a month, among whom were USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) people, missionaries, military personnel, correspondents, government officials and nurses.
- Air America took on a greater and greater burden of support for military operations, as reflected in its contracts with the Department of Defense, which increased from about $18 million in 1972 to over $41 million in 1973.
- During the final weeks of the war, AAM helicopter crews evacuated some 41,000 American civilians, "customers," diplomatic personnel, AAM personnel, and South Vietnamese civilians from Saigon before advancing North Vietnamese communist forces arrived.
- Air America aircraft carried all sorts of cargo and equipment, food, mail, cement, roofing material, sedated animals, and gasoline.

INTRODUCED IN 1964: SAR MISSIONS FOR THE US MILITARY

The first occasion to rescue a downed US military pilot came on 6 June 64, when US Navy Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann was shot down in his RF-8A Crusader from the USS Kitty Hawk over the north-eastern corner of the Plaine des Jarres, that is near Khang Khay in the Ban Pha Ka (LS-40) area.

- With North Vietnamese troops more and more pressing their invasion of the South in the early seventies, Air America was ever more called upon to help evacuate refugees. As the South Vietnamese Minister of Labor said in his Citation dated 12 June 72: "In addition, during the past two years, Air America has participated in major refugee movements. A total of 14,717 Vietnamese refugees who were in Cambodia during the year 1970, and subsequently arrived in Yung Tau, were transported from Yung Tau by Air America to Bao Loc and Ham Tan, South Vietnam for relocation. Later, in 1972, Air America again participated in refugee movements. A total of 1,317 refugees were flown by Air America from Quang Tri to Phuoc Tuy, and 4,324 refugees were transported from Hue to Ban Me Thuot and Yung Tau City. Since that time additional relocations have been possible through the support rendered by Air America."

EVACUATION FROM THE PITTMAN BUILDING

- The most famous evacuation flown by Air America on 29 April 75 was one from the Pittman Building at Saigon, although most people who saw the world famous photo taken by UPI photographer Hubert van Es probably thought that it was a US military helicopter on top of the US Embassy—it wasn’t.
- At the end, during this dramatic evacuation of Saigon, more than 7,000 refugees—1,373 Americans, 5,595 South Vietnamese, and 85 third-country nationals—were airlifted to the 40 ships of the U.S. fleet lying before the coast of South Vietnam.
- Air America’s crews did a tremendous job in hauling more than 1,000 passengers to the Embassy, the DAO, or to the ships.
- Air America was supposed to have 28 helicopters that day, out of which six were stolen by Vietnamese, one had rocket damage, one out of service for an engine change, and four were conducting evacuations in Can Tho. David B. Kendall had to ditch his helicopter alongside the ship Blue Ridge.
Such letter, written by Major General DeWitt, lished further statistics on Air America rescues. Although the USAF did not continue to publish particular information on their own rescues, Air America crews routinely conducted hazardous resupply missions to hundreds of government outposts. This aerial lifeline provided essential assistance to the Royal Lao and U.S.-directed forces battling North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao communist troops.

Air America crews became expert in the terrain and unique flying conditions of Laos, but they were not immune to enemy ground fire and the perils of being shot down over enemy-controlled territory. They soon created their own search and rescue (SAR) force, comprised of UH-34D helicopters and T-28D attack aircraft, and began to respond to their own emergencies. As more U.S. military aircraft began flying missions over Laos (and later North Vietnam), Air America also took on the primary responsibility for rescuing all downed U.S. aviators. In 1964-1965, when the U.S. military had few SAR aircraft in the region, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) reports that Air America rescued 21 American pilots. Although the USAF did not continue to publish further statistics on Air America rescues, and the CIA never tracked such data, anecdotal information and occasional formal letters of commendation suggest that Air America crews saved scores of American airmen. One such letter, written by Major General DeWitt R. Searles, USAF, stated “I wish to convey my personal appreciation and commendation to two of your helicopter crews for their exceptional aerial skill in the rescue of the crew members of an RF-4C, Bullwhip 26, on 20 January 1972.” General Searles went on to name Lee Andrews, Nicki Fillipi, Ron Anderson, John Fonberg, William Phillips, and Bob Noble for their “truly outstanding” efforts. “In spite of a known 37MM high threat area and small arms fire,” said the general, “these crew members disregarded their own personal safety to perform a heroic rescue. The quick response to the distress call and actual recovery in near record time were unquestionably instrumental in saving the lives of the USAF RF-4C crew members.”

In order to more fully understand these events, Donald Boecker, a U.S. Navy pilot shot down over northern Laos in 1965, will share the stage with one of his rescuers, Air America pilot Sam Jordan.

In early 1968 Air America pilot Ken Wood and his flight mechanic Loy “Rusty” Irons carried out one of the most unusual and daring rescues of the entire Vietnam War. Project “Heavy Green” was a top secret U.S. Air Force radar bombing facility located at Lima Site 85, a mile-high Laotian mountaintop a mere 120 miles from downtown Hanoi. The military program was manned by sixteen Air Force technicians working under cover as civilian employees of the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation. On the evening of 10 March 1968 the North Vietnamese launched a furious mortar, rocket, and artillery attack on Site 85’s CIA operations area and the Air Force facilities. Concurrently, a sapper team climbed the steep western cliffs just below the radar buildings. In a pre-dawn attack the sappers surrounded the technicians and used automatic weapons fire and rocket-propelled grenades in an attempt to destroy the facility and kill all of the Americans.

Wood and Irons, responding to a signal from a military survival radio, flew to Site 85 and courageously hovered over a group of radar technicians trapped on the side of the cliff below the radar facility. Irons quickly dropped a hoist to the men and pulled them aboard the unarmed and unarmored Huey helicopter. After forty-one years of secrecy, the CIA is now acknowledging Air America’s role in the rescue of the “Heavy Green” members—Stanley Siz, Richard Etchberger, Willie Husband, and John Daniel. Etchberger, who heroically defended his injured comrades until they were placed on the helicopter, was mortally wounded by enemy fire as the Huey withdrew. The communist assault on Site 85 resulted in the single greatest ground loss of U.S. Air Force personnel for the entire Vietnam War. Ten “Heavy Green” technicians remain unaccounted for from this attack.

Chief Master Sergeant Richard Etchberger was secretly and posthumously honored in late 1968 with the Air Force Cross. In a recent development, however, the Pentagon is reviewing Etchberger’s actions for possible award of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

CIA also acknowledges the actions of two paramilitary officers at Site 85. Howard Freeman and John Woody Spence, working and living at an operations area several hundred yards below the radar buildings, faced the communist barrage with great courage and determination. At first dawn, heedless to the presence of enemy soldiers and the continuing risk of mortars, rockets, and artillery fire, Freeman led a rescue party of Hmong irregulars to the radar facility. While searching for the technicians he came under enemy gunfire and suffered a serious leg wound. Armed only with a shotgun and some phosphorous grenades, Freeman defended his team until forced to withdraw. In honor of his heroic actions Howard Freeman was awarded CIA’s Intelligence Star. At the operations area Woody Spence suffered a severe hearing loss during the bombardment, but continued to maintain critical radio communications throughout the North Vietnamese assault. He also declined to accept the Congressional Medal of Honor.
evacuation from his post until sensitive equipment and documents were properly safeguarded. Mr. Spence was honored with the CIA's Certificate of Distinction.

Air America flight mechanic Rusty Irons, former CIA paramilitary officer Woody Spence, and Heavy Green technician John Daniel will provide their recollections of this singular rescue.

The Laos panel provides a remarkable opportunity to hear from both perspectives—the rescuers and the rescued.

THE FALL OF SOUTH VIETNAM

The swift collapse of the South Vietnam government in March and April 1975 caught many by surprise. According to an official U.S. Air Force history "USAF airlift planes and personnel had long since been withdrawn from South Vietnam, and the only reliable airlift available in the country was Air America. The helicopters and smaller aircraft of this company were invaluable for removing people from remote locations." While all of their work in South Vietnam was extremely challenging in this time of great political and military chaos—manifested in ever decreasing levels of security—Air America’s efforts in Da Nang and Saigon are especially noteworthy.

"Da Nang was a shambles when we arrived," recalled Air America pilot Marius Burke. "Aircraft, tanks, trucks, etc., were abandoned all over the area. The aircraft apparently were out of fuel." No matter, Burke and other Air America personnel got down to the risky business of moving evacuees to safe areas. Operating out of perilous landing sites and hand-pumping fuel from 50-gallon drums into helicopters that could not be shut down, Air America responded to increasingly urgent requests from CIA and State Department officers. All the while Air America personnel were constantly receiving a mix of pleas, verbal threats, and sometimes gunfire from agitated South Vietnamese government officials, military personnel, and local citizens determined to find a way out of the city.

In Saigon, the final refuge for all fleeing the North Vietnamese invasion, Air America faced enormous challenges. Initial evacuation planning did not anticipate the almost total disintegration of the Vietnamese security forces and the chaos that quickly engulfed the city and panicked the local and expatriate population.

CIA officers, determined to get "at risk" Vietnamese out of Saigon, directed some of these individuals to drive out into the countryside. One Air America pilot described 28 April 1975 as follows, "Our customer 'Max' rode with us. Our mission was to lift Vietnamese from various locations in the Vietnam Delta to a U.S. Navy ship located just offshore of the mouth of the branch of the Mekong river on which Can Tho is located. Our method as arranged by the customer was to extract people from various random pickup points. This method worked very well and attracted little, if any, attention."

On 29 April 1975 an Air America helicopter pilot spent the entire day shuttling passengers to various evacuation points. Arriving at the Embassy tennis courts his aircraft was filled with people and he flew to the USS Blue Ridge, "offloaded, refueled and went back to Saigon whereupon I landed at the Embassy roof and picked up another load heading for the Blue Ridge. Arriving at Blue Ridge it had a full deck so I was landed on a ship called Fireball. I returned to Saigon after refueling on Fireball and picked up another Embassy roof load this time going to the Fireball again and refueling." The pilot made many more roundtrips that day and finally landed on the USS Duluth at about 1900.

