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Airline of the Spies

Air America Flies for Government in Missions

By FRANCOIS SULLY

VIENTIANE, Laos — Early every morning, 70 small, highly powered planes roar off from the Vientiane airport and head for "Old Sam Soak Strip" or "Pop's Field" or certain other tiny clearings deep in the Laotian bush.

"Sometimes no one can tell whether a site is closed or open," says one of the pilots. "You get there and circle the place, looking for any suspicious sign. If no one shoots, you take your chance and land and keep the engine running until a friendly face shows up."

The planes bear the discreet markings of Air America—better known in some circles as "CIA Airlines."

Nominally, Air America is a privately owned company which does all its flying in Southeast Asia and all of it under contract to the U.S. government. Actually, its main assignment is to assist in the half-acknowledged U.S. war commitment in Laos. As a civilian organization, it can circumvent the 1962 Geneva accords which bar foreign military aircraft from Laos but permit air activity by civilian planes.

And Air America is about as active as an airline can be. Indeed, it is one of the largest of U.S. lines, ranking just behind National and ahead of Northeast in the number of its planes and personnel.

Last year Air America carried 11,000 passengers, 16,000 refugees, and 6,000 tons of cargo. It also dropped \$4 million worth of rice to 150,000 refugees in Laos, and flew in several hundred Thai troops to help defend the Long Cheng outpost against Communist attack.

More to the clandestine point, the airline is available to drop individual agents behind the North Vietnamese lines in Laos—and pick them up when their mission is completed.

It has also been used by the CIA in Vietnam to fly out high-

level Viet Cong prisoners, and by the Green Berets to supply Montagnard mercenaries.

Well-informed observers believe that Air America has gone even further: That it regularly picks up agents in North Vietnam, that it puts U.S. Special Forces teams into Laos, that it parachutes infiltrators into Cambodia, and that it flies intelligence missions along the Chinese coast.

All this, and private enterprise, too. For Air America is part of a complex corporate organization, headed by the Pacific Corp., with headquarters in Washington, D.C. Its president is George A. Doole Jr., 60, a large, amiable ex-Pan American pilot who has a special sort of used-car salesman laugh as he avoids answering questions about his organization's ties to the CIA.

"What we do," he says, "is best described as utility flying. We carry people and things—whatever the customer has for us. A lot of romance gets around about our activities, but they're much more routine than you would think."

Air America is an offspring of Civil Air Transport (CAT), the company formed by Gen. Claire Chennault and some of his Flying Tigers after World War II.

In its early days, during the Chinese revolution, CAT did a brisk business flying relief supplies into China—and fallen war lords and their loot out to safety. Later Chennault sold out, and since then the line has been involved in most of the wars in Southeast Asia. It ferried supplies into the French in Vietnam in the '50s and has

been supplying anti-Communist forces in Laos at least since 1962.

Nowadays, Air America uses twin-engine Volpar Beechcrafts and Swiss-built Pilatus Porters. It has about 150 of them and some 600 pilots to do the flying.

Some of the executives like to say the pilots are recruited mostly among civilian crop dusters, Alaskan bush pilots, and similar figures from the seat-of-the-pants flying era. Actually, most are service veterans, and in some cases even their "veteran" status is in doubt. Pilots have moved directly from the Air Force into Air America and then back into the service again. Some have even been given U.S. decorations—albeit in private ceremonies—for their heroic performances while serving in the private organization.

The heroism is often very real. Pilots have been killed on missions, have been captured, executed, or simply disappeared. They earn their relatively high pay—up to \$25,000 a year, untaxed.

Many of them fly for the money, but perhaps more do it for the adventure—or simply for the joy of flying without having to obey the bureaucratic rules imposed on military pilots. And some look upon it as simply another job.

Lanky, 49-year-old Clyde Morehouse, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, spends a good portion of his time ferrying Laotian officers to remote outposts in the hills—and manages to seem bored by it all.

"Once you've seen a couple of these mountain valleys, you've seen them all," he says.

Into Laos

Frequently, the aircraft have been mobbed by panicky Meo tribesmen, anxious to escape from a village before the arrival of Communist troops. When this happens, the pilot pulls up the ladder and batten down the aircraft until things quiet down on the landing strip.

"These men are highly experienced professionals," says one executive. "They fly 8 to 10 hours a day over mostly uncharted mountains with almost no navigational aids. They face slick landing strips, treacherous approach winds, rough terrain, bad weather in the rainy seasons, and blinding fog in the dry seasons."

Mostly, however, the men who run Air America play down the drama, along with the CIA connections.

"We operate on a you-call-we-haul basis," says the line's general manager in Vientiane, James A. Cunningham Jr. "We don't go into details. We don't ask for credentials."

And wordlessly he gestures toward a placard emblazoned with Air America's motto: "Anything. Anytime. Anywhere—Professionally."

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