

Role of Air America in Laos Continues to Raise Questions

Line Is Under Charter to U.S. to Drop Food to Refugees, but There Are Hints of Other Activities, Too

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Special to The New York Times

VIENTIANE, Laos, Aug. 23—When an Air America helicopter was shot down recently by the pro-Communist Pathet Lao, the incident again drew unwelcome publicity to an enterprise that is shadowy and vague, even by Laotian standards.

On its face, Air America is a commercial airline, chartered by the United States Government to do the risky job of supplying remote refugee camps and American outposts. The daily routine involves flying through mountain passes obscured by clouds. Most of the landing fields are dirt strips in jungle clearings.

Air America's pilots in Laos, Vietnam, Okinawa and Japan are considered iron-willed and resourceful; their mechanics the best in the Far East.

The policy of the airline has been to wave away all questions. "We're under contract exclusively to the United States, and of course we can't talk about our client," one official said.

It has long been suspected, however, that Air America was not merely hired by the Government but is, in fact, the United States Government operating under a commercial cover.

Details Not Convincing
General denials have seldom been persuasive. Offsetting them have been incidents like one that occurred early in August in the bar of the Constellation Hotel here.

Several Air America pilots were drinking with a member of their ground crew, a young Ivy League graduate fluent in several languages.

As the evening passed, the pilots began to bait him. "The trouble with you intelligence types is that you want reports on everything—what we heard, what we saw. You have to remember we're supposed to be pilots."

The last intelligence man "got worse," another pilot put in. "Do you remember all those forms he had printed?" The young man flushed and changed the subject.

Under the Geneva agreements of 1962, which provided for a unified regime of the neutralist, rightist and pro-Communist factions, the role of the United

States in the renewed fighting, the United States has tried to avoid the appearance of violating the accords.

But pro-Communist broadcasts have accused Air America of supplying arms to the neutralists and have suggested that Air America pilots were employed by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Earlier this year the United States announced that Air America was leaving Laos, to be replaced by Seaboard World Services, a subsidiary of Seaboard World Airways. Air America executives said their company intended to increase its operations in South Vietnam.

The transfer has been delayed by the death in an airplane crash of the Seaboard official who was to have handled the change-over.

The transfer would not actually affect the air activities here. The pilots, hired originally in Washington by Air America, would be asked to stay on.

One chief difference would be that no one questions the legitimacy of Seaboard, a company of 30 years standing.

United States spokesmen here protest that the guessing games about Air America tend to overshadow its useful work.

Grain Dropped Daily

The airline operates 28 aircraft in Laos. In addition to moving supplies and personnel for the United States aid mission, Air America drops 50 tons of cracked wheat and rice each day to refugee villages.

With the doors of their C-47 planes open, the pilots fly the grain in bags over clusters of huts whose occupants have escaped from the Pathet Lao in the hills. A husky Thai Laotian kicks the pound sacks out of the plane.

"Our pilots know that the grain isn't rotting in some warehouse. They see the villagers dividing it up before the planes are even out of sight."

"That's why they'll fly in almost any weather," he added. "They know that without their rice drops the people would starve."

Air America's annual budget is \$10 million, the largest single amount of United States funds spent here and one-sixth of the total aid money for Laos.

Bird & Sons, Inc. was established in 1946 to build an airplane in Vietnam. Starting with one single-engine Beechcraft, the company moved into the airline business and now employs 40 pilots. It operates an air service throughout Laos.

Bird & Sons also flies three C-46's that are leased by the Laotian Government with money provided by the United States Agency for International Development. Under the Geneva accords the Laotian Government is free to transport arms and ammunition on these planes.

Pilots Are Casualties

Both Air America and Bird have lost pilots and crews, more often through crashes on fog-covered mountainsides than through enemy fire. Bird has had six casualties in the last three years. Air America lost four Americans and two Thai

last October Eugene R. DeBruin of Kaukauna, Wis., was captured by the Pathet Lao after an Air America crash in southeastern Laos. Three Asian crew members were also taken prisoner. Two other American employees were killed in the crash.

The average Air America pilot is in his late 30's or 40's. He is married, has a family lives in Bangkok, Thailand.

He may have tried to fly a passenger airline in the United States and been discouraged by slow pay under the seniority system. "The good pay doesn't explain it all," an Air America executive said. "Guys are usually given to go through enemy fire. Bird has said so, but they can't say here that they're making a contribution."

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: 29-Apr-2009