Air America fixed wing aircraft were also a critical means of evacuation. But the ever present danger of being overwhelmed by desperate Vietnamese civilians and military personnel required skill, courage, and sometimes deception. A C-47 pilot reported that on 29 April 1975 he departed Tan Son Nhut airfield with 33 passengers (Air America employees and families, mixed VN, Chinese, American and Filipinos) plus a crew of two. Shortly after takeoff a fire developed in the right engine and the aircraft was forced to land at Con Son island. Fourteen of the passengers were then ferried by Air America helicopters to nearby ships. Surrounded by hordes of Vietnamese arriving from the mainland, the crew decided, "It was not feasible to top off our fuel due to the possibility of being mobbed by VN evacuates if the airplane appeared to be preparing for departure. With the aircraft apparently disabled no one bothered us." Eventually the aircraft was repaired and, with a speedy departure, was soon on its way to Brunei with the remaining Air America employees.

One of the most iconic photographs of the Vietnam War was taken on 29 April 1975, just hours before the jubilant North Vietnamese Army seized the South Vietnamese capital. The image, captured by Dutch photographer Hubert Van Es, shows scores of people climbing a narrow wooden ladder in the frantic hope that they would be rescued by a small helicopter perched on a rooftop just above them. Standing near the helicopter—a tall man leans forward with his hand extended to the frantic crowd. Released by United Press International with a mistaken caption that identified the location as the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, the picture instantly became a withering symbol of America’s ignominious departure from Indochina. In fact, the Bell 204 helicopter belonged to Air America. The landing pad, one of thirteen rooftop evacuation points selected in consultations between Air America and a Special Working Group at the U.S. Embassy, was located atop CIA employee living quarters at the Pittman Apartments on Gia Long Street. And, the man reaching out to those on the ladder was CIA air operations officer O.B. Harnage.

Through all the years of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, Air America pilots and their support personnel accepted the grave danger and extreme flying challenges with great alacrity. Called upon one last time in the final days before the collapse of the South Vietnamese government, Air America personnel braved the Saigon skyline to carry thousands of evacuees to the safety of nearby countries and U.S. ships in the South China Sea. They conducted themselves in the finest tradition of their motto “Anything, Anytime, Anywhere, Professionally.” In praise of their efforts, U.S. Air Force investigators concluded “Only God knows the numbers of sorties which Air America carried out in the final month in Vietnam. [We]… estimate that over 1,000 were flown, perhaps many more.”

The South Vietnam panel includes Air America pilots Marius Burke and Ed Adams, former CIA officer Robert Grealy, and noted academic and USAF combat rescue pilot, Dr. Joe Guilmartin.
The Airmen’s Bond: A Rescue Pilot’s Perspective
by Dr. Joe Guilmartin
Professor, Ohio State University

As a helicopter pilot, I was involved in Air Force rescue operations in Southeast Asia very near the beginning. I flew my first combat sortie over Laos in early October of 1965, a staging flight by a pair of H-43s to Lima 20 where we refueled, then on to Lima 36 north of the Plain of Jars where we pulled alert for two days. Our billeting arrangements were provided courtesy of Air America and were organized by the Customer, Mike, a tall rawboned fellow whose personal weapon of choice was a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle), a fact I discovered one afternoon when he went charging off into the jungle to recover an adult Royal Lao Air Force T-28 pilot bailed out off the northeast end of the Plain of Jars. Mike also provided local intelligence. Air America pilots and kickers gave us tips on the weather and flying techniques as it turned out. Mike also provided local in formations with at least nominally unarmed H-34s provided courtesy of Air America anders that be provided us with the services of an Air Commando A-1 squadron at Udorn to provide search capability and fire support, as our comrades-in-arms had made combat rescues, and never more so than when the objective of aggressiveness in coming to the aid of a survivor had gone down in an area of low terrain factors. That is surely the limiting case in situational awareness and span of control. Finally, the rescue crew rarely has the luxury of knowing critical mission parameters, including the survivor’s location, prior to launch. More often than not, planning and execution are of necessity done on the fly. Success requires a special kind of arm’s length, one that Air America pilots, crews and support personnel repeatedly demonstrated.

The H-43 was a marginal operation: no armor, no armament beyond our personal M-16s, no self-sealing tanks and a radius of action of only seventy-five miles. It was good to know that other Americans were flying in our area of responsibility. Mercifully, I was never called upon to attempt a combat rescue in the H-43 before my unit received its definitive equipment, Sikorski HH-3E “Jolly Greens” with self-sealing tanks, a thousand pounds of Titanium armor plate and a hydraulic rescue hoist with 250 feet of cable. We still had no armament beyond our personal M-16s, but at some point the pow- ers that be provided us with the services of an Air Commando A-1 squadron at Udorn to provide search capability andfire support, as indeed they did and to good effect. I and my fellows were well aware that our Air America comrades-in-arms had made combat rescues, above and beyond their contractual obligations with at least nominally unarmored H-34s and none of the advantages that our specialized equipment gave us.

Whatever problems Air America had, a lack of aggressiveness in coming to the aid of a distressed airman was not among them. I have vivid recollections of a pickup in late 1965 toward the end of dry monsoon. I and my crew were “high bird”—backup helicopter; we always committed in pairs, another choice was a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle), a rawboned fellow whose personal weapon of choice was a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle), a fact I discovered one afternoon when he went charging off into the jungle to recover an adult Royal Lao Air Force T-28 pilot bailed out off the northeast end of the Plain of Jars. Mike also provided local in formations with at least nominally unarmed H-34s provided courtesy of Air America anders that be provided us with the services of an Air Commando A-1 squadron at Udorn to provide search capability and fire support, as our comrades-in-arms had made combat rescues, and never more so than when the objective of aggressiveness in coming to the aid of a survivor had gone down in an area of low terrain factors. That is surely the limiting case in situational awareness and span of control. Finally, the rescue crew rarely has the luxury of knowing critical mission parameters, including the survivor’s location, prior to launch. More often than not, planning and execution are of necessity done on the fly. Success requires a special kind of arm’s length, one that Air America pilots, crews and support personnel repeatedly demonstrated.

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I left Southeast Asia in July of 1966, not to return for another nine and a half years. In the interim, I taught combat rescue tactics as an instructor pilot and in the classroom and wrote about them as an analyst and historian. Along the way I came to the conclusion that in terms of demands on pilot and crew, combat rescue is the limiting case in aerial warfare. Raw courage and superior stick and rudder skill—or should I say cyclic and collective skill—are essential, but not enough. Unlike delivering ordnance or cargo, the objective is human life, and contributing one more downed aircraft to the enemy score-card, however admirable in terms of courage, is counter-productive in the extreme. At the same time, a failure of will or excess of caution that leads to a missed pickup is just as bad, particularly in its psychological impact and never more so than when the objective of the failed rescue was a fellow aviator. The successful rescue crew must walk a fine line between courage and caution.

The conceptual challenges of combat rescue are daunting as well. Beyond keeping on top of the aircraft—in four-dimensional space, the fourth dimension being time, the rescue crew must know that other Americans were flying in our area of responsibility. Mercifully, I was never called upon to attempt a combat rescue in the H-43 before my unit received its definitive equipment, Sikorski HH-3E “Jolly Greens” with self-sealing tanks, a thousand pounds of Titanium armor plate and a hydraulic rescue hoist with 250 feet of cable. We still had no armament beyond our personal M-16s, but at some point the pow- ers that be provided us with the services of an Air Commando A-1 squadron at Udorn to provide search capability andfire support, as indeed they did and to good effect. I and my fellows were well aware that our Air America comrades-in-arms had made combat rescues, above and beyond their contractual obligations with at least nominally unarmored H-34s and none of the advantages that our specialized equipment gave us.

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I next operated in the same airspace as Air America during the final hours of the Vietnam War, in the 29 April 1975 Saigon evacuation. To make good the lack of Marine Corps H-53s—one of two CH-53 squadrons that participated in the 12 April Phnom Penh evacuation had returned to Hawaii—and twelve Air Force H-53s, ten Special Opera-tions CH-53s and two Rescue HH-53s were deployed from Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, to the attack carrier USS Midway. As the senior Jolly Green, I led the two HH-53s.

Backing up a month and a half, after the war in Laos had closed down in 1974, Air America retained a presence in South Vietnam, notably in the form of some twelve UH-1B/D “Hueys” plus an additional sixteen H models on loan from the Army operating in support of the ICCS (International Commission for Control and Supervision), the Embassy the CIA and USAID. That wasn’t much given the enormity of the task that was to be thrust upon Air America. More critical still, when...
the situation turned critical. Air America had only seventy-seven pilots, including fixed-wing pilots, in country.\(^1\)

Beginning in early March as the South Vietnamese military position crumbled in the face of a massive North Vietnamese invasion backed by heavy armored forces operating under an umbrella of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and anti-aircraft artillery, Air America Huey crews helped to evacuate US personnel from locations up country in the face of conditions that approached total chaos. The extraction of the last Americans from Da Nang on 29 March was particularly perilous. It was clear at this point, or should have been, that South Vietnam was doomed and that the remaining Americans and foreign friendly nationals would have to be evacuated, along with South Vietnamese deemed at risk in the event of a communist victory. Concrete plans had been under taken in support of a helicopter evacuation using Marine Corps helicopters to shuttle evacuees from the main collection point in the old MACV compound at Tan Son Nhat Airport to US Navy ships standing off the coast. Potential evacuees were billeted in scattered locations around Saigon, and Air America personnel working in conjunction with military members of the Defense Attaché Staff had marked out rooftop helipads suitable for use by Air America Hueys as a means of moving evacuees to the collection point. The problem was the ambassador, the Honorable Graham Martin, utterly committed to the South Vietnamese cause, exhausted and in ill health, obstinately refused to abandon hope in a negotiated settlement and resisted taking overt steps in support of an evacuation to avoid causing panic. Even after the South Vietnamese Army had fought and lost its final battle, at Xuan Loc on the eastern approaches to Saigon, on 20 April, the Ambassador equivocated. Not until late in the morning of the 29\(^{th}\) in the wake of a North Vietnamese air strike on Tan Son Nhat Airport the day before and an avalanche of Vietnamese air strike on Tan Son Nhat Air port the day before and an avalanche of communist rockets that hit Tan Son Nhat shortly after midnight, did the Ambassador give the order to execute.

