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Air Freebooters Risk Necks For Love--And For Money

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It was in the last tragic days of Dien Bien Phu that Earthquake Magoon's aircraft cartwheeled into the ground and exploded, killing one of the most colorful of America's fly-for-pay freebooters.

Magoon was a Civil Air Transport pilot, one of those restless types who couldn't settle down after the war, and a man interested in flying and the Orient. There was an entire airline built around them, but today CAT is losing its early raucous spirit. The pilots today even wear uniforms.

AN OFFSPRING of CAT, however, is an outfit called Air America, operating out of Vientiane, Laos.

If Magoon were alive today he would look with approval on the type of pilot flying for Air America. They are out-and-out mercenaries, flying anything, anywhere, for any reason. Sometimes they get their orders through the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Other times it comes through some Asian officials.

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The pay gets as high as \$2,000 a month but the risks are great. Through at least two years of the dirty Lao war, the Air America pilots flew planes and helicopters over Communist territory. They were shot at daily.

THERE ARE indications that the pilots are flying over other touchy places in Asia, but nobody will talk about it.

Air America was the subject of a recent magazine article—one of the few published detailed reports on the hush-hush aerial privateers. While anyone in Asia who cares can find out some things about the outfit, few can find out exactly where it operates.

The pilots are easy to spot: they carry a lot of money and seem to do their best to spend it as quickly as possible. They are very, very noisy in most things

but very, very quiet about their own operations.

THEY ARE known to fly actual combat missions. Air America helicopter pilots hauled government troops all over the Plaine de Jarres in north-central Laos to take cracks at the Pathet Lao (Communist) rebels.

The free-wheeling pilots apparently have the approval of the U.S. government—none of them has lost his passport, or been thrown out of the country. It amounts to the U.S. condoning U.S. mercenaries being involved to a certain degree in Asia's ever-occurring brush wars. But it probably is more feasible than putting U.S. military personnel into such a ticklish situation.

THE REDS have been enraged by the civilians flying for the Laos government, and branded all of them as "war criminals." They can expect little consideration if they are shot down and captured.

Meanwhile, they keep flying for the CIA, the government of Laos, the love of flying, the interesting assignments—and the money.

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