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No Frills Called for On Spook Airline

By John Maffre

Washington Post Staff Writer

THERE ARE a few things about a nonscheduled flying outfit here called Air America Inc. that would make a public relations man cry.

Other airlines spend the riches of Croesus to lure people aboard, even going so far as to promise food that is edible, but Air America does not advertise. Few of its 118 planes have galleys that could produce much more than a sandwich.

It does not hire bewitching stewardesses, or even stewards. Surely this is a sin of omission according to the gospel as revealed unto Madison Avenue.

Air America could shout about its patriotism. Instead, it pulls in its corporate head like a nervous turtle when unkind souls suggest that it's just a clutch of cloak-and-dagger mercenaries who run air taxis for the Central Intelligence Agency.

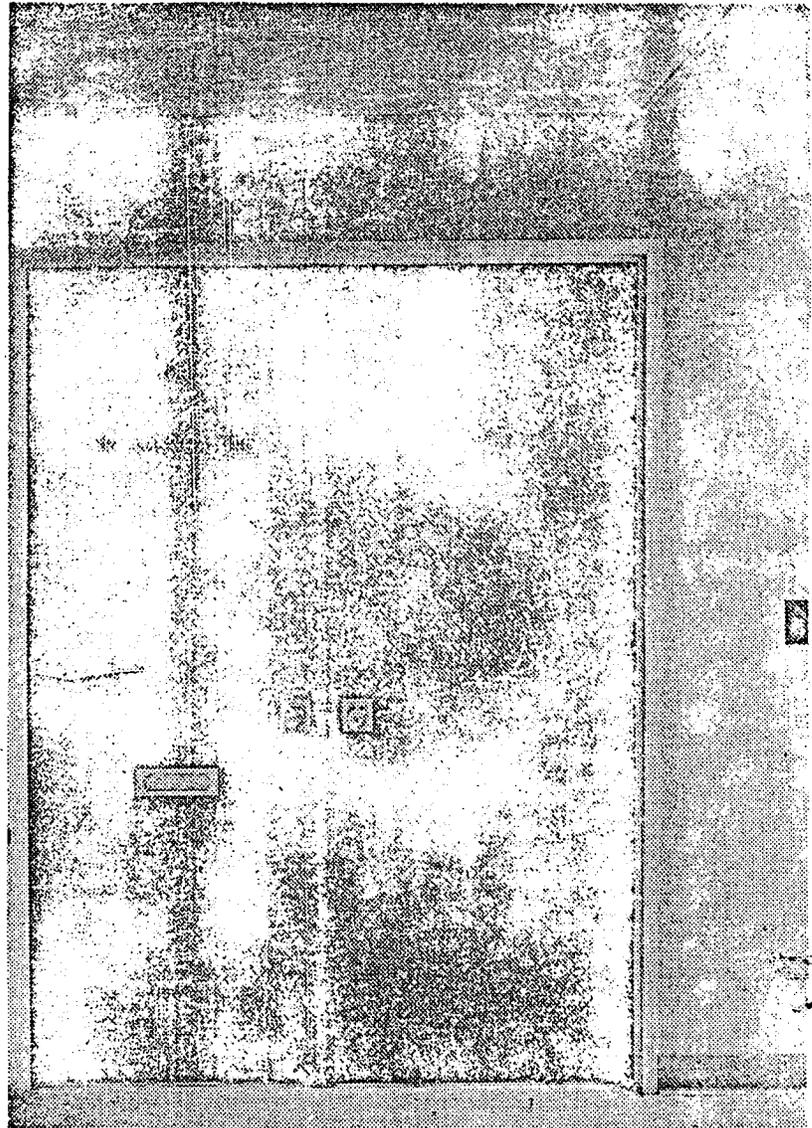
A Nice Quiet Operation

THE TRUTH is that Air America does not need to try harder to divert business from No. 1, whichever that is. It has it made. Its \$50 million worth of business last year makes it small potatoes in aviation circles, but its chief client is an Uncle Sam who is quite satisfied with its no-frills operation.

In fact, he insists upon Air America people behaving like Quiet Americans. Most of their work is done in Southeast Asia, especially in Laos and South Vietnam, and those are two states of mind where the rule applies that right hands should not let left hands know what is going on.

A few days ago, the Agency for International Development put out its annual release listing those firms which had a piece of the record \$465 million in AID contracts at the beginning of fiscal 1967. Fifty-five District of Columbia firms owned \$85 million of that total, but Air America alone accounted for half—\$32,645,220.

This is a cumulative figure, of course, going back several years. But it is still shy by many millions because it did not include contract arrangements that



By Ken Fell, Staff Photographer

This modest shingle identifies the modest suite of offices at 815 Connecticut ave. nw. where Air America Inc. has its nominal headquarters.

are being continued for services in similar missions. They include ancient South Vietnam.

Only four years ago, this was financial peanuts of less than \$70,000. Now it has escalated like everything else there. It amounted to \$4.1 million in fiscal 1966, and in the first three months of this fiscal year, some \$3.2 million was spent.

So far, the biggest slice of this AID money for Air America has financed operations in Laos. One contract that went into effect in October, 1962, has already amounted to more than \$30 million and is being enlarged.

In Laos alone, Air America operates most of the 39 helicopters and fixed-wing planes that attend to all "U.S.-supported activities" there. Continental Air Services flies ten of them on

but dependable C-46s, C-47s and C-123s as well as helicopters and some small single-engine craft that can operate from very small fields.

