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October 15, 1987



Bill Jessup, of Air America, flies over Communist-held area taking food to loyal Laotian troops.



Dropping the rice: Crew prepares to deliver the cargo by pushing it overboard.

AIR AMERICA'S BILL JESSUP:

HE DROPS RICE FROM THE SKY

by John G. Rogers

Halfway around the globe, next door to the Vietnam war, a few dedicated U.S. airmen "too old" to fly are flying regularly over some of the world's worst terrain—the mountains and jungles of Laos and their Red rebel gunners.

In the little publicized internal conflict in Laos, one of their jobs is to deliver food to loyal troops behind Communist lines. Some other missions are utterly secret. Some they don't talk about—like dropping arms to anti-Communist guerrillas—but word gets out.

These Americans in Laos are part of our flying foreign legion in Asia, high-paid, unsung daredevils who've enlisted privately in the war against communism for a variety of reasons—money, adventure, escape, conviction.

One is William A. Jessup, a 43-year-old former jet bomber pilot who rejected being grounded into an Air Force desk job in 1964 and now, with graying hair, seems a bit out of element among the younger of his dashing companions. Jessup is a quiet, friendly family man whose days of peril are nearly over. His three-year contract is running out and any day now he's due to join his family among

the flowers and palms on peaceful Trentwood Boulevard in Orlando, Fla. On his arrival, gone at last will be the anxiety that so long tortured his wife, Marjorie, while she hid the ordeal from their son and daughter.

PARADE flew with Jessup in Laos and talked with his family in Orlando and came away with a vignette of two facets—lonely husband and father flying far from home, anxious family waiting and waiting—all crossing off days on calendars.

The problem in Laos is that the Communist Pathet Lao with North Vietnamese friends control much of the eastern half of the little Asian kingdom. Through this area runs the Ho Chi Minh Trail carrying so much of Communist aid to South Vietnam. Official U.S. help to Laos is forbidden by the 1952 Geneva Accords that neutralized the country. Hence, when Laotian Premier Prince Souvanna Phouma asked for assistance, U.S. advisers and experts had to go in in civilian clothes. Among them was Bill Jessup.

Ostensibly, he's been a civilian pilot for a commercial airline named Air America that flies cargo and passengers about in southeast Asia. Actually, Air

America is part of the air network maintained in Asia by the Central Intelligence Agency. Jessup and his fellow airmen are constantly on call. Do friendly troops need transport to a jungle trouble spot? Call Air America. Do guerrillas need dropping behind Red lines? Call Air America. In its territory, it's a go-anywhere, do-anything airline against the Reds.

Prime Targets

Lumbering along in a 25-year-old, two-engine C-46—the planes are reliable workhorses and speed is not essential in the short hops of little Laos—Jessup and fellow pilots have more than once put their lives on the line flying over contested land. Communist gunners, of course, regard them as prime targets.

Before taking off, it's standard procedure for Jessup to be briefed not only on the latest weather but also on the latest change-of-hands of territory—from friendly to Communist, or vice versa. The Laotian peaks and jungles would be inhospitable enough in case of emergency bailout without running the risk of falling into the arms of the Reds.

During the rainy season, flying over Laos is especially precarious. Often, when a pilot is forced to dive through cloud holes in order to follow the valleys, he exposes himself closely to hostile guns. More than one Air America plane has disappeared without a trace. And sometimes the search-and-rescue craft sent out in the wake of disaster have, themselves, been shot down.

Jessup, who once had to skid-land a shot-up bomber in the Korean War, puts no flavor of danger into the almost daily letters he sends to the red and white brick family home in Orlando. The house must be kept cheerful for the children—Helen, 12, and Bill Jr., 10.

An excerpt from a recent letter: "Am happy to say that flying has picked up a little. I've flown the past four days, although I have the day off today."

Another letter made passing fond reference to the days when Marjorie and the kids lived with him in Vientiane, the Laotian capital: "The flying is still pretty slow. I had the milk run south yesterday, and the day off today. Hope I fly tomorrow. The house is sure lonely without my sweet family."

