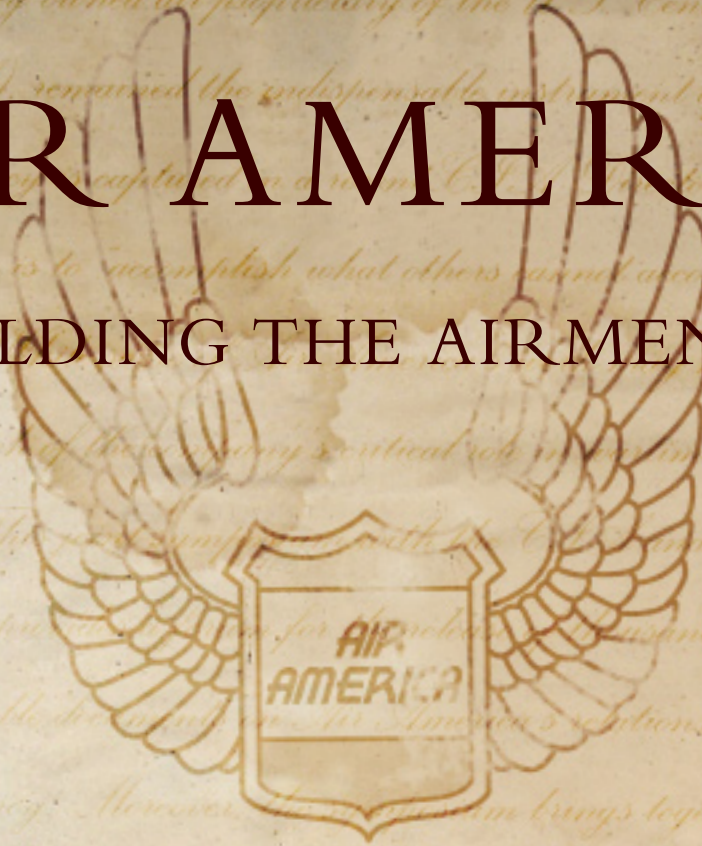


# AIR AMERICA

## UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND



### FLIGHT LOG

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*Quietly and courageously throughout the long and difficult Vietnam War, Air America, a secretly owned air proprietary of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), remained the indispensable instrument of U.S. covert military missions. This log is a testament to the Agency's mission is to accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others do not. The log is a testament to the Agency's ability to accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others do not. The log is a testament to the Agency's ability to accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others do not.*

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The Historical Collections Division (HCD) of the Office of Information Management Services is responsible for executing the CIA's Historical Review Program. This program seeks to identify, collect, and review for possible release to the public significant historical information. The mission of HCD is to:

- Provide an accurate, objective understanding of the information and intelligence that has helped shape the foundation of major US policy decisions.
- Improve access to lessons learned, presenting historical material to emphasize the scope and context of past actions.
- Improve current decision-making and analysis by facilitating reflection on the impacts and effects arising from past decisions,
- Uphold Agency leadership commitments to openness, while protecting the national security interests of the US,
- Provide the American public with valuable insight into the workings of their Government.



The History Staff in the CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence fosters understanding of the Agency's history and its relationship to today's intelligence challenges by communicating instructive historical insights to the CIA workforce, other US Government agencies, and the public. CIA historians research topics on all aspects of Agency activities and disseminate their knowledge through publications, courses, briefings, and Web-based products. They also work with other Intelligence Community historians on publication and education projects that highlight interagency approaches to intelligence issues. Lastly, the CIA History Staff conducts an ambitious program of oral history interviews that are invaluable for preserving institutional memories that are not captured in the documentary record.



## The History of Aviation Collection at The University of Texas at Dallas

The symposium, "Air America: Upholding the Airmen's Bond," comes on the heels of a decades-long effort to declassify approximately 10,000 CIA documents on the airline. These papers—many of which have never been seen by the public or scholars outside of the CIA—will join the History of Aviation Collection (HAC) at the Eugene McDermott Library at The University of Texas at Dallas.

It is a special honor that the Civil Air Transport (CAT) and Air America associations, whose members are former employees of the airline and their relatives, asked the CIA to give these papers to UT Dallas. The decision reflects the strong relationship that already exists between the CAT and Air America associations and the library's Special Collections staff. In 1985 the HAC became the official repository of the Civil Air Transport/Air America Archives and CAT/Air America survivors raised \$15,000 for a large memorial plaque featuring the names of the 240 employees who lost their lives as civilians during their service in Southeast Asia. In 1987 the plaque was dedicated at McDermott Library during a solemn ceremony.

The History of Aviation Collection is considered one of the finest research archives on aviation history in the U.S. It comprises:

- 18,000-20,000 cataloged books
- 4,000-plus magazine and periodical titles
- 500,000 photographs and negatives
- 2,000 films
- 4,000 boxes of archived materials

In 1963 George Haddaway, founder and managing editor of Flight magazine, donated

his files and a collection of rare first edition aviation books to UT Austin. In 1978 the million-item collection of Vice Admiral Charles E. Rosendahl was added to the HAC but facilities in Austin were inadequate to properly hold it. The collection moved to UT Dallas because it had considerable space in its new McDermott Library.

In an effort to relieve the library's Special Collections of its growing artifacts and to provide better public access, UT Dallas made a long-term loan of most of the Rosendahl artifacts to launch the Frontiers of Flight Museum at Love Field in Dallas.

The prominence of the Rosendahl holdings attracted members of the CAT/Air America associations to select the HAC for their official archives and memorial. This prestige further boosted the HAC's significance and research value to students and scholars and prompted additional significant donations.

Upon the death of WWII hero Gen. James H. "Jimmy" Doolittle in 1993, the library received his personal correspondence, film and photographs and copies of his scientific research papers, as well as his desk, chair, uniform, and Medal of Honor. This represents the only major collection of the general's memorabilia and personal files outside federal facilities such as the Library of Congress.

Now with the newly declassified CIA documents, the History of Aviation Collection has strengthened its position as holding the premier archive on Civil Air Transport and Air America.



The Airmen's Bond  
 Keith Woodcock  
 Donated Courtesy of the Air America Association Board

The Airmen's Bond depicts the heroism of an Air America UH-34D crew conducting the rescue of two US Air Force A1E attack aircraft pilots. Overhead, a "Raven" forward air controller flying an O-1 observation plane directs two Air America-piloted T-28Ds in strafing runs against advancing Communist forces. The rescue takes place on the Plaine des Jarres, a critical Communist supply route in the high plateau of north-central Laos. From 1964 to 1965, when the US military had few SAR aircraft in the region, Air America rescued 21 American pilots.

## AIR AMERICA: UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND

Quietly and courageously throughout the long and difficult Vietnam War, Air America, a secretly owned air proprietary of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), remained the indispensable instrument of CIA's clandestine mission. This legacy is captured in a recent CIA Director's statement that the Agency's mission is to "accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others cannot go." While some of Air America's work may never be publicly acknowledged, much of the company's critical role in wartime rescue missions can now be revealed. This joint symposium with the CIA and The University of Texas at Dallas provides a forum for the release of thousands of pages of heretofore unavailable documents on Air America's relationship with the Central Intelligence Agency.

Moreover, the symposium brings together many Air America veterans, a number of men rescued by Air America, and the CIA "customers" who often placed their lives and missions in the hands of this once-secret air proprietary.

Air America crews were not required to monitor military emergency radio calls, fly to the location of military personnel in distress, or place their lives at risk of enemy ground-fire and possible capture. They received no extra compensation for rescue work and sometimes lost wages for their efforts. However, in their flying community it was enough to know that a downed aviator was in trouble and that airmen should always come to the aid of other airmen. It was simply the Airmen's Bond.

**PRE-FLIGHT CHECKLIST**



**31 January 1947**  
CAT makes its first official flight. A C-47 piloted by Frank Hughes and Doug Smith takes off from Shanghai to Canton.

**16 January 1950**  
The city of Mengtze, China falls to Communist forces. Bob Buol, Jose Jawbert and Lincoln Sun are captured.

**10 July 1950**  
CAT Incorporated (CATI) and Airdale Incorporated are organized under the laws of the State of Delaware. Airdale Incorporated was to be a holding company for CAT Incorporated.

**15 September 1950**  
CAT begins Operation Booklift, a massive airlift operation in Korea to support UN forces

**26 March 1959**  
Air America, Incorporated created by change of name of CAT Incorporated.

**February 1961**  
Air America directed to take over United States Marine Corps operations in Udorn, Thailand.

**9 March 1961**  
President John F. Kennedy directs the CIA to run a secret war in Laos. Air America becomes intimately involved.

**August 1966**  
LS 85 established. Located on top of Phou Pha Thi mountain, the United States set up a Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) station used to guide air strikes on North Vietnam.

**June 1971**  
Battle for Skyline Ridge begins. Air America airlifts troops, supplies, and conducts Search and Rescue missions.

**17 December 1971**  
Plaine des Jarres (PDI) falls.

**1 March 1975**  
North Vietnam launches Campaign 275, the all out invasion of the Central Highlands. Within two weeks, South Vietnam President Thieu orders the Highlands abandoned.

**23 March 1975**  
Air America evacuates key personnel from Hue and Quang Nhai.

**28 March 1975**  
Evacuation of Da Nang begins.

**21 April 1975**  
South Vietnamese President Thieu resigns.

**28 April 1975**  
North Vietnamese offensive against Saigon begins with an air strike on Tan Son Nhut air base.

**29 April 1975**  
Ambassador Martin orders the emergency evacuation of Saigon. Air America helicopters evacuate personnel to aircraft carriers off shore throughout the day. The last helicopter out, piloted by Robert Caron with crew member O. B. Harnage, takes off from atop the Pittman Hotel.

**5 May 1975**  
CIA Director William Colby stated: "The withdrawal from Vietnam draws to a conclusion Air America's operational activities ... Air America appropriately named has served its country well!"

[1947]

**1 March 1949**

According to Aviation Week, CAT is the world's second largest air cargo carrier.

**6 May 1953**

CAT begins a six week emergency drop to support French troops in French Indochina.

**September 1960**

Air America begins airlift to General Phoumi at Savannakhet, Laos, flying in 1,000 tons a month.

**20 December 1960**

Fourteen USMC H-34 helicopters delivered to Air America.

**2-5 August 1965**

Gulf of Tonkin Incident

**28 April 1967**

Second defense of Lima Site 36.

**8 September 1948**

CAT inaugurates its first scheduled flight from Shanghai to Nanking-Wuchang-Chengchow-Sian-Lanchow.

**24 September 1948**

CAT's first international flight. A C-46 airlifts 4,482 pounds of tin from Kunming to Haiphong.

**29 November 1952**

Norman Schwartz and Robert Snoddy are shot down and killed while flying a covert mission over China to pick up a Chinese Agent.

