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New book delves into problem

# Airline accused of shipping opium

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For Pacific News Service

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — "It's a damned lie. You can say THAT!" We were asking Arthur Berry Richardson of New York, about reports that his airline, Air America, was one of the biggest opium shippers in the world. "We've discussed them at our board meeting, these scurrilous articles. There's no substance to them."

Last month Harper & Row published Alfred McCoy's long-awaited book, "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia." The heavily documented book is based on some 240 interviews with CIA agents, Bureau of Narcotics officials, top Laotian military commandes, and opium-growing Meo tribesmen. And it presented striking evidence that Air America has been flying Meo-grown opium out of north- and northeast Laos ever since 1965.

When asked specifically about McCoy's interviews with the Meo opium farmers whose harvest was flown out on Air America, all Arthur Richardson would say was: "Some guy thinks he's clever. Just take my word for it. Goodbye!"

Interviews with the publicity-shy directors of Air America tend to be brief but emotional affairs. For years Air America, the CIA's "private" charter airline in Southeast Asia, has indignantly denied any involvement in the Southeast Asian heroin traffic. This year, though, fewer people than ever seem inclined to take their word for it.

## MOTTO IS NO IDLE BOAST

Air America's motto is "Anything, Anytime, Anywhere — Professionally" and it is no idle boast. From dusty airstrips in the Meo hill country they have been airlifting the raw opium to laboratories in Long Chieng or Vientiane where it is refined into No. 4 heroin (90 to 99 per cent pure), then smuggled abroad by Corsican gangsters or Laotian diplomats for ultimate disposal in U.S. markets.

The Opium Trail leads from the poppy fields of the Southeast Asian "Fertile Triangle" (of Burma, Thailand, and Laos which now produce over 70 per cent of the world's opium supply) to Saigon, Hong Kong, or Marseilles, and then right to the waiting arms of America's estimated one million heroin users.

In separate interviews, Laotian Gens. Ouane Rattikone and Thao Ma both told McCoy that Air America began flying opium to markets in Long Chieng and Vientiane in 1965. Gen. Ouane

Rattikone was until last year owner of the largest heroin refinery in Southeast Asia. Gen. Thao Ma is former commander of the Laotian Air Force.

After several more interviews in Vientiane, McCoy told us he took a bus out of Luang Prabang, hitched a ride in a government truck and, when the road gave out, started hiking over the mountains. By nightfall he reached a small village, spending a sleepless night under a thin thatched roof.

"There was always the sound of a plane somewhere," he said. "Sometimes it was far away and sometimes it seemed right overhead. And every so often you would hear the sound of its mini-guns going off—600 rounds a minute at who knows what, anything that sets off its infrared detectors, anything that moves or breathes or gives off warmth."

The next morning McCoy and an interpreter walked down from the mist-enveloped mountains into the village of Long Pot, 10 miles west of the Plain of Jars. There, under the shadow of 6,200-foot Mt. Phou Phachau, which dominates the entire district, McCoy had reached the head of the Opium Trail.

## TRADITION OF POLITICAL POWER

The village of Long Pot is a Meo community of 47 wooden dirt-floored houses. It is one of 12 Meo and Lao Theung villages that make up Long Pot District. One of the oldest Meo villages in Northeast Laos, it has a tradition of political power and is the home of District Officer Ger Su Yang. According to Ger Su Yang, the village households produce 15 kilos (33 pounds) of opium apiece. They are guaranteed an adequate food supply by Air America rice drops.

In return, officers of the CIA's "clandestine army" (led by the Meo Chieftain Vang Pao) pay them a high price for the opium. The source of Vang Pao's money, of course, is the CIA.

Long Pot is one of the few remaining areas in Northeast Laos where opium history can still be observed: close enough to Long Chieng still to be controlled by Vang Pao but far enough to escape the fighting. The Meo tribesmen's only cash crop is opium, and the CIA's deal with Vang Pao, badly put, comes to this: you send us soldiers and we'll buy your opium.

The 47 households' harvest of 700 kilos of opium will yield 70 kilos of pure morphine base after it has been boiled, processed and pressed into bricks. Then further processed in one of the region's seven heroin labs, the Long Pot harvest will yield 70 kilos of No. 4 heroin. Worth \$500 to the villagers of Long Pot, it will bring \$225,000 on the streets of New York or San Francisco.

Formerly Long Pot's opium harvest was bought up by merchant caravans, but these stopped coming after fighting intensified in 1964

and 1965. They were replaced by pony caravans of Vang Pao's men. But the 1969, 1970 and 1971 opium harvests were flown out in Air America UH-1H "Huey" helicopters.

## RENDEZVOUS IS DESCRIBED

District Officer Ger Su Yang described the rendezvous with Air America: "Meo officers with three or four stripes (captain or major) came from Long Chieng to buy our opium. They came in American helicopters, perhaps two or three men at a time. The helicopter leaves them here for a few days and they walk to villages over there (swinging his arm in a semi-circle in the direction of Gier Goot, Long Makhay and Nam Pac), then come back here and radio Long Chieng to send another helicopter for them. They take the opium back to Long Chieng." The pilots were always Americans, and the Meo army traders did the buying.

The head man of Nam Ou, a Lao Theung village four miles north of Long Pot, confirmed the district officer's account. In 1969 and 1970 Meo officers helicoptered into Tan Son village, hiked to Nam Ou, and purchased the opium harvest, then continued on their way to Nam Suk and Long Pot.

The harvest of 1971 may well have been Long Pot's last. In return for the rice drops and opium purchases, Vang Pao and the CIA kept demanding soldiers. USAID (United States Agency for International Development) built a school in the village, and "Mr. Pop" (Edgar Buell, then the CIA's chief operative in Laos) had high hopes for the place, but in 1970 Vang Pao demanded that all the young men in the village including 15 year-olds join his army fighting the Pathet Lao. Ger Su Yang complied and they were flown away by Air America helicopters in late 1970.

But reports of heavy casualties came in and the village refused to send more. Ger Su Yang described what happened next: "The Americans in Long Chieng said I must send all the rest of our men. But I refused. So they stopped dropping rice to us. The last rice drop was in February this year."

## ANSWER TO THE VILLAGERS

Flight or starve — this was the CIA's answer to the villagers of Long Pot. Air America flew the village's young men away to fight and returned their corpses to the village — professionally wrapped in sanitary plastic bags.

For the CIA the Meos offered a convenient instrument for keeping alive their war in Laos, but for the Meos their alliance with the CIA and Air America has only brought disaster. They have been decimated and the survivors have fled the hills for the refugee camps around Long Chieng.

Long Pot's 1972 opium harvest was destroyed when "allied" fighters napalmed the village and three nearby Lao Theung villages. And Vietnam's National Liberation Front reported that on Jan. 10, 1972, units of the Lao People's Liberation Army took Long Pot.

Because of the fighting, in fact, Laos will only account for a fraction of Southeast Asia's estimated 1,000-ton 1972 harvest, and Air America may be shipping more dead bodies than opium this year.

Revelations like these in McCoy's book made the CIA so nervous that they contacted the publisher and insisted on a prior review, an unprecedented move. After considerable haggling, Harper & Row reluctantly agreed, but found the CIA's critique of the book unimpressive and went ahead with publication anyway.

Since the CIA is Air America's major contractor, the trail of responsibility leads directly to the Executive Branch of the U.S. government. It neatly undercuts all the "law and order" statements flowing from the White House.