Aside from headlines and photographs, the Saigon Evacuation received only cursory mention in the American news media. David Butler of NBC Radio was the only American media bureau chief in Saigon when the city fell and while his account of the evacuation is both accurate and exemplary it did not appear in print for ten years.\(^2\) Media coverage left the impression that while the evacuation was chaotic, photos of Vietnamese climbing over concertina wire to get into the Embassy for evacuation were coin of the realm—it was unopposed.

It was not, as testified to by a widely published but inadequately-captioned photo showing a Soviet-manufactured SA-7 heat-seeking missile passing through the rotor plane of a Marine Corps CH-53. From my own recollection of radio traffic at the time, confirmed by subsequent research, a North Vietnamese 57mm anti-aircraft battery was firing at the incoming stream of helicopters from offshore Navy decks at around 1500, only to be silenced by a strike by a flight of Air Force “Iron Hand,” anti-radiation F-4 fighter-bombers. There were three active SA-2 radar-guided surface-to-air missile sites to the north and northeast of the city, and while they never fired, they were in place.\(^3\) There is no doubt that the North Vietnamese infiltrated SA-7 teams into the city and at least a limited number of 12.7mm heavy machine guns on anti-aircraft mounts as well. I say this advisedly as Jolly Green gunners silenced at least two 12.7mm positions and perhaps three on our run in to the DAO compound at about 2130. Helicopters descending into the compound from the east were fired at throughout the operation by a 37mm battery to the west that, provisionally, was unable to depress far enough for a successful engagement.

Into this cauldron stepped Air America, under circumstances that were anything but favorable. For openers, a limited number of 12.7mm heavy machine guns on anti-aircraft mounts as well. I say this advisedly as Jolly Green gunners silenced at least two 12.7mm positions and perhaps three on our run in to the DAO compound at about 2130. Helicopters descending into the compound from the east were fired at throughout the operation by a 37mm battery to the west that, provisionally, was unable to depress far enough for a successful engagement.

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### Notes

3. Author’s recollection. On our initial run-in to the DAO compound at about 1500 hours, my RHAW (for Radar Homing and Warning) scope displayed radar emissions from three SA-2 sites, all well within range.
4. Lear, Last Flights, 10-11.
Just how many evacuees made it out who would have been left behind were it not for Air America Huey crews and their support personnel is beyond reconstruction. The official total of evacuees brought out to the fleet by helicopter is 7,815, a figure that is surely low. Of those evacuated by military helicopter, a substantial number would never have made it to the collection points without Air America. How many is a matter of speculation, but the number is surely well over a thousand and excludes those brought directly to Navy ships. It is perhaps fitting that the iconic photographic image of that awful occasion is that of an Air America Huey crew loading Vietnamese refugees from an improvised helipad atop the roof of the CIA deputy station chief’s apartment.¹⁶

Ray L. Bowers, The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia Tactical Airlift (Washington, DC: The Office of Air Force History, 1983), 644, n. 31. How the figure was derived is not specified, but was apparently on the basis of numbers reported to ABCCC (Airborne Battlefield Communications, Command and Control), the airborne control agency, by military helicopter pilots. If that is the case, it is surely low. As the evacuation progressed, frequencies became saturated and it was clear that ABCCC wasn’t controlling. Many crews simply stopped reporting.


John F. Guilmarin, Jr.
Columbus, Ohio
MEMORANDUM

TO: All American Employees of the Mission

FROM: The Ambassador

I would like to share with you a letter that I received from our President:

May 19, 1972

Dear Mr. Ambassador:

The communist dry season offensive in Laos has been blunted this year, largely through the tireless efforts of your Mission. You have done a tremendous job under difficult conditions and I want to express my deep appreciation, on behalf of the American people, for the distinguished leadership you have displayed in this critical situation.

With warmest personal regards,

Sincerely,

Richard Nixon

I have written to the President:

June 8, 1972

Dear Mr. President:

Your most thoughtful and generous letter of May 19 addressed to me is a tribute to the men and women of this Mission who showed such devotion to duty during a very difficult five months.

It is therefore with great pride and gratitude to you, Mr. President, that I have taken the liberty of transmitting your views to the American members

of the Mission, and to the employees of Air America and Continental Air Services who carried out with such gallantry their responsibilities to our government.

The vast majority of Americans in Laos are one hundred per cent behind all your efforts to achieve world peace. We admire your courage. All are proud to be Americans, and that you are our President.

Very respectfully,

G. McMurtrie Godley

AMB:GNGodley; jsv
FROM: Department of the Air Force  
Headquarters 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (PACAF)  
APO San Francisco 96237  

REPLY TO ATTN OF: CC  

8 September 1971  
RECD W/MAR 8 1968  

SUBJECT: Rescue of Downed F-4 Aircrew  

TO: Base Manager, Air America, Inc.  
c/o Air Force Liaison Officer  
Box 62, APO San Francisco 96237  

1. On 2 September 1971, one of the aircrews of the 13th TFS "Panther Pack" received battle damage to their aircraft and crashed in a ball of flames. Fortunately, both crew members were able to eject prior to impact, but they were both injured. Incapacitated and helpless on the ground, in the northern part of the Plain of Jars in Laos, they were in imminent danger of capture or death from hostile forces surrounding them. Two Air America helicopter crews saved their lives by landing in the open field to pick them up, even though under enemy fire.

2. A Bell 205, crewed by Mr. Ted Cash, Mr. Wayne Lannin, and Mr. William Parker, rescued Captain Ron Fitzgerald, the Weapons System Officer of the fighter. Both Mr. Lannin and Mr. Parker risked their lives by exposing themselves directly to enemy fire to hoist the injured Captain Fitzgerald aboard the helicopter.

3. An H-34, piloted by Mr. Don Henthorn, landed to pick up Major Jim Compton, the Aircraft Commander of the downed fighter, while a crew member, Mr. Ernie Cortez risked his life by exposing himself to hostile ground fire to lift Major Compton into the helicopter.

4. The two helicopters took off in a hail of enemy fire and airlifted the injured Panthers to a landing site nearby where they were transferred to an Air America Porter aircraft. They were then airlifted to a staging base, where they were attended by a surgeon and subsequently were returned to Udorn RTAFB aboard an Air America C-123.

5. The deep gratitude felt by the 13th TFS towards the valiant Air America crews who saved our comrades is difficult to express. There is no doubt that their prompt, heroic action saved two lives that day. We will long remember and be grateful for their actions. We all hope that we may be of help if Air America crews ever face a similar test.
6. Letters are never as warm as a drink and a handshake. The 13th TFS, therefore, cordially invites Messrs. Cash, Lannin, Parker, Henhorn, and Cortez to be our guests at a going-away "Sawadee Party" for some of our men who are completing their combat tours in Southeast Asia. The party will be held on 18 September at 1900 hours in the main banquet room of the Udorn Officers' Open Mess. The "Panther Pack" is looking forward to thanking all of these men in person.

7. To all of the personnel of Air America, the 13th TFS "Panther Pack" sends a "Well Done" with admiration for the fine work done day after day in support of our allies in Southeast Asia. Keep up the good work!

CHARLES W. COLLINS, Le Colonel, USAF
Commander
May 11, 1975

On 29 April 1975 Air America, Inc. was tasked to effect the evacuation of Saigon, Vietnam, a difficult and hazardous mission that required a maximum effort for all concerned.

I would like to convey at this time my personal thanks along with those of our various customers and the Board of Directors of Air America, Inc. for an outstandingly successful accomplishment of that mission.

The performance of our flight crew members again reflected what can be accomplished by a dedicated professional group acting together as individuals and as a team.

I realize that each and every one of you will be departing this Company in a very short time, but before doing so I want you to know as a member of that group that your participation in this humanitarian act stands out in the highest traditions of the American spirit. Again thanks for an outstanding job well done.

Sincerely,

Paul C. Veite, Jr.
Chairman of the board of Directors
and
Chief Executive Officer
Final Flights:
Air America and the Collapse of South Vietnam, 1975
by William M. Leary

Air America had fallen on hard times as Vietnam welcomed the Year of the Rabbit at the beginning of 1975. The airline that had been secretly owned by the Central Intelligence Agency since 1950 was a far cry from the giant air complex of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1970, the airline operated a fleet of 146 aircraft that included Boeing 727s, DC-6s, C-46s, C-47s, C-123s, Twin-Beach Volpras, Pilatus Porters, H ello Couriers, and a variety of helicopters. It employed over 500 pilots, primarily in Southeast Asia. In June 1974, however Air America shut down its operations in Laos, where it had been serving as a paramilitary adjunct to the native forces that were fighting the CIA's "Secret War." Three months later, the CIA confirmed an earlier decision to sell the air complex, setting the date for its demise as June 30, 1975. Morale among Air America employees was at low ebb, as pilots and technical personnel left in large numbers, anticipating the company's closure. Meanwhile, flying continued, primarily for International Development (USAID). 