**22 May 1964**

T-28 program begins. Air America pilots fly Laotian T-28s in support of Search and Rescue operations.

**November 1964**

First large-scale search and rescue effort of the Indochina war.

**12 January 1968**

Air America's first and only air-to-kill. Four North Vietnamese AN-2 Colts approached Site 85. Two of the aircraft attacked while the other two circled off in the distance. An Air America Bell 212 was asked to assist. Faster than the Colts, the Air America helicopter flown by Ted Moore, flew next to one of the aircraft while his flight mechanic, Glenn Woods, fired on the AN-2 with his AK-47. After downing the first plane they caught up to the second plane, shooting it down in the same manner.

**11 March 1968**

Lima Site 85 falls. Air America helicopter crews fly to the site repeatedly to evacuate personnel.

**Mid-December 1974**

The North Vietnamese launches a winter-spring offensive against Phuoc Long Province to test the United States willingness to respond to this peace agreement violation.

**2 June 2001**

Director, Central Intelligence George Tenet issues a commendation to Air America personnel.

[2001]



AIR AMERICA

UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND

# AIR AMERICA TIMELINE



## AIR AMERICA FACTS

- In 1970, Air America had 80 airplanes and was "The World's Most Shot at Airline."
- Air America lost 240 pilots and crew members to hostile fire.
- Captain Weldon "Big" Bigony, a native of Big Spring, Texas, was one of the first pilots hired by CAT.
- In July 1950 the CIA formed the Pacific Corporation (not its original name) and a month later purchased CAT to use in clandestine missions to fight communism in the Asia theater. The price was under a million dollars—a real bargain for a company with a book value of three or four times that amount.
- Before the fall of Dien Bien Phu to the Viet Minh on 7 May 1954, CAT pilots flew 682 airdrop missions to the beleaguered French troops.
- Following the signing of the Geneva Accord on 21 July 1954, it also supplied C-46s for Operation Cognac, during which they evacuated nearly 20,000 civilians from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.
- During 1970, Air America airdropped or landed 46 million pounds of food stuffs—mainly rice—in Laos. Helicopter flight time reached more than 4,000 hours a month in the same year. Air America crews transported tens of thousands of troops and refugees.
- In Vietnam, according to Robbins, AAM had about 40 aircraft and served about 12,000 passengers a month, among whom were USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) people, missionaries, military personnel, correspondents, government officials and nurses.
- Air America took on a greater and greater burden of support for military operations, as reflected in its contracts with the Department of Defense, which increased from about \$18 million in 1972 to over \$41 million in 1973.
- During the final weeks of the war, AAM helicopter crews evacuated some 41,000



American civilians, "customers," diplomatic personnel, AAM personnel, and South Vietnamese civilians from Saigon before advancing North Vietnamese communist forces arrived.

- Air America aircraft carried all sorts of cargo and equipment, food, mail, cement, roofing material, sedated animals, and gasoline.

### INTRODUCED IN 1964: SAR MISSIONS FOR THE US MILITARY

The first occasion to rescue a downed US military pilot came on 6 June 64, when US Navy Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann was shot down in his RF-8A Crusader from the USS Kitty Hawk over the north-eastern corner of the Plaine des Jarres, that is near Khang Khay in the Ban Pha Ka (LS-40) area.

- With North Vietnamese troops more and more pressing their invasion of the South in the early seventies, Air America was ever more called upon to help evacuate refugees. As the South Vietnamese Minister of Labor said in his Citation dated 12 June 72: "In addition, during the past two years, Air America has participated in major refugee movements. A total of 14,717 Vietnamese refugees who were in Cambodia during the year 1970, and subsequently arrived in Vung Tau, were transported from Vung Tau by Air America to Bao Loc and Ham Tan, South Vietnam for relocation. Later, in 1972, Air America again participated in refugee movements. A total of 1,317 refugees were flown by Air America from Quang Tri to Phuoc Tuy, and 4,324 refugees were transported from Hue to Ban Me Thuot and Vung Tau City. Since that time additional relocations have been possible through the support rendered by Air America."

### EVACUATION FROM THE PITTMAN BUILDING

- The most famous evacuation flown by Air America on 29 April 75 was one from the Pittman Building at Saigon, although most people who saw the world famous photo taken by UPI photographer Hubert van Es probably thought that it was a US military helicopter on top of the US Embassy—it wasn't.



- At the end, during this dramatic evacuation of Saigon, more than 7,000 refugees — 1,373 Americans, 5,595 South Vietnamese, and 85 third-country nationals — were airlifted to the 40 ships of the U.S. fleet lying before the coast of South Vietnam.
- Air America's crews did a tremendous job in hauling more than 1,000 passengers to the Embassy, the DAO, or to the ships.
- Air America was supposed to have 28 helicopters that day, out of which six were stolen by Vietnamese, one had rocket damage, one out of service for an engine change, and four were conducting evacuations in Can Tho. David B. Kendall had to ditch his helicopter alongside the ship Blue Ridge.

## Symposium Overview

by Dr. Tim Castle

### THE WAR IN LAOS

When President Kennedy decided in 1961 to forcefully resist rising communist aggression against the remote but strategically located Kingdom of Laos, the CIA and Air America were ready. Flying in a mountainous land-locked country with few roads, continually shifting weather conditions and virtually no navigational aids, Air America crews routinely conducted hazardous resupply missions to hundreds of government outposts. This aerial lifeline provided essential assistance to the Royal Lao and U.S.-directed forces battling North Vietnamese and Pathet communist troops.

Air America crews became expert in the terrain and unique flying conditions of Laos, but they were not immune to enemy ground fire and the perils of being shot down over enemy-controlled territory. They soon created their own search and rescue (SAR) force, comprised of UH-34D helicopters and T-28D attack aircraft, and began to respond to their own emergencies. As more U.S. military aircraft began flying missions over Laos (and later North Vietnam), Air America also took on the primary responsibility for rescuing all downed U.S. aviators. In 1964-1965, when the U.S. military had few SAR aircraft in the region, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) reports that Air America rescued 21 American pilots.

Although the USAF did not continue to publish further statistics on Air America rescues and the CIA never tracked such data, anecdotal information and occasional formal letters of commendation suggest that Air America crews saved scores of American airmen. One such letter, written by Major General DeWitt

R Searles, USAF, stated "I wish to convey my personal appreciation and commendation to two of your helicopter crews for their exceptional aerial skill in the rescue of the crew members of an RF-4C, Bullwhip 26, on 20 January 1972." General Searles went on to name Lee Andrews, Nicki Fillipi, Ron Anderson, John Fonberg, William Phillips, and Bob Noble for their "truly outstanding" efforts. "In spite of a known 37MM high threat area and small arms fire," said the general, "these crew members disregarded their own personal safety to perform a heroic rescue. The quick response to the distress call and actual recovery in near record time were unquestionably instrumental in saving the lives of the USAF RF-4C crew members."

In order to more fully understand these events, Donald Boecker, a U.S. Navy pilot shot down over northern Laos in 1965, will share the stage with one of his rescuers, Air America pilot Sam Jordan.

In early 1968 Air America pilot Ken Wood and his flight mechanic Loy "Rusty" Irons carried out one of the most unusual and daring rescues of the entire Vietnam War. Project "Heavy Green" was a top secret U.S. Air Force radar bombing facility located at Lima Site 85, a mile-high Laotian mountaintop a mere 120 miles from downtown Hanoi. The military program was manned by sixteen Air Force technicians working under cover as civilian employees of the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation. On the evening of 10 March 1968 the North Vietnamese launched a furious mortar, rocket, and artillery attack on Site 85's CIA operations area and the Air Force facilities. Concurrently, a sapper team climbed the steep western cliffs

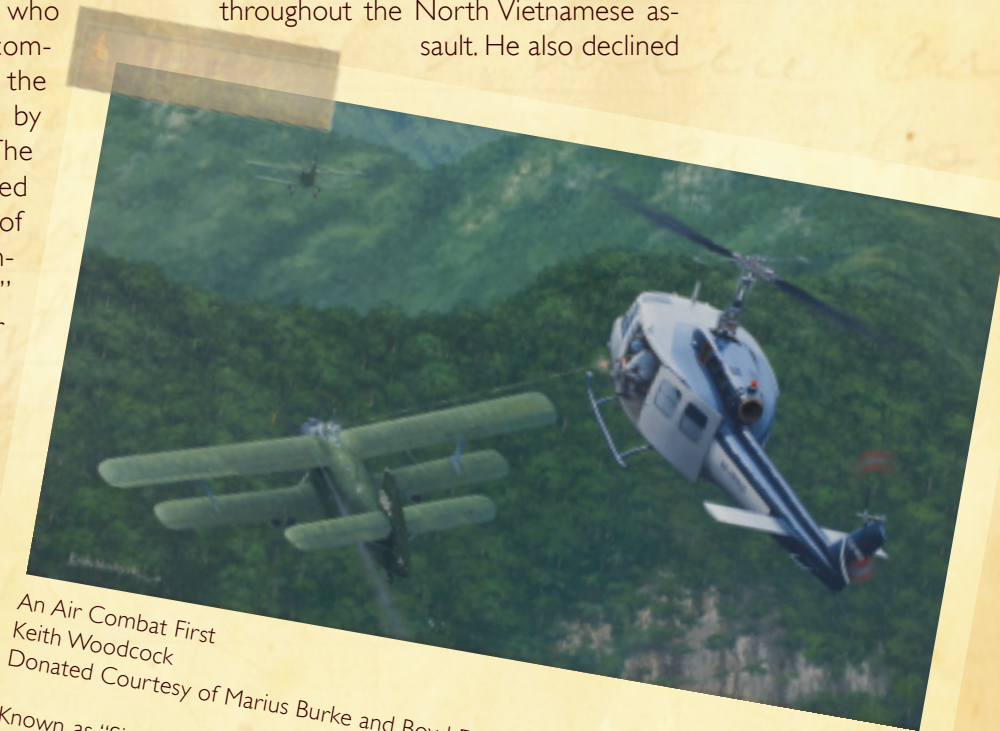
just below the radar buildings. In a pre-dawn attack the sappers surrounded the technicians and used automatic weapons fire and rocket-propelled grenades in an attempt to destroy the facility and kill all of the Americans.

Wood and Irons, responding to a signal from a military survival radio, flew to Site 85 and courageously hovered over a group of radar technicians trapped on the side of the cliff below the radar facility. Irons quickly dropped a hoist to the men and pulled them aboard the unarmed and unarmored Huey helicopter. After forty-one years of secrecy, the CIA is now acknowledging Air America's role in the rescue of the "Heavy Green" members - Stanley Sliz, Richard Etchberger, Willie Husband, and John Daniel. Etchberger, who heroically defended his injured comrades until they were placed on the helicopter, was mortally wounded by enemy fire as the Huey withdrew. The communist assault on Site 85 resulted in the single greatest ground loss of U.S. Air Force personnel for the entire Vietnam War. Ten "Heavy Green" technicians remain unaccounted for from this attack.