Missouri-born Marjorie Jessup, attractive and soft-voiced, readily admits to "anxiety" over her husband's job. But, she confides: "If he's had any close calls, he keeps them from me. We just know that we miss him a lot and will be very glad to have him home."

Jessup was a major with 8000 hours of flying time when he became 40 in 1964. When the Air Force decided he'd reached the age for a desk job, he rebelled. He loved flying too much to quit and the most immediately available employer was Air America, a haven for other "old" pilots.

This airline shares a Washington office with Civil Air Transport—the Nationalist Chinese airline—and its personnel tell you it's privately owned and totes cargo and passengers about among Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Okinawa and Japan. It does actually do some commercial business but this is reportedly promoted by the C.I.A. On the record, Air America is wholly owned by the Pacific Corporation, a U.S. holding company, which also owns 40 percent of Civil Air Transport. Jessup's salary with Air America is not known, but Air America pilots are said to make up to \$36,000 a year. Marjorie Jessup simply says that her husband "has a pretty well paying job compared to lots of others. There's a basic salary and then the more hours he flies, the more money he makes."

In Vientiane Jessup lives in a newly built bungalow. The house is comfortable for Laos, where drinking water must be boiled or filtered and food choice for Americans is very limited despite military-type commissary privileges. On a recent evening, Jessup got word that his schedule next day called for three flights—the third to deliver 11,000 pounds of rice to Drop Zone 201 between Communist-dominated land and the North Viet-

namese border. The rice was for an isolated Laotian Army outpost.

Jessup turned in early and the next morning an Air America bus picked him up and drove him the five miles to Wat-tay Airport. There he saw the loading of the C-46—the kind that flew over The Hump in Burma in 1943, several wars ago.

Takeoff was routine and when Jessup neared D.Z. 201 in jagged northeast Laos, he could see off to his left the mountains of Red China's Yunnan Province. To the right lay the Dien Bien Phu area of North Vietnam. When Jessup arrived over 201 he found thick cloud cover and since he had to release his triple-wrapped rice bags as in pinpoint bombing—no parachutes involved—he decided that accurate delivery was impossible. Constantly checking his map studded with stars marking Communist gun positions, he flew on to his first alternate. Same story—rugged, dead limestone peaks poking through thick, fleecy cloud cover, but insufficient visibility for rice dropping.

Delivering The Rice

Not until the fifth alternate could Jessup and his crew—co-pilot D. E. Hoehn, rice dropper John Kirkley, of Cave Junction, Ore., and two Thai assistant droppers—achieve their objective. This time they had perfect visibility over the brown-red earth wounds of the dog-in-Laotian Army positions among the green blur of jungle.

While the droppers were busy, Jessup kept his old plane left-banked in a circle at exactly 110 knots air speed and at 800 feet altitude. Each time a string of 18 bags was kicked through a wide door in the side of the fuselage, a "load away" bell rang. When the last one sounded, Jessup gunned his engines in a climb to safer altitude for the trip back to Vientiane.

For the record, Air America contends that Jessup's job is not risky, not even dangerous. The line says that though the planes are old, they're superbly maintained by native mechanics.

However, Marjorie Jessup feels a vast tension lift as her husband's three-year Air America contract runs out. He'll be home soon in the low-lying, four-bedroom house on Lake Conway where he settled his family last summer. It's a pleasant place. Red and yellow blossoms line the drive running up to the house and out where the lake laps at the back yard, there's handy boating, fishing and swimming. It's plain that the family is eager to establish life together there. Jessup will seek a new job somehow connected with flying. And the kids say their father will enjoy playing bridge, tinkering in his workshop, or sipping a beer on the back patio while the palm trees rustle in the wind.

And, settled down far from Laos, he may also help advise his pretty daughter on her career plans which at present are summed up as: "Open up a pet shop or join the Marines."



At home in Orlando, Fla., Jessup's wife Marjorie, and two children wait for him.