Pilatus Porters, Helio Couriers, and a variety of helicopters, including Twin-Beach Volpras, were used to transport supplies and personnel. In December 1974, the North Vietnamese launched a winter-spring offensive against Phuoc Long province. The purpose of the operation was less to acquire control of territory in the south than to test the williness of the United States to respond to a blatant violation of the peace agreement. There was little alarm in the U.S. intelligence community, as the fighting in Phuoc Long was considered a "political-military campaign." An all-out offensive, the intelligence community believed, would not be likely before early in 1976.

Not for the first time in the Vietnam War, the intelligence crystal ball proved cloudy. Phuoc Binh City fell to the NVA on January 7, 1975, the first provincial capital to pass into the hands of northern forces since the cease-fire of 1973. As it was clear that Washington would not act, the politburo in Hanoi approved a plan for widespread attacks in the south in 1975, followed by a general uprising in 1976. The offensive would begin in the long-contested Central Highlands.

Campaign 275 opened on March 1, 1975. Within two weeks, the NVA offensive had made such progress that President Thieu ordered the Central Highlands abandoned. At the same time, NVA forces were pouring south of the DMZ, heading from Hue and Da Nang. Marius Burke, the senior Air America pilot at Da Nang, had only four helicopters, to meet the growing airlift demands caused by the NVA offensive. On March 23, Air America evacuated key personnel from Hue and Quang Nhai. On the 25th, while engaged in the evacuation effort, an Air America helicopter was fired on by supposedly friendly South Vietnamese troops. It took hits in the rotor blade spar and engine but managed to limp back to Da Nang. Clearly, Burke reported to Saigon, the situation had reached "a critical state," and that parnick South Vietnamese troops posed as great a threat as the NVA.

That same day, a meeting was held at CIA headquarters in Washington to discuss Air America's ability to respond to the increasing demands for air service. Paul Velt, Air America's chief executive officer, reviewed the company's equipment status for his CIA superiors. Air America owned and operated 12 Bell 204B/205 helicopters, civilian models of the military's UH-1B/D Hueys. In addition, the company had on loan from the military 16 UH-1s and 10 Bell 204Bs. Of the "bailed-out" Hueys, were on the ICCS lease, while 5 were on a USAID lease. Three of the 11 ICCS helicopters were currently in use for the commission's diminishing requirements, while the other 8 were in flyable storage. It would be difficult to place these 8 Hueys back in service because spare parts for them came from the Department of Defense and were not available on short notice.

The most immediate problem, however, was not aircraft but pilots. Air America, Velt explained, had 77 pilots, both rotary wing and fixed wing, including supervisors. The rotary wing pilots were flying 120 hours a month, the maximum allowable under the USAID contract. Also, the contract called for two pilots per helicopter. Because of the company's uncertain future, pilots and technical personnel were in the process of leaving for other jobs. The first thing to be done, Velt said, was to clarify the identity of the new contractor. Current employees could then apply for jobs with the replacement company. Personnel agreeing to stay with Air America until June 30 would be offered special bonuses. Also, contractual restraints for two pilots and 120 hours should be lifted. While there measures might not completely solve the problem, they certainly would help Velt then told his superiors that he would leave shortly for South Vietnam to assess the situation and take all necessary action.

Frank Snepp, the CIA's principal analyst in Saigon, had become increasingly concerned about the rapidly deteriorating military situation. Government defenses in the northern half of the country, he told Station Chief Thomas Pulgar on March 25, were nearing total collapse. "The entire complexion of the Vietnam War," he observed, "has altered in a matter of weeks, and the government is in imminent trouble."
danger of decisive military defeat." Polgar, however, refused to become alarmed. He agreed with Ambassador Martin's policy of encouraging the Saigon government to continue resistance in hopes of securing a negotiated settlement. Above all, Americans must not give any indication that they considered the situation hopeless. As refugees poured into Da Nang, Burke prepared for the worst. He cut personnel to a minimum, with one pilot and Filippino flight mechanic per aircraft. He asked for volunteers who would be willing to remain and face the hazards of the final evacuation. His four helicopters would be kept fully fueled and ready for immediate departure.

The evacuation of Da Nang began on March 28. By the morning of the 29th, Burke reported, the city was "a shambles," with abandoned aircraft, tanks, trucks, and other vehicles scattered about. In the midst of the evacuation effort, a World Airways Boeing 727 appeared overhead. Burke tried to contact the pilot to warn him not to land, but did not get a response. As soon as the 727 set down, it was engulfed by a swarm of ARVN and civilian refugees. The runway on which it had landed -17-Left-was soon littered with bodies and overturned vehicles. Burke again attempted to contact the airplane and direct it to 17-Right, which looked clear, but heard nothing.

By the time the 727 taxied to the front of the control tower, both runways had become unusable. "It looked hopeless," Burke reported. The only option was to use a taxiway. The aircraft started to roll, narrowly missing a stalled van on the side of the taxiway. A motorcycle struck the left wing, and the driver was hurled into the infield. Somehow, the 727 struggled into the air after plowing through various small structures at the end of the field. As Deputy Ambassador Wolf Lehmann later commented about this incident, the attempted evacuation by 727 was "responsible, utterly irresponsible, and should never have taken place."

The sudden collapse of South Vietnam's military forces cogged American military authorities to review their evacuation plans. The original scheme, published on July 31, 1974, had contained four options. Evacuation would be conducted (1) by commercial airlift from Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport, (2) by military aircraft from Tan Son Nhut, (3) by sealift from ports serving Saigon, and (4) by helicopters to U.S. Navy ships standing offshore. It now seemed that detailed planning for the helicopter option should go forward.

Air America obviously would be a crucial part of any emergency helicopter evacuation from downtown Saigon. Rooftops that might be used for the evacuation could not support the heavy Marine Corps aircraft. Only Air America could do the job. Following discussions with Vice Admiral M. Green, vice-president for Vietnam, and Chief Pilot Carl Winston, Air America agreed to take 13 UH-1 Hs out of flyable storage. With a total of 28 helicopters, Air America pledged to have 24 of them available at any given time. Because of the shortage of pilots, many of these helicopters would have to be flown by a single pilot. "This was risky," the U.S. Air Force account of the final evacuation observed. "But Air America was accustomed to such risks and expressed no reservations about that aspect of the Saigon air evacuation."

On April 7, veteran helicopter pilot Niki A. Fillipi began a survey of 37 buildings in downtown Saigon to assess their viability as helicopter landing zones (HLZs). The survey led to the selection of 13 HLZs. Fillipi then supervised crews from the Pacific Architect & Engineering company in removing obstructions that might interfere with safe ingress/egress to the HLZs. An "H" was painted on the rooftops to mark the skids of Air America's helicopters, indicating that aircraft could land or take off in either direction with guaranteed rotor clearance. During his meetings with the Special Planning Group that would be charge of the helicopter evacuation, Fillipi emphasized that three requirements had to be met if Air America was to complete its assigned tasks in the evacuation plan. The Air America ramp had to be secured; helicopters needed a safe supply of fuel; and, to avoid confusion, Air America had to maintain its own communication network linking with Marine Corps helicopters only through UHF guard frequency. He was assured that all three requirements would be met.

CEO Velte arrived in Saigon on April 7. He consulted with Fillipi on the evacuation plan, but this proved fruitless. On April 12, the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade sent a delegation to consult with the ambassador on the evacuation plan. Martin told them that he would not tolerate any outward signs that the United States intended to abandon
South Vietnam. All planning would have to be conducted with the utmost discretion. General Carey, the Marine commander, upon receiving this information, flew to Saigon the next day to see Martin. "The visit," Carey reported, "was cold, non productive and appeared to be in search of an irritant to the ambassador."

The military situation continued to worsen as North Vietnamese forces encircled the capital. On April 21, President Thieu resigned. That same day, the Marines established a forward headquarters at the DAO. The DAO complex, together with Air America area across the street, were designated as the main departure points for a helicopter evacuation to the fleet. A battalion sized security force would guard the DAO complex, while a battalion command group and one company would be sent to the Air America area.

On April 28, at the situation around Saigon continued to worsen, Velte learned that General Carey had decided not to provide a security force for the Air America ramp at Tan Son Nhut. This came as a shock. Only the previous week, Carey had assured Velte that he would send marines to secure the ramp. Velte asked the ambassador to intervene and reverse the decision, emphasizing that the security of the Air America area had been a prerequisite for the company’s successful participation in any emergency evacuation plan. There was no immediate response from the embassy.

The story continued on DVD.

The late William M. Leary, Ph.D., served as the E. Merton Coulter Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of Georgia. Dr. Leary considered the world’s foremost specialist on Air America. His 2005 lecture was central to the McDermott Library’s Civil Air Transport-Air America Collection and Memorial located on the third floor of McDermott Library. Leary has written histories of the China National Aviation Corp., Civil Air Transport and the U.S. Air Mail Service. In 1995 he received the Central Intelligence Agency Studies in Excellence Award for an Outstanding Contribution to the Literature of Intelligence. He served as the Charles A. Lindbergh Professor of Aerospace History at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington D.C. in 1996-97.

Evacuation of Nha Trang RVN March/April 1975

When I arrived at the office on Mar, 1975 Capt. Winston asked me if I would go to Nha Trang as temporary Sr. Com. He was absent on leave. There was trouble expected at Da Nang and someone was needed at Nha Trang to coordinate common traffic, etc. between Saigon and Da Nang. I returned home for my suitcase and departed by aircraft for Nha Trang. On my arrival, I checked into the Pacific house.

The Con Gen at this time was processing their Vietnamese employees for evacuation to Saigon. Most of these people had arrived from other places, i.e. Pleiku, Kontum, etc. They were being ticketed at the Con Gen building.