Chief Master Sergeant Richard Etchberger was secretly and posthumously honored in late 1968 with the Air Force Cross. In a recent development, however, the Pentagon is reviewing Etchberger's actions for possible award of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

CIA also acknowledges the actions of two paramilitary officers at Site 85. Howard Freeman and John Woody Spence, working and living at an operations area sev-

eral hundred yards below the radar buildings, faced the communist barrage with great courage and determination. At first dawn, heedless to the presence of enemy soldiers and the continuing risk of mortars, rockets, and artillery fire, Freeman led a rescue party of Hmong irregulars to the radar facility. While searching for the technicians he came under enemy gunfire and suffered a serious leg wound. Armed only with a shotgun and some phosphorous grenades, Freeman defended his team until forced to withdraw. In honor of his heroic actions Howard Freeman was awarded CIA's Intelligence Star. At the operations area Woody Spence suffered a severe hearing loss during the bombardment, but continued to maintain critical radio communications throughout the North Vietnamese assault. He also declined



An Air Combat First  
Keith Woodcock

Donated Courtesy of Marius Burke and Boyd D. Mesecher

Known as "Site 85," the US radar facility perched atop a 5,800-foot mountain in northeast Laos—less than 150 miles from Hanoi—was providing critical and otherwise unavailable all-weather guidance to American F-105 fighter-bombers flying strike missions against Communist supply depots, airfields, and railroad yards in North Vietnam. An Air Combat First captures one daring action by Air America pilot Ted Moore and flight mechanic Glenn Woods responding to a North Vietnamese air attack on the site which gained them—and Air America—the distinction of having shot down an enemy fixed-wing aircraft from a helicopter—a singular aerial victory in the entire history of the Vietnam War.

evacuation from his post until sensitive equipment and documents were properly safeguarded. Mr. Spence was honored with the CIA's Certificate of Distinction.

Air America flight mechanic Rusty Irons, former CIA paramilitary officer Woody Spence, and Heavy Green technician John Daniel will provide their recollections of this singular rescue.

The Laos panel provides a remarkable opportunity to hear from both perspectives—the rescuers and the rescued.

#### THE FALL OF SOUTH VIETNAM

The swift collapse of the South Vietnamese government in March and April 1975 caught many by surprise. According to an official U.S. Air Force history "USAF airlift planes and personnel had long since been withdrawn from South Vietnam, and the only reliable airlift available in the country was Air America. The helicopters and smaller aircraft of this company were invaluable for removing people from remote locations." While all of their work in South Vietnam was extremely challenging in this time of great political and military chaos—manifested in ever decreasing levels of security—Air America's efforts in Da Nang and Saigon are especially noteworthy.

"Da Nang was a shambles when we arrived," recalled Air America pilot Marius Burke. "Aircraft, tanks, trucks, etc., were abandoned all over the area. The aircraft apparently were out of fuel." No matter, Burke and other Air America personnel got down to the risky business of moving evacuees to safe areas. Operating out of perilous landing sites and hand-pumping fuel from 50-gallon drums into helicopters that could not be shut down, Air America responded to

increasingly urgent requests from CIA and State Department officers. All the while Air America personnel were constantly receiving a mix of pleas, verbal threats, and sometimes gunfire from agitated South Vietnamese government officials, military personnel, and local citizens determined to find a way out of the city.

In Saigon, the final refuge for all fleeing the North Vietnamese invasion, Air America faced enormous challenges. Initial evacuation planning did not anticipate the almost total disintegration of the Vietnamese security forces and the chaos that quickly engulfed the city and panicked the local and expatriate population.

CIA officers, determined to get "at risk" Vietnamese out of Saigon, directed some of these individuals to drive out into the countryside. One Air America pilot described 28 April 1975 as follows, "Our customer 'Max' rode with us. Our mission was lifting Vietnamese from various locations in the Vietnam Delta to a U.S. Navy ship located just offshore of the mouth of the branch of the Mekong river on which Can Tho is located. Our method as arranged by the customer was to extract people from various random pickup points. This method worked very well and attracted little, if any, attention."

On 29 April 1975 an Air America helicopter pilot spent the entire day shuttling passengers to various evacuation points. Arriving at the Embassy tennis courts his aircraft was filled with people and he flew to the USS Blue Ridge, "offloaded, refueled and went back to Saigon whereupon I landed at the Embassy roof and picked up another load heading for the Blue Ridge. Arriving at Blue Ridge it had a full deck

so I was landed on a ship called Fireball. I returned to Saigon after refueling on Fireball and picked up another Embassy roof load this time going to the Fireball again and refueling." The pilot made many more roundtrips that day and finally landed on the USS Duluth at about 1900.

Air America fixed wing aircraft were also a critical means of evacuation. But the ever present danger of being overwhelmed by desperate Vietnamese civilians and military personnel required skill, courage, and sometimes deception. A C-47 pilot reported that on 29 April 1975 he departed Tan Son Nhut airfield with 33 passengers (Air America employees and families, mixed VN, Chinese, American and Filipino) plus a crew of two." Shortly after takeoff a fire developed in the right engine and the aircraft was forced to land at Con Son island. Fourteen of the passengers were then ferried by Air America helicopters to nearby ships. Surrounded by hordes of Vietnamese arriving from the mainland, the crew decided "it was not feasible to top off our fuel due to the possibility of being mobbed by VN evacuees if the airplane appeared to be preparing for departure. With the aircraft apparently disabled no one bothered us." Eventually the aircraft was repaired and, with a speedy departure, was soon on its way to Brunei with the remaining Air America employees.

One of the most iconic photographs of the Vietnam War was taken on 29 April 1975, just hours before the jubilant North Vietnamese Army seized the South Vietnamese capital. The image, captured by Dutch photographer Hubert Van Es, shows scores of people climbing a narrow wooden ladder in the frantic hope that they would be rescued by a small helicopter perched on a rooftop

just above them. Standing near the helicopter a tall man leans forward with his hand extended to the frantic crowd. Released by United Press International with a mistaken caption that identified the location as the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, the picture instantly became a withering symbol of America's ignominious departure from Indochina. In fact, the Bell 204 helicopter belonged to Air America. The landing pad, one of thirteen rooftop evacuation points selected in consultations between Air America and a Special Working Group at the U.S. Embassy, was located atop CIA employee living quarters at the Pittman Apartments on Gia Long Street. And, the man reaching out to those on the ladder was CIA air operations officer O.B. Harnage.

Through all the years of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, Air America pilots and their support personnel accepted the grave danger and extreme flying challenges with great alacrity. Called upon one last time in the final days before the collapse of the South Vietnamese government, Air America personnel braved the Saigon skyline to carry thousands of evacuees to the safety of nearby countries and U.S. ships in the South China Sea. They conducted themselves in the finest tradition of their motto "Anything, Anytime, Anywhere, Professionally." In praise of their efforts, U.S. Air Force investigators concluded "Only God knows the numbers of sorties which Air America flew in the final month in Vietnam. [We]... estimate that over 1,000 were flown, perhaps many more."

The South Vietnam panel includes Air America pilots Marius Burke and Ed Adams, former CIA officer Robert Grealy, and noted academic and USAF combat rescue pilot, Dr. Joe Guilmartin.



## The Airmen's Bond: A Rescue Pilot's Perspective

by Dr. Joe Guilmartin

Professor, Ohio State University

As a helicopter pilot, I was involved in Air Force rescue operations in Southeast Asia very near the beginning. I flew my first combat sortie over Laos in early October of 1965, a staging flight by a pair of H-43s to Lima 20 where we refueled, then on to Lima 36 north of the Plaine des Jarres where we pulled alert for two days. Our billeting arrangements were provided courtesy of Air America and were organized by the Customer, Mike, a tall rawboned fellow whose personal weapon of choice was a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle), a fact I discovered one afternoon when he went charging off into the jungle to recover an Air America Helio pilot who was said to have gone down short of the runway—incorrectly as it turned out. Mike also provided local intelligence. Air America pilots and kickers gave us tips on the weather and flying techniques to deal with it. Our logistic support was also provided by Air America: fifty-five gallon drums of JP-4 brought in by Caribou and an occasional maintenance man and replacement parts flown up from Udon by Porter or Helio when our helicopters broke.

The H-43 was a marginal operation: no armor, no armament beyond our personal M-16s, no self-sealing tanks and a radius of action of only seventy-five miles. It was good to know that other Americans were flying in our area of responsibility.

Mercifully, I was never called upon to attempt a combat rescue in the H-43 before my unit received its definitive equipment, Sikorski HH-3E "Jolly Greens" with self-sealing tanks, a thousand pounds of Titanium armor plate and a hydraulic rescue hoist with 250 feet of cable. We still had no armament beyond our personal M-16s, but at some point the powers that be provided us with the services of an Air Commando A-1 squadron at Udon to provide search capability and fire support, as indeed they did and to good effect. I and my fellows were well aware that our Air America comrades-in-arms had made combat rescues, above and beyond their contractual obligations with at least nominally unarmed H-34s and none of the advantages that our specialized equipment gave us.

Whatever problems Air America had, a lack of aggressiveness in coming to the aid of a distressed airman was not among them. I have vivid recollections of a pickup in late 1965 toward the end of dry monsoon. I and my crew were "high bird"—backup helicopter; we always committed in pairs, another advantage Air America rarely enjoyed—when a Royal Lao Air Force T-28 pilot bailed out off the northeast end of the Plaine des Jarres. I watched with mounting frustration as the low bird aircraft commander dithered, refusing to go in for the pickup before our A-1s

arrived without specific authorization. The survivor had gone down in an area of low hostile activity; but as we had learned, orbiting aircraft soon attract the enemy. While I was screwing up my guts to jump my chain of command and commit, an Air America H-34 appeared out of nowhere, swooped in for the pickup, made it, and departed, no fuss, no muss, no bother.

I left Southeast Asia in July of 1966, not to return for another nine and a half years. In the interim, I taught combat rescue tactics as an instructor pilot and in the classroom and wrote about them as an analyst and historian. Along the way I came to the conclusion that in terms of demands on pilot and crew, combat rescue is the limiting case in aerial warfare. Raw courage and superior stick and rudder skill—or should I say cyclic and collective skill?—are essential, but not enough. Unlike delivering ordnance or cargo, the objective is human life, and contributing one more downed aircraft to the enemy scorecard, however admirable in terms of courage, is counter-productive in the extreme. At the same time, a failure of will or excess of caution that leads to a missed pickup is just as bad, particularly in its psychological impact and never more so than when the objective of the failed rescue was a fellow aviator. The successful rescue crew must walk a fine line between courage and caution.