Mostly, the cargo is cracked wheat and rice dumped from the heavier transports to remote Laotian villages where land communication is next to impossible. It is hair-raising work for the airmen, and the pilots and crews are rated among the best in the aviation business. Much of this flying is in eastern Laos territory, where the American-financed regime of Prince Souvanna Phouma must labor mightily to hold those few pockets of loyalty that it does command.

That much Air America will talk about, reluctantly. But it makes other flights that hardly fall within the usual role of an AID mission anywhere, and

Continued

this is ticklish. It will remain so as long as tiny Laos and the big foreign powers that contend there maintain the fiction that the 1962 Geneva Agreement has kept everybody neutral.

Some Men Have Died

ON OCCASION, these Air America flights prove fatal. In July, 1963, four Americans and two Thais were lost when a transport plane went down in what was reported to be a resupply mission to a right-wing Royal Lao unit. Some months later, two Americans were killed and another American and three Asians were taken prisoner by the Pathet Lao after a crash, the prisoners eventually being released.

There was a time, just two years ago, when Air America said it was going to pull out of Laos. The idea was that its operation would be taken over by Seaboard World Services, a subsidiary of the large and prestigious carrier Seaboard World Airways.

The Communists had been accusing Air America loudly of being the flying arm of the CIA. They said that it was dropping supplies, guns and ammunition to the forces which opposed the Pathet Lao and was engaged in all sorts of clandestine activity. Hanoi was busy doing the same service for the Pathet Lao, but this did not minimize the fact that the United States was worried about its image in Laos and wanted to preserve the appearance of purity.

However, the decision to switch to Seaboard was reversed somewhere, and Air America carries on its role.

Modest Identification

AIR AMERICA works much the same way in South Vietnam. It performs a number of functions for AID and does other jobs as well, jobs that AID personnel might not know about.

Several Air America planes can be seen most days of the week at Saigon's airfield, the busiest in the world. Usually they have no markings on them except the civil registration number preceded by an N. In remote fields in the hinterland, a whine like a fire siren gone berserk means that a little Swiss-designed "Pilatus" turboprop is buzzing around, perhaps with Air America insignia on it.

The Air America function in South Vietnam may remain less important than in Laos, however. The fighting there is so open that there is not as much need for covert operations, and the U.S. MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) has such enormous resources that it can provide for most requirements.

It would be unfair to imply that AID is merely a cover for the multitude of Air America tasks. Probably the bulk of its flying is AID work pure and simple. And when the airline is called

on for other chores, AID has little if anything to say about it.

In Vientiane or Bangkok or Saigon, AID is one of many segments of the United States Mission. So is the Central Intelligence Agency, although its members are more modestly listed in the diplomatic handbooks as political counselors or aides to the ambassador. That means that when a particular project requires an airplane and airmen to perform some discreet flying bearing the CIA imprimatur, there is no great difficulty in finding the means and the men.

A Tax-Free \$20,000

IF THE FLYING is at times rough, it has its compensations. There are nearly 600 pilots on hire by Air America, usually men in their late 30s or early 40s. It does not take long for a qualified captain to get into the \$20,000-a-year class, and if he is stationed abroad for more than a year and a half, he qualifies for an American income tax exemption on that first \$20,000.

In most Asian countries—certainly in South Vietnam—the rate of local taxation is considerably lower and the area for bargaining with tax officials is vast compared with the oppressive rectitude shown by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service.

Most of the pilots are American and many of them went to Air America when they grew impatient with the slower rate of advancement on the larger carriers. There are, however, a number of Chinese pilots from Taiwan who have remarkably well-filled logbooks, and other Asians who are either flying or providing maintenance service.

Probably only a few are CIA employees in the direct sense, as far as piloting is concerned, although the agency does not lack for representation. One reporter tells of overhearing a huddle of Air America pilots in a Vientiane cocktail lounge chiding one of their younger companions, a nonflying associate who was apparently a CIA agent, for being too zealous in asking the airmen to give detailed and precise accounts of everything they saw. The thrust of their argument was that they were too busy handling airplanes to be gumshoeing around the boondocks of Laos.

A Traveling Director

THE DIRECTION for this mixed bag of flying tricks comes nominally from a modest suite of offices at 815 Connecticut ave. nw., just five minutes across Lafayette Square from the White House. When he's there, George A. Doole Jr. presides over it as managing director. But two or three times a year he checks out of an office that

cluttered up with plastic airplane models and heads east to oversee the operation of which Air America is just a part.

Doole is also president and chief executive officer of the parent Pacific Corp. This owns Air America, which in turn owns the Taiwan-based servicing firm of Air Asia Co. Ltd., and it also owns 40 per cent of CAT (Civil Air Transport Co. Ltd.), a more orthodox carrier which does advertise and which does hire beautiful stewardess and which does serve good meals from Seoul to Bangkok. All four of these corporate entities maintain offices at the same downtown Washington address.

Doole is an affable fellow who used to fly the famous Boeing Flying Clippers 30 years ago and he has a practiced easiness in deflecting questions about Air America's non-AID work in Southeast Asia.

"I wouldn't know about that, would I?" he responds. "We're hired by the U.S. Government to fly people and things from one place to another. That's it."

Too Much Fuss

THE QUESTION was raised earlier this year when Air America blushing accepted an award from the Aero Club of Washington. The club members, like Doole himself, said they wouldn't know about everything that Air America did. But the citation noted that the firm performed nobly in an area that made it "essential that a nonmilitary air service be used even under conditions of actual warfare."

The award sits on a window ledge at Doole's left hand, a modest affair of wood featuring a model of the Washington Monument.

"I think maybe they made too much fuss over it," Doole said with a chuckle when he was asked about it. And that's all he would say about that affair, either.