The next day Da Nang started to evacuate and the city panicked. Capt. Burke was at Da Nang and had 3 or 4 choppers. He spent the next 2 days trying to get fuel and radio relay for the choppers at Da Nang. We had to keep 2 Volpars in orbit to relay from Burke to me, and I relayed to Saigon. The Con Gen at Da Nang Mr. Francis had been on board Burke’s chopper but when they landed at Marble Mountain the Con Gen got off and talked to the Vietnamese region commander’s aide. The Con Gen told Burke that the region commander was going to commit suicide and he, the Con Gen, had to go to him. The Con Gen departed in a Vietnamese chopper. This later caused considerable concern at the U.S. embassy until the Con Gen finally got a message through that he was safe on board a ship heading South. The choppers were shuttling to Cu Lai Re Island. I sent a steel fuel container with 500 gallons of JP to the island by caribou. The first night of the Da Nang fall, passengers came into Nha Trang by chopper and fixed wing. One French teacher had been picked up by a chopper and moved to the island. He came to Nha Trang by Volpar. I interviewed him along with a CBS photographer who had been on board Mr. Daly’s World Airways 727. He got off and could not get back on. He said he ran to the tower and called for help. One of our choppers landed and picked him up. I put these people on a flight to Saigon.

The second day we were requested to send the choppers back to Da Nang to look for the Con Gen also an A40B customer was on board a barge at Da Nang and was requesting water be dropped at the Vietnamese on the barges had no food or water. I asked for a caribou and A40B sent plastic containers from Saigon. There was one drop made which I believe was unsuccessful as the containers broke on impact with the water.
The next day another attempt was made to drop water; this time containers tied together with finitaire. This attempt aborted due to heavy rains in the area which apparently solved the water problem to some extent. The Da Nang Con Gen later arrived at Cam Ranh Bay and was flown to Nha Trang. He had a long talk with Mr. Spears, the Nha Trang Con Gen and then departed for Saigon by Volpar. At Nha Trang there seemed to be a sense of panic building up. Everyone seemed to be tense. I came out of the Pacific house to go to the airport on my second morning, and a mob had materialized in front of the Con Gen gate all wanting to be manifested to Saigon when I saw this I returned to my room, got my suitcase and from then on slept at the airport.

I was concerned about fuel as always. The fuel truck would stop servicing at the first sign of trouble. I called Saigon for empty fuel trucks would stop servicing at the first sign of trouble. I called Saigon for empty fuel trucks; they agreed to stay and control the crowd if they were promised a ride. They stayed all day and did an outstanding job. Late in the afternoon, however, they left unannounced and all control was gone. DC-6s of Birdair came in all day. They stayed all day and did an outstanding job. Late in the afternoon, however, they left unannounced and all control was gone. DC-6s of Birdair came in all day. When one was on the ground I would call in a C-46 and load company cargo and passengers. This worked most of the time.

The following events occurred on the day that Nha Trang was evacuated and not necessarily in this order:

1. Woke up at about 5:30 and called to the Pacific House to see if someone could bring coffee and breakfast.
2. A 40b customer across the way came over and told me the Viet Cong were only about 12 miles up the road and the evacuation was going this day. He said he was now destroying his papers and equipment. He told me I could have anything I needed. He was gone by 10:30 and abandoned his office and warehouse.
3. Con Gen had not informed me of their plans to evacuate. I got a call and they asked me to get all available aircraft from Saigon. This I did and also requested a C-46 for my own use.
4. Vietnamese started arriving at the airport looking for rides. I went out and put a new lock on the AAM gate and locked it as the guard was not on the job.
5. I previously had requested barbed wire to help control crowds. I never received this wire. We placed chains across to keep vehicles out of the operations area.
6. The Pol driver told me that he was on his last tank of gas and would not be getting anymore. He said he would stay on the job until all fuel was gone if I would promise his family a ride to Saigon. I did this and he worked as he promised.
7. A mob had gathered by the time the first airplane arrived. They were already getting unruly. I talked to some Vietnamese marines who spoke English. They were armed and were there to get a ride to Saigon. They agreed to stay and control the crowd if they were promised a ride. They stayed all day and did an outstanding job. Late in the afternoon, however, they left unannounced and all control was gone.
8. VNAF helicopters started departing. Two had a mid-air just above the ground and crashed into the revetments.
9. Had two Vietnamese employees who did not want to go to Saigon. I borrowed money and paid them their final pay. One was a male radio operator and the other was the one-armed cleaning woman. All equipment and their dependents. This was hampered by the Con Gen not allowing me space on the aircraft. I finally started getting an aircraft for my own use.
10. I put the finance records into the bag and locked the front of the Pacific house for a chopper pad.
11. Put the baggage compartment of a helicopter. This insured that we would not lose them.
12. The last 2 DC-6 aircraft came in and were completely mobbed. I had a Caribou and C-47 sneak in while they were of the Pacific house to go to the airport on the first day. The next day the first chopper arrived with fuel and the "secure" place was abandoned. The fuel could not be loaded back aboard choppers so we planned on using it ASAP. We used about 3 drums and the other 17 drums were stolen.
13. Chopper pilots reported small arms fire due to the mobs so hun-
14. Vietnamese started coming to our air
15. Air Vietnam quit coming into the city due to the mobs so hun-
16. The last 2 DC-6 aircraft came in and were completely mobbed. I had a Caribou and C-47 sneak in while they were
were on the ground. They were completely mobbed. I got all the employees left on the caribou and decided it was time for me to go. The mechanics pulled me into the door as the mob was trying to hold my legs. As the airplane was taking off I saw hundreds of people walking down the taxiway toward AAM.

17. A flying tiger DC-8 was dispatched from Saigon. However, by the time he arrived overhead Nha Trang was airborne and my opinion was that it was unwise for the (DC-8) to land. A 14-foot step had to be found for people to board and this would have been impossible to do with the huge unruly mob.

18. Once during the day just when a DC-6 was loaded and taxiing for takeoff, the tower said the field was closed. It was determined that someone in Saigon had ordered this. The field was later opened after repeated calls to Saigon.

19. We got out all of our employees and most of our important parts and equipment.

20. The Vietnamese radio operator agreed to stay on the job and call us when possible. He called one time the day following the evacuation and said that everything was quiet downtown and at the airfield. We never heard from him again.

It is my opinion that all the evacuations AAM participated in were caused by the embassy personnel ordering Vietnamese evacuated, thereby creating panic among the Vietnamese people.

Captain Edward Reid, Jr.
Air America, Inc.

In early April 1975 the AAM SVND evacuation contingency plans were fairly well finalized. These plans included coordination with the DAO evacuation command center (ECC). AAM Captain Filippi was the primary coordinator between AAM and ECC. AAM captain Manus Burke was the man assigned to organize and formalize the AAM employee evacuation plans, as would relate to getting the foreign employees from their living quarters to the AAM-TSN compound for onward evacuation out of Viet Nam. In my job capacity, I had dealings with all factions of the company evacuation contingency plans.

In my support to Captain Filippi AAM provided the technical assistance to the setting up of an alternate flight watch facility at an office nearby the DAO ECC. AAM would provide the primary vhf/am and vhf/fm radios if and when the AAM operations function could not operate. We also provided the DAO ECC with our ICCS colored Dayglow green paint, so that they could paint the letter H on their designated roof tops. These LZ pads were to be utilized for all the U.S. mission personnel pickup points in the case of an evacuation.

Captain Filippi also brought a group of three U.S. Marines to my office on or about 25 April. The Marine officer in charge was interested primarily in the perimeter security of the AAM compound. He stated that he would be the officer responsible for providing security of our facility and that upon the evacuation of our AAM compound, his U.S. marine group would destroy (blow up) the AAM facilities. We discussed the weak points in our perimeter, such as the company passenger terminal building and gates. Also we agreed that the rolling gates utilized across our southwest taxiway entrance was a weak point that would be difficult to seal off from refugees and/or armed desperate Vietnamese military personnel. It was decided that AAM would use metal conex containers to barricade the taxiway and place a double row of concertina wire on top of them to stem infiltration. This would be done after our fixed wing aircraft had departed or if the airport conditions prevented our fixed wing aircraft from taking off. In preparation we later positioned about 10 conexes near the taxiway and some 4 rolls of concertina wire. The terminal building would be planned to be blocked on the ramp side by vehicles and the entrance gate from the street to our employee vehicle parking lot was to be barricaded by the 2 Isuzu buses operated by AAM. The Marine officer said he would like me to make the necessary preparations and he would return in a few days to see what progress we had made. He nor any of the other marines ever visited me again and I heard nothing further about their plans.

Major (USAF) Cook was the man in DAO who provided me with the 300 fuel drums and one each Esso refueler of AVGAS and one of JP4. He told me that DAO ECC would also have an Esso re-
I strongly recommended that they double up in their country national (TCN) employees. I had several informal meetings with the third in our supply area for possible issue/use. We formally identified 3 rooftops around the area of Truong Minh Giangtroung Minh KY for the balance of the TCN employees. Those who were not reasonably close to those rooftops were asked to move in closer. These rooftops (LZ pads) were then designated for each employee, by location, for pickup. A name and address list of all foreign employees was given to Captain Burke for planning purposes. The majority of our helicopter pilots were given area familiarization flights so that they knew all the DAO and employee pickup pads.

A vhf/am (portable) radio was given to the Chinese employees in Cholon and the same was provided to the TCN group or Filipinod. These radios would enable them to have radio contact with the AAM TSN operations office and use company aircraft as may be required. Each LZ was given a radio call sign. Mr. P.Y. Lin acting manager of supply and Mr. Sam Talapian foreman of electronics was designated as the TCN group spokesman. In addition we proceeded to paint the AAM Dayglo green H on those approved rooftops.