The conceptual challenges of combat rescue are daunting as well. Beyond keeping on top of the aircraft—better still, ahead of the aircraft—in four-dimensional space, the fourth dimension being time, the rescue crew must keep apprised of the situation on the ground: the survivor or survivors' medical condition, their proximity to enemy forces and the capabilities and limitations of those forces, not to mention mundane but essential pa-

rameters such as the wind, density altitude and terrain factors. That is surely the limiting case in situational awareness and span of control. Finally, the rescue crew rarely has the luxury of knowing critical mission parameters, including the survivor's location, prior to launch. More often than not, planning and execution are of necessity done on the fly. Success requires a special kind of airmanship, one that Air America pilots, crews and support personnel repeatedly demonstrated.

“Anything, Anywhere,  
Anytime, Professionally.”

—Air America's Slogan

I next operated in the same airspace as Air America during the final hours of the Vietnam War, in the 29 April 1975 Saigon evacuation. To make good the lack of Marine Corps H-53s—one of two CH-53 squadrons that participated in the 12 April Phnom Penh evacuation had returned to Hawaii—and twelve Air Force H-53s, ten Special Operations CH-53s and two Rescue HH-53s were deployed from Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, to the attack carrier USS Midway. As the senior Jolly Green, I led the two HH-53s.

Backing up a month and a half, after the war in Laos had closed down in 1974, Air America retained a presence in South Vietnam, notably in the form of some twelve UH-1B/D "Hueys" plus an additional sixteen H models on loan from the Army operating in support of the ICCS (International Commission for Control and Supervision), the Embassy, the CIA and USAID. That wasn't much given the enormity of the task that was to be thrust upon Air America. More critical still, when



the situation turned critical, Air America had only seventy-seven pilots, including fixed-wing pilots, in country.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in early March as the South Vietnamese military position crumbled in the face of a massive North Vietnamese invasion backed by heavy armored forces operating under an umbrella of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and anti-aircraft artillery, Air America Huey crews helped to evacuate US personnel from locations up country in the face of conditions that approached total chaos. The extraction of the last Americans from Da Nang on 29 March was particularly perilous. It was clear at this point, or should have been, that South Vietnam was doomed and that the re-

maining Americans and friendly foreign nationals would have to be evacuated, along with South Vietnamese deemed to be particularly at risk in the event of a communist victory. Concrete plans had been undertaken in support of a helicopter evacuation using Marine Corps helicopters to shuttle evacuees from the main collection point in the old

MACV compound at Tan Son Nhut Airport to US Navy ships standing off the

coast. Potential evacuees were billeted in scattered locations around Saigon, and Air America personnel working in conjunction with military members of the Defense Attaché Staff had marked out rooftop helipads suitable for use by Air America Hueys as a means of moving evacuees to the collection point. The problem was the Ambassador. The Honorable Graham Martin, utterly committed to the South Vietnamese cause, exhausted and in ill health, obstinately refused to abandon hope in a negotiated settlement and resisted taking overt steps in support of an evacuation to avoid causing panic. Even after the South Vietnamese Army had fought and lost its final battle, at Xuan Loc on the eastern approaches to Saigon, on 20 April, the Ambassador equivocated. Not until late in the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>, in the wake of a North Vietnamese air strike on Tan Son Nhut Airport the day before and an avalanche of communist rockets that hit Tan Son Nhut shortly after midnight, did the Ambassador give the order to execute.

Aside from headlines and photographs, the Saigon Evacuation received only cursory attention from the American news media. David Butler of NBC Radio was the only American media bureau chief in Saigon when the city fell, and while his account of the evacuation is both accurate and exemplary it did not appear in print for ten years.<sup>2</sup> Media coverage left the impression that while the evacuation was chaotic—photos of Vietnamese climbing over concertina wire to get into the Embassy for

evacuation were coin of the realm—it was unopposed.

It was not, as testified to by a widely-published but inadequately-captioned photo showing a Soviet-manufactured SA-7 heat-seeking missile passing through the rotor plane of a Marine Corps CH-53. From my own recollection of radio traffic at the time, confirmed by subsequent research, a North Vietnamese 57mm anti-aircraft battery was firing at the incoming stream of helicopters from offshore Navy decks at around 1500, only to be silenced by a strike by a flight of Air Force "Iron Hand", anti-radiation F-4 fighter-bombers. There were three active SA-2 radar-guided surface-to-air missile sites to the north and northeast of the city, and while they never fired, they were in place.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that the North Vietnamese infiltrated SA-7 teams into the city and at least a limited number of 12.7mm heavy machine guns on anti-aircraft mounts as well. I say this advisedly as Jolly Green gunners silenced at least two 12.7mm positions and perhaps three on our run in to the DAO compound at about 2130. Helicopters descending into the compound from the east were fired at throughout the operation by a 37mm battery to the west that, providentially, was unable to depress far enough for a successful engagement.

Into this cauldron stepped Air America, under circumstances that were anything but favorable. For openers, between communist rocket fire and an over-zealous fire marshal who relocated the only refueling truck, there was no fuel. In consequence, the Hueys were limited to



three to five shuttle runs between rooftop helipads and the DAO Compound or Embassy before flying out to sea to refuel on Navy ships. Of twenty-eight Hueys that should have been available, six had been stolen by Vietnamese, one was hit by rocket fire, one was out of service for an engine change and four had been sent to evacuate Can Tho to the south. During the course of the day, accidents and mischance reduced the number of available Hueys to thirteen.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the day and into the evening—the Ambassador's delayed decision ensured that the evacuation would go on into the night—Air America Hueys flown by a single pilot shuttled across the city, carrying as many as a dozen evacuees in an aircraft rated for eight passengers. It was perhaps Air America's finest hour. Loading up evacuees, many of them panicked and of uncertain identity, from ad hoc pads, and in some cases unsurveyed rooftops, without any semblance of ground control entailed a constant risk of being overloaded or interference with the flight controls, and that was only the beginning. Nor was it all rotary wing: in early afternoon, an Air America supervisor brought out what he estimated as over 150 evacuees on a C-46, no doubt a veteran of the Hump airlift, dodging debris and abandoned aircraft on take off.

<sup>1</sup> William M. Leary, "Last Flights: Air America and the Collapse of South Vietnam", *The George Jalonick II and Dorothy Cockrell Jalonick Memorial Distinguished Lecture Series* (Dallas: The University of Texas at Dallas, August 13, 2005, published by the Special Collections Department of the Eugene McDermott Library), 3.

<sup>2</sup> David Butler, *The Fall of Saigon: Scenes from the Sudden End of a Long War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Author's recollection. On our initial run-in to the DAO compound at about 1500 hours, my RHAW (for Radar Homing and Warning) scope displayed radar emissions from three SA-2 sites, all well within range.

<sup>4</sup> Leary, *Last Flights*, 10-11.



Just how many evacuees made it out who would have been left behind were it not for Air America Huey crews and their support personnel is beyond reconstruction. The official total of evacuees brought out to the fleet by helicopter is 7,815, a figure that is surely low.<sup>5</sup> Of those evacuated by military helicopter, a substantial number would never have made it to the collection points without Air America. How many is a matter of speculation, but the number is surely well over a thousand and excludes those brought directly to Navy ships. It is perhaps fitting that the iconic photographic image of that awful occasion is that of an Air America Huey crew loading Vietnamese refugees from an improvised helipad atop the roof of the CIA deputy station chief's apartment.<sup>6</sup>

John F. Guilmartin, Jr.  
Columbus, Ohio



<sup>5</sup> Ray L. Bowers, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: Tactical Airlift* (Washington, DC: The Office of Air Force History, 1983), 644, n. 31. How the figure was derived is not specified, but was apparently on the basis of numbers reported to ABCCC (Airborne Battlefield Communications, Command and Control), the airborne control agency, by military helicopter pilots. If that is the case, it is surely low. As the evacuation progressed, frequencies became saturated and it was clear that ABCCC wasn't controlling. Many crews simply stopped reporting.

<sup>6</sup> Fox Butterfield with Kari Haskell, "Getting it Wrong in a Photo", *The New York Times* (April 23, 2000), 5.

## RESCUE FLIGHTS: EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE



AN-2 Throttle

On 12 January 1968, recognizing the threat posed by "Site 85," the People's Army of Vietnam vowed to destroy it. On 12 January 1968, four North Vietnamese AN-2 Colt biplanes headed for Site 85. One pair began low-level bombing and strafing passes while the other pair circled nearby. Air America pilot Ted Moore was flying an ammunition-supply run to the site in his unarmed UH-1D "Huey" helicopter when he saw the biplanes attacking and took chase of the first Colt. Flight mechanic Glenn Woods pulled out his AK-47 rifle and began firing at the lumbering biplane. The pursuit was relentless, continuing for more than 20 minutes until the second Colt (hit by ground fire) joined the first in an attempt to escape back into North Vietnam. Both attacking Colts suffered severe bullet damage and crashed before reaching the border. Fearing a similar fate, the two unengaged Colts retreated unharmful. This throttle is from one of the downed AN-2s recovered after the battle.

**Note:** Please see the DVD for a complete list of Expressions of Gratitude.

MEMORANDUM

June 10, 1972

TO: All American Employees of the Mission

FROM: The Ambassador *GMG*

I would like to share with you a letter that I received from our President:

May 19, 1972

Dear Mr. Ambassador:

The communist dry season offensive in Laos has been blunted this year, largely through the tireless efforts of your Mission. You have done a tremendous job under difficult conditions and I want to express my deep appreciation, on behalf of the American people, for the distinguished leadership you have displayed in this critical situation.

With warmest personal regards,

Sincerely,

Richard Nixon

I have written to the President:

June 8, 1972

Dear Mr. President:

Your most thoughtful and generous letter of May 19 addressed to me is a tribute to the men and women of this Mission who showed such devotion to duty during a very difficult five months.

It is therefore with great pride and gratitude to you, Mr. President, that I have taken the liberty of transmitting your views to the American members

2.

of the Mission, and to the employees of Air America and Continental Air Services who carried out with such gallantry their responsibilities to our government.

The vast majority of Americans in Laos are one hundred per cent behind all your efforts to achieve world peace. We admire your courage. All are proud to be Americans, and that you are our President.

Very respectfully,

G. McMurtrie Godley

AMB:GMGodley:jsw

11 MAR 1968

HEADQUARTERS  
UNITED STATES MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM  
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96222  
Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, CORDS

MACCORDS-MSD

28 FEB 1968

REC'D WAS MAR 8 1968

Mr. Merrill Hulse, Base Manager  
Air America, Incorporated  
Tan Son Nhut Airport  
Saigon, Vietnam

Dear Mr. Hulse:

I am taking this opportunity to express my appreciation to Air America for the exemplary performance of its personnel in making available crews and flying aircraft under extremely trying circumstances to support the United States Government during the recent Tet offensive.

I am certain that the effort put forth by your people in many cases was instrumental in saving lives and helped to turn the tide in our favor. I commend you highly for your efforts and thank you on behalf of CORDS for a job exceptionally well done.

Very truly yours,

*L. Wade Latham*  
L. WADE LATHAM  
ACofS, CORDS

*Received March 5, 1968*

MSDR (2) ✓  
VPTS  
VFFO  
VFLA  
SLC  
TC  
AVP

4 - 3/11/68

*on order*

FROM: Department of the Air Force  
Headquarters 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (PACAF)  
APO San Francisco 96237

REPLY TO ATTN OF: CC

8 September 1971

REC'D WAS SEP 20 1971

SUBJECT: Rescue of Downed F-4 Aircrew

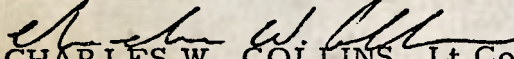
TO: Base Manager, Air America, Inc.  
c/o Air Force Liaison Officer  
Box 62, APO San Francisco 96237

1. On 2 September 1971, one of the aircrews of the 13th TFS "Panther Pack" received battle damage to their aircraft and crashed in a ball of flames. Fortunately, both crew members were able to eject prior to impact, but they were both injured. Incapacitated and helpless on the ground, in the northern part of the Plain of Jars in Laos, they were in imminent danger of capture or death from hostile forces surrounding them. Two Air America helicopter crews saved their lives by landing in the open field to pick them up, even though under enemy fire.
2. A Bell 205, crewed by Mr. Ted Cash, Mr. Wayne Lannin, and Mr. William Parker, rescued Captain Ron Fitzgerald, the Weapons System Officer of the fighter. Both Mr. Lannin and Mr. Parker risked their lives by exposing themselves directly to enemy fire to hoist the injured Captain Fitzgerald aboard the helicopter.
3. An H-34, piloted by Mr. Don Henthorn, landed to pick up Major Jim Compton, the Aircraft Commander of the downed fighter, while a crew member, Mr. Ernie Cortez risked his life by exposing himself to hostile ground fire to lift Major Compton into the helicopter.
4. The two helicopters took off in a hail of enemy fire and airlifted the injured Panthers to a landing site nearby where they were transferred to an Air America Porter aircraft. They were then airlifted to a staging base, where they were attended by a surgeon and subsequently were returned to Udorn RTAFB aboard an Air America C-123.
5. The deep gratitude felt by the 13th TFS towards the valiant Air America crews who saved our comrades is difficult to express. There is no doubt that their prompt, heroic action saved two lives that day. We will long remember and be grateful for their actions. We all hope that we may be of help if Air America crews ever face a similar test.

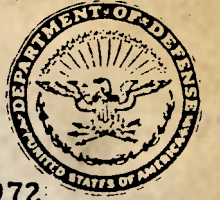
4 - 9/20/71

6. Letters are never as warm as a drink and a handshake. The 13th TFS, therefore, cordially invites Messrs. Cash, Lannin, Parker, Henthorn, and Cortez to be our guests at a going-away "Sawadee Party" for some of our men who are completing their combat tours in Southeast Asia. The party will be held on 18 September at 1900 hours in the main banquet room of the Udorn Officers' Open Mess. The "Panther Pack" is looking forward to thanking all of these men in person.

7. To all of the personnel of Air America, the 13th TFS "Panther Pack" sends a "Well Done" with admiration for the fine work done day after day in support of our allies in Southeast Asia. Keep up the good work!

  
CHARLES W. COLLINS, Lt Colonel, USAF  
Commander

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
HEADQUARTERS DEPUTY COMMANDER  
SEVENTH AIR FORCE/THIRTEENTH AIR FORCE, THAILAND (PACAF)  
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96237



22 Jan 1972

REPLY TO  
ATTN OF: CD

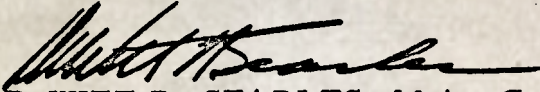
SUBJECT: Letter of Commendation

TO: Mr. John Ford  
Chief Pilot Helicopter  
Air America

1. I wish to convey my personal appreciation and commendation to two of your helicopter crews for their exceptional aerial skill in the rescue of the crew members of an RF-4C, Bullwhip 26, on 20 January 1972.

2. The efforts of Messrs Lee Andrews, Nicki Fillipi and Ron Anderson in AA Helicopter XWFPH, and John Fonberg, William Phillips and Bob Noble in AA Helicopter 8513F, were truly outstanding. In spite of a known 37MM high threat area and small arms fire, these crew members disregarded their own personal safety to perform a heroic recovery. The quick response to the distress call and actual recovery in near record time were unquestionably instrumental in saving the lives of the USAF RF-4C crew members.

3. The professional aerial skill and performance of an act beyond their call of duty most favorably reflect great credit on the dedication and high experience of your personnel.

  
DeWITT R. SEARLES, Major General  
Deputy Commander

Copy to: Mr. C. J. Abadie, Jr.  
Base Manager  
Air America

4 - 5/7/72

# AIR AMERICA

May 11, 1975

On 29 April 1975 Air America, Inc. was tasked to effect the evacuation of Saigon, Vietnam, a difficult and hazardous mission that required a maximum effort for all concerned.

I would like to convey at this time my personal thanks along with those of our various customers and the Board of Directors of Air America, Inc. for an outstandingly successful accomplishment of that mission.

The performance of our flight crew members again reflected what can be accomplished by a dedicated professional group acting together as individuals and as a team.

I realize that each and every one of you will be departing this Company in a very short time, but before doing so I want you to know as a member of that group that your participation in this humanitarian act stands out in the highest traditions of the American spirit. Again thanks for an outstanding job well done.

Sincerely,

*Paul C. Velte, Jr.*  
 Paul C. Velte, Jr.  
 Chairman of the Board of Directors  
 and  
 Chief Executive Officer

## FINAL FLIGHTS



|           |                                  |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| B03 LS236 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| B09 LS187 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| B11 LS241 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| B21 LS11  | UNFRIENDLY - DO NOT ALLEN OVERRY |
| B23 LS205 | CLOSED - UNFRIENDLY ACTIVITY     |
| LS111     | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| A30 LS195 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| A30 LS228 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| A30 LS174 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| A15 L61   | CLOSED - UNF ACTIVITY            |
| A21 LS186 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| A17 LS234 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| A22 LS179 | UNFRIENDLY                       |
| B19 LS-13 | UNFRIENDLY                       |

## Final Flights:

### Air America and the Collapse of South Vietnam, 1975

by William M. Leary

Air America had fallen on hard times as Vietnam welcomed the Year of the Rabbit at the beginning of 1975. The airline that had been secretly owned by the Central Intelligence Agency since 1950 was a far cry from the giant air complex of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1970, the airline operated a fleet of 146 aircraft that included Boeing 727s, DC-6s, C-46s, C-47s, C-123s, Twin-Beech Volpars, Pilatus Porters, Helio Couriers, and a variety of helicopters. It employed over 500 pilots, primarily in Southeast Asia. In June 1974, however Air America shut down its operations in Laos, where it had been serving as a paramilitary adjunct to the native forces that were fighting the CIA's "Secret War." Three months later, the CIA confirmed an earlier decision to sell the air complex, setting the date for its demise as June 30, 1975. Morale among Air America employees was at low ebb, as pilots and technical personnel left in large numbers, anticipating the company's closure. Meanwhile, flying continued, primarily helicopter operations for the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) -the agency created to monitor the peace agreement of 1973 -and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). But the end was clearly in sight, both for the airline and for the country. In the summer of 1974, the U.S. House of Representatives had voted a sharp reduction in aid to South Vietnam. Shortly thereafter, President Richard M. Nixon had been forced to resign in the wake of the Watergate scandal. An evacuation plan for South Vietnam -initially labeled TALON VISE but later changed to FREQUENT WIND -was in place, with U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin in charge. In the fall of 1974,

Vice Admiral George P. Steele, commander of the Seventh Fleet, had met with Martin to review the plan. "Do not worry, Admiral," Martin had reassured Steele, "I will initiate the evacuation in good time. I understand the necessity for doing so."

In mid-December 1974, the North Vietnamese launched a winter-spring offensive against Phuoc Long province. The purpose of the operation was less to acquire control of territory in the south than to test the willingness of the United States to respond to a blatant violation of the peace agreement. There was little alarm in the U.S. Intelligence community to the fighting in Phuoc Long. A National Intelligence Estimate on December 23 forecast that Hanoi would avoid the "risks and losses" of a major offensive and work to achieve its goals through a "political-military campaign." An all-out offensive, the intelligence community believed, would not be likely before early in 1976.

Not for the first time in the Vietnam War, the intelligence crystal ball proved cloudy. Phuoc Binh City fell to the NVA on January 7, 1975, the first provincial capital to pass into the hands of northern forces since the cease-fire of 1973. As it was clear that Washington would not act, the Politburo in Hanoi approved a plan for widespread attacks in the south in 1975, followed by a general uprising in 1976. The offensive would begin in the long-contested Central Highlands.

Campaign 275 opened on March 1, 1975. Within two weeks, the NVA offensive had made such progress that President Thieu or-

dered the Central Highlands abandoned. At the same time, NVA forces were pouring south of the DMZ, heading from Hue and Da Nang. Marius Burke, the senior Air America pilot at Da Nang, had only four helicopters to meet the growing airlift demands caused by the NVA offensive. On March 23, Air America evacuated key personnel from Hue and Quang Nhai. On the 25th, while engaged in the evacuation effort, an Air America helicopter was fired on by supposedly friendly South Vietnamese troops. It took hits in the rotor blade spar and engine but managed to limp back to Da Nang. Clearly, Burke reported to Saigon, the situation had reached "a critical state," and that panicking South Vietnamese troops posed as great -if not greater-danger than the NVA.

That same day, a meeting was held at CIA headquarters in Washington to discuss Air America's ability to respond to the increasing demands for air service. Paul Velte, Air America's chief executive officer, reviewed the company's equipment status for his CIA superiors. Air America owned and operated 12 Bell 204B/205 helicopters, civilian models of the military's UH-1B/D Hueys. In addition, the company had on loan from the military 16 UH-1 Hs. Eleven of the "bailed" Hueys were on the ICCS lease, while 5 were on a USAID lease. Three of the 11 ICCS helicopters were currently in use for the commission's diminishing requirements, while the other 8 were in flyable storage. It would be difficult to place these 8 Hueys back in service because spare parts for them came from the Department of Defense and were not available on short notice.

The most immediate problem, however, was not aircraft but pilots. Air America, Velte explained, had 77 pilots, both rotary wing and

fixed wing, including supervisors. The rotary wing pilots were flying 120 hours a month, the maximum allowable under the USAID contract. Also, the contract called for two pilots per helicopter. Because of the company's uncertain future, pilots and technical personnel were in the process of leaving for other jobs. The first thing to be done, Velte said, was to clarify the identity of the new contractor. Current employees could then apply for jobs with the replacement company. Personnel agreeing to stay with Air America until June 30 would be offered special bonuses. Also, contractual restraints for two pilots and 120 hours should be lifted. While these measures might not completely solve the problem, they certainly would help. Velte then told his superiors that he would leave shortly for South Vietnam to assess the situation and take all necessary action.