About the middle of April, Captain Burke and I made several flights together in April, along with the designated spokesman of the Filipinos and Chinese employees. Our purpose was to determine which TCNs lived where in town and which rooftops were the most suitable for use. We formally identified 3 rooftops around the area of Truong Minh Giangtroung Minh KY for the balance of the TCN employees. Those who were not reasonably close to those rooftops were asked to move in closer. These rooftops (LZ pads) were then designated for each employee, by location, for pickup. A name and address list of all foreign employees was given to Captain Burke for planning purposes. The majority of our helicopter pilots were given area familiarization flights so that they knew all the DAO and employee pickup pads.

A vhf/am and vhf/fm (portable) radio was given to the Chinese employees in Cholon and the same was provided to the TCN group or Filipinod. These radios would enable them to have radio contact with the AAM TSN operations office and use company aircraft as may be required. Each LZ was given a radio call sign. Mr. P.Y. Lin acting manager of supply and Mr. Sam Talapian foreman of electronics was designated as the TCN group spokesman. In addition we proceeded to paint the AAM Dayglo green H on those approved rooftops.

About the middle of April, Captain Burke and I became more concerned about the overall war situation around Saigon and we recommended that all TCN employees move into the warehouse type buildings behind the former Cita hangars which was within the AAM compound. A number of the TCN employees started to move into those rooms. About 23 or 24 April, I insisted that all TCNs move to those buildings, and I was assured by Mr. P.Y. Lin that all those employees living in Cholon would be moved to the Cita buildings by the night of 26 April, as the security of the Cholon area was quite questionable.

On the morning of 29 April when we were preparing to evacuate at TCNs, I was given a name list of three TCNs that were still housed in town. There were 7 Chinese in Cholon and 11 Filipinos in the Truong Minh Giangtroung Minh KY area. Eventually the AAM helicopters picked up all the Filipinos and 6 of the Chinese. I had talked by radio at 1500l with P. Y. Lin and confirmed that the six Chinese in Cholon would go to the Chinese hospital and get out the seventh Chinese employee. Mr. W.A. Peng then they were all to proceed to any of the alternate rooftop LZ pads for pickup by using their portable vhf/fm radio. In the end result, I learned a few days later that W.A. Peng did not get evacuated. The reason why it is unknown to me at this writing I suggest that P.Y. Lin make a statement on why they did not or could not get Peng out.

In retrospect I would say that AAM evacuation plans went fairly smoothly and that we were very fortunate that only one employee failed to get out of Vietnam and none of our employees were injured. All of this is in spite of the fact that the U.S. Marines never arrived in the AAM compound, to secure/destroy it.

I went by AAM helicopter, from my living quarters (259 Troung Quoc Duong) to AAM TSN at about 0930l on Tuesday 29 April 1975.

We operated from AAM TSN until about 1230l at which time CEO gave the order to evacuate the AAM compound, due to lack of security (no U.S. Marines) and VNAF penetrating our area with cars, Hondas, local dependents, etc. CEO said we were to regroup at the DAO ECC.

Prior to abandoning the AAM area, CEO approved the dispatching of AAM fixed wing aircraft to carry the non-essential employees to friendly countries. We proceeded to load all such employees and launched the aircraft ASAP. In a short period of time, we had all those employees that were present and some unknown locals who infiltrated our groups, on the fixed wing aircraft and airborne.

I must mention that it was very difficult to control the boarding of passengers and to determine who was AAM employee or dependents, because we had very little help at the aircraft entrance doors. I don't know who, if anyone did authorize the departure of some of the Americans, i.e. Charlie Meyers, Harvey Kohler, Dick Fisher, George Keller, etc. on the fixed wing aircraft. We could have really utilized those Americans to control passenger loading, the taxiway gates and the refueling problem.

Shortly after arriving at AAM TSN I was notified that VNAF pilots were stealing our GFE UH-1H helicopters from the ICSS ramp. To the best of my knowledge they stole 5 UH-1H aircraft from the ICSS ramp and one AAM 204b helicopter from the AAM ramp itself. These VNAF people were well armed and desperate.

With the incoming rockets and VNAF infiltrating our ramp area, there was no time to collect or destroy essential records. We
keys were, so we flew to the BX LZ pads. No one knew where the ECC and attempted to locate the JP-4 BX stop and shop building. We returned to it around the corner of the DAO area, with Dick Wengenroth and myself assisting the AAM helicopter pilots with their arrivals and departures, at the DAO tennis court pads.

AAM Captain Filippi told me that we needed to obtain JP-4 fuel for the helicopters and he asked me where was the DAO fuel truck. I explained that I knew DAO USAF Major Cook had an Esso truck, as part of the DAO ECC planning but I was not involved in their (DAO) planning. Not knowing where the DAO fuel truck was positioned, Dick Wengenroth and myself took a DAO truck and hot-wired the ignition and proceeded to drive around the DAO building 5000 compound but were unable to find the JP-4 truck. Then I asked Captain Filippi to obtain a few U.S. Marines from ECC by AAM helicopter. We could not find any DAO vehicles with a large enough battery to suit the JP-4 truck needs. So again we flew to the BX LZ pads with the thought of taking the battery from nearby Isuzu bus and use it for the JP-4 truck. This time Stan Huster accompanied Chuck Wengenroth and myself. We switched the batteries, only to find out the bus battery was dead. We then went back to DAO ECC and again requested Capt. Filippi to provide us with a few U.S. Marines so that we could obtain JP-4 fuel drums or the standby Esso JP-4 truck from the AAM compound. As we again could not get any U.S. Marines, for security we elected to use one of the two AAM helicopters. We could not start the JP-4 truck engine, then we would not be able to pump the JP-4 from the truck. We then returned to DAO ECC by AAM helicopter. We could not find the truck battery was so weak the truck would not start. We considered tow ing the JP-4 truck using a nearby tow truck, but as the JP-4 truck was a hydromatic if we could not start the JP-4 truck engine, then, we would not be able to pump the JP-4 from the truck. We then returned to DAO ECC by AAM helicopter. We could not find any DAO vehicles with a large enough battery to suit the JP-4 truck needs. So again we flew to the BX LZ pads with the thought of taking the battery from nearby Isuzu bus and use it for the JP-4 truck. This time Stan Huster accompanied Chuck Wengenroth and myself. We switched the batteries, only to find out the bus battery was dead. We then went back to DAO ECC and again requested Capt. Filippi to provide us with a few U.S. Marines so that we could obtain JP-4 fuel drums or the standby Esso JP-4 truck from the AAM compound. As we again could not get any U.S. Marines, for security we elected not to re-enter the abandoned AAM compound for fuel. Later while listening to the AAM helicopter pilots talking to the AAM compound and operating from it, once the marines arrived to secure the area. It was planned and I was so briefed by DAQ that our pilots were carefully monitoring the rooftop pickups of people, to enable refueling at the U.S. ships off Vung Tau, where the majority of their passengers were being taken. The AAM helicopter pilots did a great job in fuel management as well as some “can do” flying.

As best I recall the U.S. military helicopters started arriving at the DAO BX LZ pads about 1500. The majority of their passengers were local refugees who had been programmed out by prior USAF C-141 and C-130.

At about 1615, CEO instructed some of us to use one of the two AAM helicopters at DAO and proceed to the U.S. ships. This group along with myself was dropped off at the U.S.S. Vancouver, LPD-2. This group of AAM employees consisted of Stan Hunter, Paul Discillo, Ron Leitchy, Capt. Chester Folick, Dick Wengenroth, E.L. Angeles, Vic Ballesteros and later we were joined by Ed Twiford. The Vietnamese flight mechanic with us, on n1704, helicopter was Mr. Can, (I believe) and he was taken to the refugee side of our ship and I never saw him again.

Our ship, the U.S.S. Vancouver, finally sailed for Subic Bay Philippines on 1 May about 1915, and we arrived in Philippines about 2130 on 3 May.

Although we were all processed through U.S. and Philippine customs and immigration by about 2330 the same night at cubi point naval base gym, we were returned to self-take a DAO truck for the night because the weather at Manila eliminated us from flying there that night.

On the morning of 4 May we were flown to Manila by U.S. military helicopter and sent to the Carlton hotel to check in with CEO and VP. We arranged our own flight bookings and flew from Manila to Hong Kong the same afternoon and checked into the pre-arranged rooms at the Hong Kong Sheraton hotel about 1630. We reported to the AAM offices at the peninsula hotel on the morning of 5 May.

B.D. Messcher
Director—Technical Services
Air America, Inc.
I want to thank the Air America pilots for rescuing me from the rooftop of the American Embassy in Saigon in the early evening of 30 April 1975. I had served in Vietnam from 1 November 1972 to that last day in April 1975. My name then was Joan Fritz.

Before I was rescued, I had the pleasure of working with the Air America pilots on the radio. About a week before Saigon fell, I was asked to work in the office that coordinated with the Air American pilots. The chief there, O.B., had broken his glasses and could not read; and it was too late for him to get new prescription glasses. So, I became his eyes. He taught me to work the radio and write down the tail numbers of planes when they took off and landed. O.B. had, among other duties, the responsibility of preparing and checking over many different lists involving Vietnamese and other personnel scheduled to be rescued and ferried out of the country. I recognized the importance of his work, and I was happy to be able to assist him.

One rather comical part of my rescue occurred when the chopper pilot took a map out and started looking at it over the water. I did not want to ask him if he knew where he was going, so I more tactfully asked him whether he had ever landed on an aircraft carrier before. He said that he had done so a few times, and I was greatly relieved to hear the news! The Air America chopper flew me to the U.S.S. Hancock while safely aboard the U.S.S. Hancock, I observed some other non-Air America helicopters landing on the deck of the carrier. Apparently, there was not room to accommodate all of these helicopters, so after the passengers and pilots exited them, the helicopters were pushed overboard. (No, they didn’t sink the Air America choppers!) I was aboard the aircraft carrier for about six days before we arrived at Subic Bay in the Philippines.