Frank Snapp, the CIA's principal analyst in Saigon, had become increasingly concerned about the rapidly deteriorating military situation. Government defenses in the northern half of the country, he told Station Chief Thomas Polgar on March 25, were nearing total collapse. "The entire complexion of the Vietnam War," he observed, "has altered in a matter of weeks, and the government is in imminent







danger of decisive military defeat." Polgar, however, refused to become alarmed. He agreed with Ambassador Martin's policy of encouraging the Saigon government to continue resistance in hopes of securing a negotiated settle-

ment. Above all, Americans must not give any indication that they considered the situation hopeless. As refugees poured into Da Nang, Burke prepared for the worst. He cut personnel to a minimum, with one pilot and Filipino flight mechanic per aircraft. He asked for volunteers who would be willing to remain and face the hazards of the final evacuation. His four helicopters would be kept fully fueled and ready for immediate departure.

The evacuation of Da Nang began on March 28. By the morning of the 29th, Burke reported, the city was "a shambles," with abandoned aircraft, tanks, trucks, and other vehicles scattered about. In the midst of the evacuation effort, a World Airways Boeing 727 appeared overhead. Burke tried to contact the pilot to warn him not to land, but did not get a response. As soon as the 727 set down, it was engulfed by a swarm of ARVN and civilian refugees. The runway on which it had landed -17-Left -was soon littered with bodies and overturned vehicles. Burke again attempted to contact the airplane and direct it to 17-Right, which looked clear, but heard nothing.

By the time the 727 taxied to the front of the control tower, both runways had become unusable. "It looked hopeless," Burke reported. The only option was to use a taxiway. The aircraft started to roll, narrowly missing a stalled van on the side of the taxiway. A motorcycle struck the left

wing, and the driver was hurled into the infield. Somehow, the 727 struggled into the air after plowing through various small structures at the end of the field. As Deputy Ambassador Wolf Lehmann later commented about this incident, the attempted evacuation by 727 was "irresponsible, utterly irresponsible, and should never have taken place."

The sudden collapse of South Vietnam's military forces caused American military authorities to review their evacuation plans. The original scheme, published on July 31, 1974, had contained four options. Evacuation would be conducted (1) by commercial airlift from Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport, (2) by military aircraft from Tan Son Nhut, (3) by sealift from ports serving Saigon, and (4) by helicopters to U.S. Navy ships standing offshore. It now seemed that detailed planning for the helicopter option should go forward.

Air America obviously would be a crucial part of any emergency helicopter evacuation from downtown Saigon. Rooftops that might be used for the evacuation could not support the heavy Marine Corps aircraft. Only Air America could do the job. Following discussions with Var M. Green, vice president for Vietnam, and Chief Pilot Carl Winston, Air America agreed to take 13 UH-1 Hs out of flyable storage. With a total of 28 helicopters, Air America pledged to have 24 of them available at any given time. Because of the shortage of pilots, many of these helicopters would have to be flown by a single pilot. "This was risky," the U.S. Air Force account of the final evacuation observed, "but Air America was accustomed to such risks and expressed no reservations about that aspect of the Saigon air evacuation."

On April 7, veteran helicopter pilot Nikki A. Fillipi began a survey of 37 buildings in downtown Saigon to assess their viability as helicopter landing zones (HLZs). The survey led to the selection of 13 HLZs. Fillipi then supervised crews from the Pacific Architect & Engineering company in removing obstructions that might interfere with safe ingress/egress to the HLZs. An "H" was painted on the rooftops to mark the skids of Air America's helicopters, indicating that aircraft could land or take off in either direction with guaranteed rotor clearance. During his meetings with the Special Planning Group that would be in charge of the helicopter evacuation, Fillipi emphasized that three requirements had to be met if Air America was to complete its assigned tasks in the evacuation plan. The Air America ramp had to be secured; helicopters needed a safe supply of fuel; and, to avoid confusion, Air America had to maintain its own communication network, linking with Marine Corps helicopters only through UHF guard frequency. He was assured that all three requirements would be met.

CEO Velte arrived in Saigon on April 7. He consulted with Fillipi on the evacuation planning to date. He then contacted military authorities and asked if they could provide additional pilots to allow double crewing of the helicopters for the emergency. He received a sympathetic response, and a message was sent to CINPAC. Requesting the temporary assignment of 30 Marine Corps helicopter pilots so that each Air America aircraft would have a copilot. When Ambassador Martin saw the cable, however, he "hit the ceiling," and sent a "flash" message canceling the request.

Martin's precipitous action was characteristic of what was becoming an increasingly bizarre attitude on the part of the U.S. Embassy as the NVA drew closer to Saigon. Even Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was becoming concerned with Martin's actions. "Faced with imminent disaster," Kissinger later wrote, "Martin decided to go down with the ship. He was reluctant to evacuate any Americans lest this contribute to the disintegration of the south. "I considered Martin's stonewalling dangerous," Kissinger recalled. On April 9 he told Ben Bradlee, executive editor of the Washington Post, that "we've got an Ambassador who is maybe losing his cool."

The military's efforts to press Martin were proving fruitless. On April 12, the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade sent a delegation to consult with the ambassador on the evacuation plan. Martin told them that he would not tolerate any outward signs that the United States intended to abandon



South Vietnam. All planning would have to be conducted with the utmost discretion. General Carey, the Marine commander, upon receiving this information, flew to Saigon the next day to see Martin. 'The visit,' Carey reported, "was cold, non-productive and appeared to be an irritant to the ambassador."

The military situation continued to worsen as North Vietnamese forces encircled the capital. On April 21, President Thieu resigned. That same day, the Marines established a forward headquarters at the DAO. The DAO complex, together with Air America area across the street, were designated as the main departure points for a helicopter evacuation to the fleet. A battalion-sized security force would guard the DAO complex, while a battalion command group and one company would be sent to the Air America area.

The Defense Attache also sent a message to Washington, requesting permission to bring a platoon of marines to Tan Son Nhut at once to control the growing crowd of fixed-wing evacuees. Lest Ambassador Martin's sensitivities be upset about the presence of additional U.S. military personnel, Air America helicopters were used on April 25 to bring in 40 marines, dressed in civilian clothes, from the U.S.S. Hancock, standing offshore. Once inside the DAO complex, they were able to don their combat gear.

On April 28, as the situation around Saigon continued to worsen, Velte learned that General Carey had decided not to provide a security force for the Air America ramp at Tan Son Nhut. This came as a shock. Only the previous week, Carey had assured Velte that he would send marines to secure the ramp. Velte asked the ambassador to intervene and reverse the decision, emphasizing that the security of the Air America area had been a prerequisite for the company's successful participation in any emergency evacuation plan. There was no immediate response from the embassy.

THIS STORY  
CONTINUED ON DVD.

The late William M. Leary, Ph.D., served as the E. Merton Coulter Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of Georgia. Dr. Leary was considered the world's foremost specialist on Air America. His 2005 lecture was central to the McDermott Library's Civil Air Transport-Air America Collection and Memorial located on the third floor of McDermott Library. Leary has written histories of the China National Aviation Corp., Civil Air Transport and the U.S. Air Mail Service. In 1995 he received the Central Intelligence Agency Studies in Excellence Award for an Outstanding Contribution to the Literature of Intelligence. He served as the Charles A. Lindbergh Professor of Aerospace History at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington D.C. in 1996-97.

## AFTER ACTION REPORT

### Evacuation of Nha Trang Rvn March/April 1975

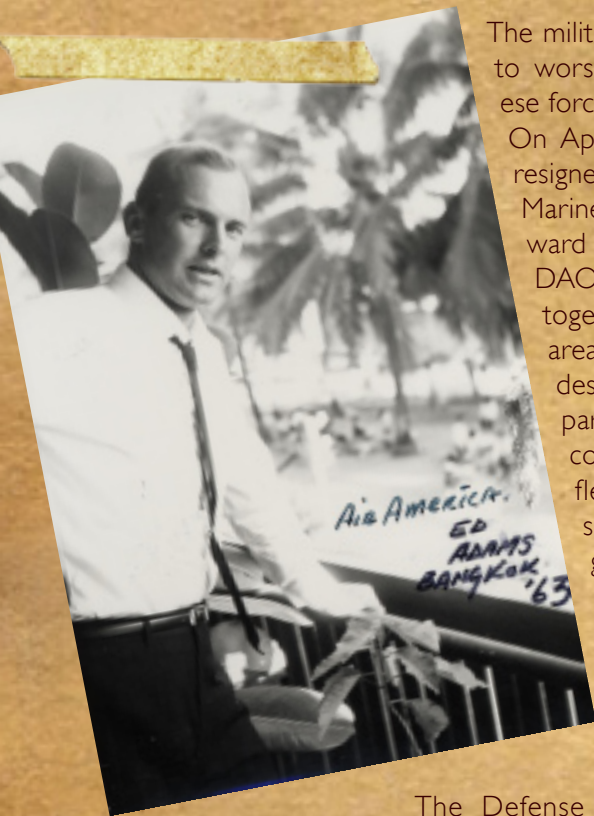
When I arrived at the office on Mar 1975 Captain Winston asked me if I would go to Nha Trang as temporary Scr as E. G. Adams was absent on leave. There was trouble expected at Da Nang and someone was needed at Nha Trang to coordinate commo, traffic, etc. between Saigon and Da Nang. I returned home for my suitcase and departed by aircraft for Nha Trang. On my arrival, I checked into the Pacific house.

The Con Gen at this time was processing their Vietnamese employees for evacuation to Saigon. Most of these people had arrived from other places, i.e. Pleiku, Kontum, etc. They were being ticketed at the Con Gen building.

The next day Da Nang started to evacuate and the city panicked. Capt. Burke was at Da Nang, and had 3 or 4 choppers. I spent the next 2 days trying to get fuel and radio relay for the choppers at Da Nang. We had to keep 2 Volpars in orbit to relay from Burke to me, and I relayed to Saigon. The Con Gen at Da Nang, Mr. Francis had been on board Burke's chopper but when they landed at Marble Mountain the Con Gen got off and talked to the Vietnamese region commander's aide. The Con Gen told Burke that the region commander was going to commit suicide and he, the Con Gen, had to go to him. The Con Gen departed in a Vietnamese chopper. This later caused considerable concern at the U.S. embassy until the Con Gen finally got a message through that he was safe on board a ship heading South. The choppers were shuttling to Cu Le Re Island. I sent a steel fuel container with 500 gallons of JP to the island by caribou. The first night of the Da Nang fall, passengers came into Nha Trang by

chopper and fixed wing. One French teacher had been picked up by a chopper and moved to the island. He came to Nha Trang by Volpar. I interviewed him along with a CBS photographer who had been on board Mr. Daly's World Airways 727. He got off and could not get back on. He said he ran to the tower and called for help. One of our choppers landed and picked him up. I put these people on a flight to Saigon.

The second day we were requested to send the choppers back to Da Nang to look for the Con Gen also an A40b customer was on board a barge at Da Nang and was requesting water be dropped as the Vietnamese on the barges had no food or water. I asked for a caribou and a40b sent plastic containers from Saigon. There was one drop made which I believe was unsuccessful as the containers broke on impact with the water.





The next day another attempt was made to drop water; this time canteens tied together with floatation. This attempt aborted due to heavy rains in the area which apparently solved the water problem to some extent. The Da Nang Con Gen later arrived at Cam Ranh Bay and was flown to Nha Trang. He had a long talk with Mr. Spears, the Nha Trang Con Gen and then departed for Saigon by Volpar. At Nha Trang there seemed to be a sense of panic building up. Everyone seemed to be tense. I came out of the Pacific house to go to the airport on my second morning, and a mob had materialized in front of the Con Gen gate all wanting to be manifested to Saigon when I saw this I returned to my room, got my suitcase and from then on I slept at the airport.

I was concerned about fuel as always. The fuel truck would stop servicing at the first sign of trouble. I called Saigon for empty drums which they sent, however, they were too dirty and could not be used as we had no way of cleaning them. I then requested fuel drums from the Con Gen. He got some for me and we started filling them for later use. I then started trying to find a place to store fuel for use by the choppers in case we lost our fuel at Nha Trang the a40b regional representative told me that he had a place near Cam Ranh at the province chief's compound which was the most secure place possible. I started dispatching choppers with fuel drums. we got 20 drums there in the first day. The next day the first chopper ar-

rived with fuel and the "secure" place was abandoned. The fuel could not be loaded back aboard choppers so we planned on using it ASAP. We used about 3 drums and the other 17 drums were stolen.

At the time I moved to the airport called in the ten employees and recommended they sleep at the airport. They all moved in and pa&e gave me mattresses and sheets. They also gave us c-rat ions and other canned food. I sent manny down to pick up these items. The chopper pilots were all sleeping at the pacific house] I planned on being able to fly down to the Con Gen pad and pick up the crews in case of trouble. All the time I was a Nha Trang we were dispatching items of equipment not needed and also employees and their dependents. This was hampered by the Con Gen not allowing me space on the aircraft. I finally started getting an aircraft for my own use.

The following events occurred on the day that Nha Trang was evacuated and not necessarily in this order:

1. Woke up at about 5:30 and called to the pacific House to see if someone could bring coffee and breakfast.
2. A 40b customer across the way came over and told me the Viet Cong were only about 12 miles up the road and the evacuation was going this day. He said he was now destroying his papers and equipment. He told me I could have anything I needed. He was gone by 10:30 and abandoned his office and warehouse.
3. Con Gen had not informed me of their plans to evacuate. I got a call and they asked me to get all available aircraft from Saigon. This I did and also requested a C-46 for my own use.
4. Vietnamese started arriving at the airport looking for rides. I went out and put

a new lock on the AAM gate and locked it as the guard was not on the job.

5. I previously had requested barbed wire to help control crowds. I never received this wire. We placed chains across to keep vehicles out of the operations area.
6. The Pol driver told me that he was on his last tank of gas and would not be getting anymore. He said he would stay on the job until all fuel was gone if I would promise his family a ride to Saigon. I did this and he worked as he promised.
7. A mob had gathered by the time the first airplane arrived. They were already getting unruly. I talked to some Vietnamese marines who spoke English. They were armed and were there to get a ride to Saigon. They agreed to stay and control the crowd if they were promised a ride. They stayed all day and did an outstanding job. Late in the afternoon, however they left unannounced and all control was gone. DC-6s of Birdair came in all day. When one was on the ground I would call in a C-46 and load company cargo and pax. This worked most of the day.
8. VNAF helicopters started departing. Two had a mid-air just above the ground and crashed into the revetments.
9. Had two Vietnamese employees who did not want to go to Saigon. I borrowed money and paid them their final pay. One was a male radio operator and the other was the one-armed cleaning woman. All other employees and dependents were sent to Saigon.
10. I put the finance records into the baggage compartment of a helicopter. This insured that we would not lose them.
11. Two days before, I surveyed the roof of the pacific house for a chopper pad. This was prepared but on the day of evacuation the Vietnamese breached the fence and crowded the roof pad so

it was only used for a couple of trips. Another pad had been prepared in the parking lot at the Con Gen this was used all day with armed U.S. Marines controlling the mob.

12. Two times during the day while AAM choppers were shuttling personnel from the Con Gen pad to the airport I made the choppers shut down as our mob at the airport was getting enormous. Each time Mr. Spears became frantic and called me to have the choppers keep shuttling as the mob at the Con Gen was getting uncontrollable.
13. Chopper pilots reported small arms in different areas of the town. One reported the prison gates were open and the prisoners were looting the prison. I could hear firing from different locations all day.
14. VNAF aircraft started shuttling military and their dependents across the runway from AAM. This finally spilled over to our operation when vehicles full of Vietnamese started coming to our aircraft for rides.
15. Air Vietnam quit coming into the city due to the mobs so hundreds of Vietnamese came to our end of the field. This compounded our already enormous problem.
16. The last 2 DC-6 aircraft came in and were completely mobbed. I had a Caribou and C-47 sneak in while they



were on the ground. They were completely mobbed. I got all the employees left on the caribou and decided it was time for me to go. The mechanics pulled me into the door as the mob was trying to hold my legs. As the airplane was taking off I saw hundreds of people walking down the taxiway toward AAM.

17. A flying tiger DC-8 was dispatched from Saigon. However, by the time he arrived overhead Nha Trang was airborne and my opinion was that it was unwise for the (DC-8) to land. A 14-foot step had to be found for people to board and this would have been impossible to do with the huge unruly mob.

18. Once during the day just when a DC-6 was loaded and taxiing for takeoff, the tower said the field was closed. It was

determined that someone in Saigon had ordered this. The field was later opened after repeated calls to Saigon.

19. We got out all of our employees and most of our important parts and equipment.

20. The Vietnamese radio operator agreed to stay on the job and call us when possible. He called one time the day following the evacuation and said that everything was quiet downtown and at the airfield. We never heard from him again.

It is my opinion that all the evacuations AAM participated in were caused by the embassy personnel ordering Vietnamese evacuated, thereby creating panic among the Vietnamese people.

Captain Edward Reid, Jr.  
*Air America, Inc.*



## AFTER ACTION REPORT

### AIR AMERICA SVND EVACUATION SUMMARY

In early April 1975 the AAM SVND evacuation contingency plans were fairly well finalized. These plans included coordination with the DAO evacuation command center (ECC) AAM Captain Filippi was the primary coordinator between AAM and ECC. AAM captain Marius Burke was the man assigned to organize and formalize the AAM employee evacuation plans, as would relate to getting the foreign employees from their living quarters to the AAM TSN compound for onward evacuation out of Vietnam. In my job capacity, I had dealings with all factions of the company/ evacuation/ contingency plans.

In my support to Captain Filippi AAM provided the technical assistance to the setting up of an alternate flight watch facility at an office nearby the DAO ECC. AAM would provide the primary vhf/am and vhf/fm radios if and when the AAM operations function could not operate. We also provided the DAO ECC with our ICCS colored Dayglo green paint, so that they could paint the letter H on their designated roof tops. These LZ pads were to be utilized for all the U.S. mission personnel pickup points in the case of an evacuation.

Captain Filippi also brought a group of three U.S. Marines to my office on or about 25 April. The Marine officer in charge was interested primarily in the perimeter security of the AAM compound. He stated that he would be the officer responsible for providing security of our facility and that upon the evacuation of our AAM compound, his U.S. marine group would destroy (blow up) the AAM facilities. We discussed the weak points in our perimeter, such as the company passenger terminal building and gates. Also we

agreed that the rolling gates utilized across our southwest taxiway entrance was a weak point that would be difficult to seal off from refugees and/or armed desperate Vietnamese military personnel. It was decided that AAM would use metal conex containers to barricade the taxiway and place a double row of concertina wire on top of them to stem infiltration. This would be done after our fixed wing aircraft had departed or if the airport conditions prevented our fixed wing aircraft from taking off. In preparation we later positioned about 10 conexs near the taxiway and some 4 rolls of concertina wire. The terminal building would be planned to be blocked on the ramp side by vehicles and the entrance gate from the street to our employee vehicle parking lot was to be barricaded by the 2 Isuzu buses operated by AAM. The Marine officer said he would like me to make the necessary preparations and he would return in a few days to see what progress we had made. He nor any of the other marines ever visited me again and I heard nothing further about their plans.

Major (USAF) Cook was the man in DAO who provided me with the 300 fuel drums and one each Esso refueler of AVGAS and one of JP4. He told me that DAO EEC would also have an Esso re-



fueler of JP4 parked in the DAO compound area.

We in AAM also doubled our delivery service of Esso Mogas to ensure that we would have maximum fuel for our generators and vehicles.

In addition we obtained an extra potable water trailer from PA&E and serviced it as a standby.

We also purchased about 425 cases of military "C" rations from PA&E in case we needed food for our employees. In this same purchase were numerous cases of other canned foods that PA&E had for sale. All of this was stored in our supply area for possible issue/use.

I had several informal meetings with the third country national (TCN) employees. I strongly recommended that they double up in their

living quarters outside the airfield. Captain Burke and I made several flights together in April, along with the designated spokesman of the Filipinos and Chinese employees. Our purpose was to determine which TCNs lived where in town and which rooftops were the most suitable for use. We formally identified 3 rooftops around the area of Truong Minh Giangtroung Minh KY for the balance of the TCN employees. Those who were not reasonably close to these rooftops, were told to move in closer. These rooftops (LZ pads) were then designated for each employee, by location, for pickup. A name and address list of all foreign employees was given to Captain Burke for planning purposes. The majority of our helicopter pilots were given area familiarization flights so that they knew all the DAO and employee pickup pads.

A vhf/am and vhf/fm (portable) radio was given to the Chinese employees in Cholon and the same was provided to the TCN group or Filippinod. These radios would enable them to have radio contact with the AAMTSN operations office and with company aircraft as may be required. Each LZ was given a radio call sign. Mr. P.Y. Lin acting manager of supply and Mr. Sam Talapian foreman of electronics was designated as the TCN group spokesman. In addition we proceeded to paint the AAM Dayglo green H on those approved rooftops.