As I flew out of Saigon on that Air America chopper, I remember thinking to myself, this is the end of the movie. And I thought then — and I continue to think today — about all the men and women who served in Vietnam in any capacity over the years. Supporting U.S. efforts in Vietnam was a sometimes painful but ultimately great experience for me. I am grateful that I can finally give my long-overdue, heartfelt Thank You to the Air America pilots for my rooftop rescue. My colleagues at CIA, and I honor you for what you did for all of us, and we will never forget.

Sincerely,

Joan Peterson
Note: With the declassification of thousands of pages of Air America Corporate and CIA formerly-classified documents, historians will be able to read and review information previously not available, allowing a more rounded and fuller history of Air America. An example of this is the following article written by Larry D. Sall, Ph.D., Dean of Libraries at The University of Texas at Dallas. Dr. Sall reviewed declassified accident report files including the only known hijacking of an Air America plane. This is not only a fascinating article but an example of the stories to be written with the release of these documents. Also included in this section are some examples of the various documents that have been released to the public.
The Crash of Civil Air Transport Flight B-908
By Larry D. Sall, Ph.D.,
Dean of Libraries at The University of Texas at Dallas

About 5:30 on the afternoon of June 20, 1964, a Civil Air Transport C-46, Flight B-908, took off from Suirun Airpoort at Taichung on the island of Taiwan with 52 passengers and a crew of five. Less than 15 minutes later, all on board perished when Flight B-908 crashed into a rice paddy a few miles north of the Suirun airfield. In just released files from the Central Intelligence Agency, the story of this tragic event is detailed. According to newspaper accounts at the time, this was the first crash of a scheduled domestic flight that Civil Air Transport had experienced.

Why did the CIA maintain files on this Taiwanese accident? What could have been its interest in such a tragedy that it felt compelled to keep such extensive files? The answer to both questions is straightforward: CAT was owned by the CIA and had been since the Korean War. CAT was an asset to the agency, used to maintain a presence and an influence in East Asia. When not operating during the day as a civilian airline, the CIA used CAT’s personnel and equipment for clandestine missions.

CAT was established following World War II when General Claire Chennault and his associate Whiting Willauer to provide airlift capacity in that part of the world, so there was a serious absence of American airlift capacity in part of the world, so seeking a solution to the problem, the CIA purchased CAT under the cover of a private corporation. Thus the CIA came to be operating a civilian airline in Asia and so needed to be closely involved in the investigation of the crash of Flight B-908.

Both the Taiwanese authorities and the American authorities carefully studied the circumstances leading to the crash and its aftermath. Among the first questions were: what were the conditions at the time of the crash and could they have been a contributing factor? The flight took off in daylight, in clear weather over flat terrain, and according to eyewitnesses the takeoff appeared entirely normal. As Flight B-908 flew past the airfield, the pilot indicated everything was normal and said he would see the tower personnel the next day.

Taking off to the south and heading on a round island route with its next stop scheduled to be Taipai, the plane made a 180-degree turn to the east and headed north when suddenly it weaved sharply to the west and began a steep descent from an altitude of approximately 1500 feet. Flight B-908 struck the ground at an angle of about 30 degrees with its nose and left wing down. The C-46 was destroyed by the impact with only the tail section remaining more or less intact. The wreckage was scattered over a 200-300 meter square area in a rice paddy and a ditch.

Farmers working nearby heard the plane descending and saw it crash. The consensus was that the plane was fully intact before impact; there was no sign of smoke or fire prior to impact, and the engines did not sound unusual. First on the scene were the farmers who could find no sign of survivors; they also reported that fire broke out in some places in the wreckage, but these fires did not spread and soon died out. When the local police arrived shortly after the crash, they took charge of the scene. Chinese Civil Aviation Authorities did not reach the area until about twelve hours later. CAT personnel arrived soon after and were kept from handling the remains or wreckage while the Chinese officials pursued their initial investigation.

In its own report CAT noted that the “sudden transition from normal climbing flight in the direction of Taipai to a sharp turn to the left and diving into the ground almost certainly establishes only two possible causes: a. A sudden and major mechanical trouble which made it impossible for the pilots to control the aircraft.

b. Sudden incapacitation or restraint of both pilots which rendered them unable to control the aircraft through some act of other aircraft occupants.”

After an exhaustive investigation of the plane’s mechanical condition, both prior to and following the crash, the only significant questions were the condition of two control cables found broken following the crash, a claim that the left engine was over speeding at the time of the crash, and the condition of the pilots. CAT’S analysis of the propeller hubs and gears indicated both propellers were set at the proper pitch, and other clues including reports from people on the ground found no indication that either engine was performing outside of expected parameters.

The broken control cables were sent to laboratories in the United States for analysis. The normal stress on the cables when functioning was about 20 pounds while the cables themselves were rated to handle 1000 pounds. Also, it was noted that during the crash the cables had cut into the fuselage. While after their initial investigation Chinese officials regarded the broken cables as contributing factors, further tests indicated the cables broke during the crash when subjected to extreme stress. Also, even if the cables had broken in flight, according to CAT the two onboard pilots would have been able to control the aircraft with little difficulty. In addition CAT’s report stated that had an engine over accelerated, as was initially suspected by the local authorities, both pilots would have had no trouble dealing with that issue either.

Upon discovering that pilot Bengee Lin’s body was not stripped into his seat, the Chinese authorities initially believed that he had behaved in an overconfident manner that could have led to the crash. This was further investigated by CAT. The crash was so violent that the pilot’s seat was completely torn apart, which CAT felt explained why the pilot’s body was not found with the seat. Also both pilots were extremely competent and experienced.

So if there was no “sudden and major mechanical trouble,” what might have caused the “sudden incapacitation or restraint of both pilots?” The two pilots, Bengee Lin, the Pilot in Command, and M.H. Kung, Second in Command, had extensive C-46 experience. Pilot Bengee Lin had 17 years of flight experience, having logged 11,881 hours, 4,914 of them in a C-46. M.H. Kung had been a
professional pilot for 19 years with 13,074 hours logged of which 9,270 were in a C-46. Both pilots were in good physical condition according to their most recent examinations, and both were regarded as mentally healthy. The likelihood that both would collapse simultaneously would have been remote in the extreme.

If the pilots were not incapacitated by individual physical maladies, and mechanical problems had been ruled out, that left the most troubling possibility: the pilots had been rendered “unable to control the aircraft through some act of other aircraft occupants.” The likelihood that this was the case became stronger when two .45 caliber automatic pistols were found in the wreckage. The hammer was found in the cocked position with the carriage forward on one of the pistols. Two radar manuals were found in the debris the day after the crash. The inside pages of both manuals had been hollowed out in the shape of a .45 caliber automatic. Neither pistol was found with the manuals.

Lt. Tseng Yang, an engineering officer in the Chinese Navy, had checked out the manuals from the library of the Chinese Navy’s Peng Hu Ship Building Yard No. 2. Also, two pistols had been reported missing from the Armory of the Peng Hu Ship Building Yard No. 2.

One conclusion can be drawn immediately: Lt. Tseng had no intent of returning the manuals to the library as they had been ruined before being taken on the plane. Lt. Tseng would also have had access to both the pistols and the manuals, immediately pointing suspicion at him. Because both Lt. Tseng and Wang Tseng Yee had booked the flight for each other, the circumstantial case against them as co-conspirators is extremely strong. During the investigation of the crash site, while the victim’s bodies were being recovered, one body with its abdomen ripped open was found near the pilots’ bodies. It was passenger Wang’s body, and according to the medical examiner, the nature of Wang’s injuries indicated he was standing at the moment of impact.

The Chinese medical examiner, Dr. W. S. Cheng, noticed “a small hole at the right side of the face” of Pilot Benggee Lin in a photograph made by the Chinese security division at the crash site. He also observed that “approximately from that hole a large part of the front of the face and skull was thrown open and to the left and upward.” Dr. Cheng also reported that following the cremation of Co-pilot M. H. Kung, a three-inch spike was found in the ashes. The source of the spike was unknown.

It appears from the evidence that for reasons unknown, Lt. Tseng and passenger Wang attempted to take control of Flight B-908 shortly after takeoff. In that attempt the pilots were incapacitated; possibly Pilot Benggee Lin was shot and Co-pilot Kung was stabbed. In any event, both pilots were rendered incapable of flying the plane, and it crashed. What the motive of the alleged hijackers may have been is not clear. That they were suicidal is a remote possibility, but a more likely possibility was that they wanted to take the plane to the Chinese Mainland which was just across the Taiwan Straits from Taichung. In any event, 55 innocent people died as a result of this act of terror, including 19 Americans, a Korean flight attendant, and 35 Chinese people.
1. The crash site was cordoned off by local police. Liaison was effected with the Chief of Police, Tachikawa Police Bureau, and the Chief, Tachikawa Fire Department, who were the two officers responsible for necessary security measures at the crash site. The head of the LAT group was at the crash site to conduct a preliminary examination of the site.

3. Observation indicated that there were no survivors and the remaining parts of B-400 were distributed over an area estimated to be 2000-3000 meters square. The bodies of the victims were scattered throughout the wreckage area, beyond immediate recognition, and personal effects were scattered throughout the crash site.

5. LAT and Air Asia representatives were prohibited by police from searching the victims or wreckage prior to the completion of the investigation by the police and procurator in the early morning of 21 June 1968. Photographs, however, were taken by the LAT photographer.

6. Although the coroner and procurator did not arrive until 02:45 21 June, preliminary preparation was made in the interim with regard to the inspection of the site, the take-over of the necessary equipment and personal effects of the victims, and the removal of the bodies. The LAT representatives were permitted to take photographs of the site without interference from the police.

7. The search for survivors was continued by LAT, Tachikawa, and government personnel at the crash site until 06:44. Nine bodies were removed from the site and transferred to a Tachikawa hospital. At 07:20, the body of the LAT representative was taken to the hospital.

8. On 28 June, the wreckage of B-400 was removed to Taipei with air capabilities acting as guards to protect the site.

SECRET

MEMORANDUM

TO : EM via 804/VTG
FROM : SCG/VTG
SUBJECT : L61 Recovery Trip Report

28/Dec.

Departed VTE 0750L, arrived L39 0922L via P04. Standby for aircraft and information by AB-1 customer, however reported L61 area still not secured till 1600L, customer said will try tomorrow then returned L08 with P04. It was too late to receive 804's message for L39 RON while I arrived L08 at 1350L.

29/Dec.

Departed VTE by 4/S/5BZ 0830L, arrived L39 0950L. Proceed to AB-1 customer office. Have learnt that friendly troops already moved to L61 but security information still expected from L53 by 1600L. Army Headquarter. At P.M. I went to confirm with AB-1 customer again, said that search aircraft could not reach L61 as expected situation still questionable. We must go there by to-morrow morning. Rough briefing has been given by AB-1 customer. Returned to L39 radio station for standby and RON.

30/Dec.

Arrived airport 0730L and proceeded to AB-1 customer office at 0820L. There PC of H52 gave all SAR team briefing as following:

1) A red panel made by rubber cloth was handed over to me by customer.

2) I was appointed by PIC of H52 that I will be on board H52. I am supposed to fly in the first aircraft to land at L61. As soon as aircraft bonnies ground, the aircraft will pull up and circling over head. I have to keep on signal panel with red color up place it at a direction where considered suitable for chopper to pick up the bodies and myself.

3) I receive ground fire, stay where I am with the red panel, lay down and do not move, the chopper will pick me up and forget about the bodies. No questions asked by team personnel after briefing then our O/T 800L proceeding to L53L where one L39 by AB-1 and one liaison officer will be picked up. Both choppers standby on ground L53L for final situation confirmation from L61.
MEMORANDUM

TO:  
FROM:  
RE:  
SUBJECT: Cont'd

Furnished, R/O Ampol Chan-aius and R/M Sorita were captured by unreported by one of Lao paratrooper captain, he said they were taken away to 16 Kilo north of L61 (Houay Foun) on 27th Dec.

Viewing of no blood stain on station floor, I believed that all five of them (four R/Os one mechanic) had escaped the shell blast but obviously they were captured and three R/Os been shot to dead while run out for safe along the road side (body site) about 1 Kilo away from the station.

As for destroyed equipment left on scene are:

One ea 9T150 (Repairable, brought back to VTE)
One ea 906150
Two ea 93B
Two ea Generators (Completely burnt)
One ea Airconditioner (Repairable, brought back to VTE)
One ea Ice box (Beyond repair)

All WX observation equipment, personal effects and two telephone sets were lost.

Antenna masts (2) still standing with guy wires on, antennas missing.

cc: DCD/VS - One set of photo attached
    CS via BM 004/UDN
    CU via VR KG ZZ/VTE
    File

UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND

Page 5/5
So ends the last sentence of the final paragraph of a saga that may have an epilogue, but never a sequel.
Why We Care

On Sunday the 30th of June 1974 the last flight schedule was published at the Air America Udorn, Thailand Base. Two Volpax Beech aircraft flown by Berl King and Jim Rhyne were being ferried to Saigon, Vietnam. Both King and Rhyne are aviation icons. This faded mimeographed schedule must surely hang framed on many an ex-employee’s wall as it does mine.

C.J. Abadie, the Air America Vice President for Northern Thailand, asked his Assistant Richard Ford to write an appropriate commentary to be printed on the last flight schedule for this last day of operations in the Thailand/Laos region.

“...ends the last sentence of the (final) paragraph of a saga that may have an epilogue, but never a sequel. It has been to each participating individual an experience which varied according to their role and perspective. However, there is a common bond of knowledge and satisfaction of having taken part in something worthwhile, and with just a slight sense of pity for those lesser souls who could not, or would not, share in it.

This last flight schedule is dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny.”

Civil Air Transport (CAT) began USG contract operations in Vientiane Laos in 1957. This division of CAT became Air America in 1959. The purpose of this aviation company in the Kingdom of Lao at the time was largely humanitarian. CAT/Air America aircraft flew many missions to drop food (rice) to Lao and Hmoung in northern Laos after a bad harvest. In 1961 the company added rotor wing (helicopter) aircraft based in Udorn which greatly increased operational capabilities. Short field Takeoff/Landing (STOL) aircraft had also been added to the fleet. These types of specialized aircraft required exceptionally skilled pilots, loadmasters, and maintenance support. Operations control, area security information specialists, and logistical capability developed to support flight operations in a very difficult and often dangerous environment. Navigation aids, landing strip and HZ development, and weather forecasting services were rudimentary at best.

The ability of the CAT/Air America management to find, train, and control what we knew to be a very unusual team of employees for so many years is now acknowledged as absolutely astounding. Over forty nationalities, worked, played, and often bled together: “Their individual experiences varied according to their role and perspective.”

There were heroes and villains of course, as in any form of quasi-military human endeavor. But for those who toiled throughout this part and place of American history, - who would have imagined that after nearly four decades that “common bond” remains so much a part of our lives. This bond is as solid and viable today as it was then, is now, and forever will be. - (except of course, for those same lesser souls, who cannot or will not understand why.)

As civilian veterans of a very sad and misunderstood conflict in South Asia, we have not fared well in the media, or in some literature. Even though company aircraft and crews rescued more than 150 downed U.S. airmen, provided food and medical aid to thousands of refugees, assisted our primary customer’s directed Lao and Hmoung forces in holding down 2 crack NVA divisions until 1974 when they were released to participate in the final siege of Saigon that ended the war; very few knew or cared. But we knew that we had “taken part in something worthwhile.”

The continued myths of customer/Air America participation in drug trafficking are still being found and published by unknowing and uncaring writers. The silly “Air America” movie advanced this agenda by those who seek to tarnish our history. Though the efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency who has provided the materials, and the McDermott Library at the University of Texas at Dallas, who has archived the true and accurate records for the unbiased students of history; we are greatly appreciative. We also are grateful that the Vietnam Center at the Texas Tech University that also provides excellent resources to serious students of history. This association is proud that so many of our members have contributed their personal accounts.

CAT/Air America associations are indebted to the McDermott Library where our Memorial plaque is located. It is our “Wall” and provides a place for quiet and respectful contemplation of the lives of our brothers whose names were on the flight schedule of destiny.

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The CAT/Air America Memorial Plaque

Robert P. Abrams 25 October 1964
Alfredo J. Alor 18 May 1972
Howland D. Baker 12 September 1964
Nai Bay 4 October 1963
Wallace H. Bell 13 October 1962
Roelf Bijl 17 November 1967
Earle E. Bruce Jr. 8 August 1967
William P. Cagney 26 July 1962
Reynaldo Castillo 8 September 1972
Montano L. Centeno 27 July 1969
Ampol Chan Aium 27 July 1969
Montano L. Centeno 27 July 1969
Wallace Bufford 6 May 1954
Antonio C. Calderon 17 June 1967
Pablo C. Castro 12 March 1963
Prast Chachana 9 February 1973
W. H. “Jimmy” Chang 9 December 1950
Banching Chaniachai 11 June 1971
C. K. Chen 26 June 1964
Vivian Chen 16 February 1968
Suthi Champaub 23 November 1972
H. Y. Chua 20 June 1964
Terry D. Clark 7 April 1973
John J. Cooney 8 August 1967
Ernesto M. Cruz 10 January 1971
Eugene H. Debrun 20 April 1968
Rizal S. Alap-Marches 13 November 1965
Timoteo Bagnot 8 March 1969
Paul C. Barrow 15 April 1967
John W. Beardsley 10 March 1970
David W. Bevan 13 August 1961
Howard H. Boyles Jr. MIA
Lawrence R. Buol 26 May 1956
James C. Campbell 18 June 1969
Jack W. Cavill 29 July 1948
Kenneth A. Houp 17 March 1971
T. H. Hu 20 June 1964
Throng Lien Huynh 12 August 1964
Charles D. Jones 5 March 1965
Howard W. Kelly 18 January 1969
Charles D. Jones 5 March 1965
Howard W. Kelly 18 January 1969
Thanom Khrathaphongvay 23 July 1971
Mu Shuen Kung 20 June 1964
Xuan Duc Le 6 February 1966
C. Y. Lee 20 June 1964
V. L. Lee Jr. 27 July 1974
Richard H. Lieberth 12 October 1963
Rafael A. De Vera 24 July 1962
Carlos Dominguez 30 March 1971
Bennardo L. Dychitan 7 December 1968
Frank Fanthong 12 January 1971
Benjamin A. Franklin 1 January 1966
William J. Gibbs 5 May 1969
Joel M. Guadalupe 27 August 1972
Truett H. Harper 6 March 1970
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Ruby Lee 20 June 1964
Arthur Leonard 1 December 1969
Benj Lin 20 June 1964
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Clarence N. Driver MIA
Wayne W. Enninger 6 March 1966
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D. M. Hostkins 18 June 1972
Tsoan ho Hsieh 27 December 1968
Hua Ming Huang 16 October 1968
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Nirant Kasorphon 2 July 1972
Soupang Khampaphit 2 March 1969
George Kirkland 22 July 1953
Thi Mau Le 5 September 1965
Z T Lee 17 August 1963
Robert E. Lee 5 May 1968
John S. Lewis 13 August 1964
Herbert Liu 27 December 1963
The CAT/Air America Memorial Plaque (cont.)

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