About the middle of April, Captain Burke and I became more concerned about the overall war situation around Saigon and we recommended that all TCN employees move into the warehouse type buildings behind the former Citca hangars which was within the AAM compound. A number of the TCN employees started to move into those rooms. About 23 or 24 April, I insisted that all TCNs move to those buildings, and I was assured by Mr. P.Y.

Lin that all those employees living in Cholon would be moved to the Citca buildings by the night of 26 April, as the security of the Cholon area was quite questionable.

On the morning of 29 April when we were preparing to evacuate all TCNs, I was given a name list of three TCNs that were still housed in town. There were 7 Chinese in Cholon and 11 Filipinos in the Troung Minh Giang area. Eventually the AAM helicopters picked up all the Filipinos and 6 of the Chinese. I had talked by radio at 1500I with P. Y. Lin and confirmed that the six Chinese in Cholon would go to the Chinese hospital and get out the seventh Chinese employee, Mr. W.A. Peng then they were all to proceed to any of the alternate rooftop LZ pads for pickup by using their portable vhf/fm radio. In the end result, I learned a few days later that W.A. Peng did not get evacuated. The reason why is unknown to me at this writing. I suggest that P.Y. Lin make a statement on why they did not or could not get Peng out.

In retrospect I would say that AAM evacuation plans went fairly smooth and that we were very fortunate that only one employee failed to get out of Vietnam and none of our employees were injured. All of this is in spite of the fact that the U.S. Marines never arrived in the AAM compound, to secure/destroy it.

I went by AAM helicopter, from my living quarters (259 Troung Quoc Duong) to AAM TSN at about 0930I on Tuesday 29 April 1975.

We operated from AAMTSN until about 1230I at which time CEO gave the order to evacuate the AAM compound, due to lack of security (no U.S. Marines) and VNAF penetrating our area with cars, Hondas, local dependents,



etc. CEO said we were to regroup at the DAO ECC.

Prior to abandoning the AAM area, CEO approved the dispatching of AAM fixed wing aircraft to carry the non-essential employees to friendly countries. We proceeded to load all such employees and launched the aircraft ASAP. In a short period of time, we had all those employees that were present and some unknown locals who infiltrated our groups, on the fixed wing aircraft and airborne.

I might mention that it was very difficult to control the boarding of passengers and to determine who was AAM employee or dependents, because we had very little help at the aircraft entrance doors. I don't know who, if anyone did authorize the departure of some of the Americans, i.e. Charlie Meyers, Harvey Kohler, Dick Fisher, George Keller, etc. on the fixed wing aircraft. We could have really utilized those Americans to control passenger loading, the taxiway gates and the refueling problem.

Shortly after arriving at AAMTSN I was notified that VNAF pilots were stealing our GFE UH-1H helicopters from the ICCS ramp. To the best of my knowledge they stole 5 UH-1H aircraft from the ICCS/as ramp and one AAM 204b helicopter from the AAM ramp itself. These VNAF people were well armed and desperate.

With the incoming rockets and VNAF infiltrating our ramp area, there was no time to collect or destroy essential records. We



were hopeful that we could rescue the AAM compound and operate from it, once the marines arrived to secure the area. It was planned and I was so briefed by DAQ and the U.S. Marines that the AAM compound would be secured by the U.S. marines and upon our departure, they would destroy (blow up) the AAM facilities. Unfortunately for all concerned, the U.S. Marines did neither.

Upon arrival at the DAO ECC Dick Wengenroth, Stan Huster, Ron Lietchy, Paul Disciullo and myself assisted the AAM helicopter pilots with their arrivals and departures, at the DAO tennis court pads.

AAM Captain Filippi told me that we needed to obtain JP-4 fuel for the helicopters and he asked me where was the DAO fuel truck. I explained that I knew DAO USAF Major Cook had an Esso truck as part of the DAO ECC planning but I was not involved in their (DAO) planning. Not knowing where the DAO truck was positioned, Dick Wengenroth and myself took a DAO truck and hotwired the ignition and proceeded to drive around the DAO building 5000 compound but were unable to find the JP-4 truck. Then I asked Captain Filippi to obtain a few U.S. Marines from ECC and we could go to the AAM ramp and bring out some of the 225 drums of JP-4 we had there. Captain Filippi could apparently get no U.S. Marines designated for this assignment. So I went and got one of the AAM pilots to fly over the DAO area, with Dick Wengenroth and myself searching for the JP-4 truck. We spotted it at the lot around the corner of the BX stop and shop building. We returned to the ECC and attempted to locate the JP-4 truck ignition keys. No one knew where the keys were, so we flew to the BX LZ pads and walked to the lot where the JP-4 truck

was parked. The lot gate had a padlock on it which we broke off. Within about 20 minutes we had hotwired the JP-4 truck ignition wires, but the truck battery was so weak the engine would not start. We considered towing the JP-4 truck using a nearby tow truck, but as the JP-4 truck was a hydromatic if we could not start the JP-4 truck engine, then we would not be able to pump the JP-4 from the truck. We then returned to DAO ECC by AAM helicopter. We could not find any DAO vehicles with a large enough battery to suit the JP-4 truck needs. So again we flew to the BX LZ pads with the thought of taking the battery from nearby Isuzu bus and use it for the JP-4 truck. This time Stan Huster accompanied Chuck Wengenroth and myself. We switched the batteries, only to find out the bus battery was dead. We then went back to DAO ECC and again requested Capt. Filippi to provide us with a few U.S. Marines so that we could obtain JP-4 fuel drums or the standby Esso JP-4 truck from the AAM compound. As we again could not get any U.S. Marines, for security we elected not to re-enter the abandoned AAM compound for fuel. Later while listening to the AAM helicopter pilots talking to the AAM om at DAO by radio, it was readily evident that our pilots were carefully monitoring their fuel onboard and programming their roof top pickups of people, to enable refueling at the U.S. ships off Vung Tau, where the majority of their passengers were being taken. The AAM helicopter pilots did a great job in fuel management as well as some "can do" flying.

As best I recall the U.S. military helicopters started arriving at the DAO BX LZ pads about 1500I. The majority of their passengers were local refugees who had been programmed out by prior USAF C-141 and C-130.

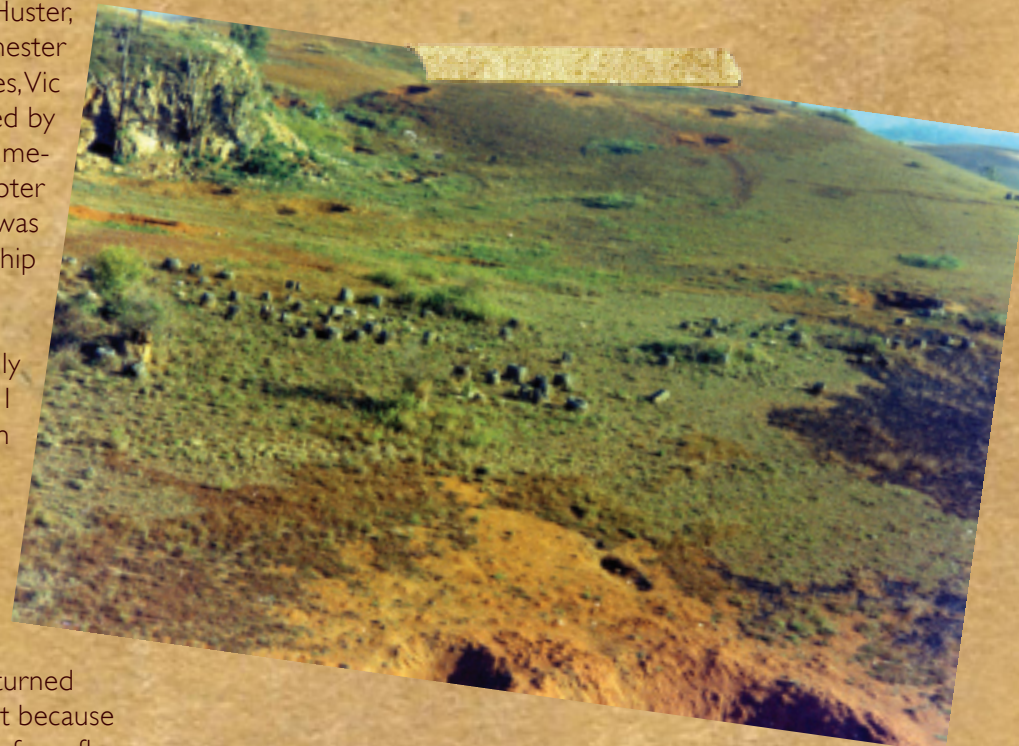
At about 1615I CEO instructed some of us to use one of the two AAM helicopters at DAO and proceed to the U.S. ships. This group along with myself was dropped off at the U.S.S. Vancouver, LPD-2. This group of AAM employees consisted of Stan Huster, Paul Disciullo, Ron Leitichy, Capt. Chester Folck, Dick Wengenroth, E. L. Angeles, Vic Ballesteros and later we were joined by Ed Twifford. The Vietnamese flight mechanic with us on n47004 helicopter was Mr. Can (I believe) and he was taken to the refugee side of our ship and I never saw him again.

Our ship, the U.S.S. Vancouver, finally sailed for Subic Bay Philippines on 1 May about 1915I, and we arrived in Philippines about 2130I on 3 May.

Although we were all processed through U.S. and Philippine customs and immigration by about 2330I the same night at cubic point naval base gym, we were returned to the U.S.S. Vancouver for the night because the weather at Manila eliminated us from flying there that night.

On the morning of 4 May we were flown to Manila by U.S. military helicopter and sent to the Carlton hotel to check in with CEO and VP. We arranged our own flight bookings and flew from Manila to Hong Kong the same afternoon and checked into the pre-arranged rooms at the Hong Kong Sheraton hotel about 1650I. We reported to the AAM offices at the peninsula hotel on the morning of 5 May.

B.D. Mesecher,  
*Director—Technical Services*  
*Air America, Inc.*



THE AFTERNOON OF APRIL 28 I TOOK THE [DANANG] RADIO OPERATOR AND HER YOUNGER SISTER TO THEIR HOUSE ON [TRU MINH KY] AFTERWARD, I WAS RETURNING TO MY HOUSE ON [CHI LANG] TO CARRY LUGGAGE - ETC. OUT TO THE AIRFIELD. AT THAT TIME 1700 HOURS THE [A-37S] BOMBED [TSN] I IMMEDIATELY RETURNED TO [TSN] AIRFIELD AND ABANDONED MY LUGGAGE AT [CHI LANG] THERE WAS NOT TIME TO RETURN AND RECOVER ANYTHING. THE NEXT MORNING MYSELF AND [CARPENTER] MADE THE FIRST FLIGHT INTO [259] AND FLEW 8 PILOTS OR SO OUT TO THE RAMP. WE THEN MADE A TRIP TO [DAO] AND PICKED UP 7 AND FLEW TO THE [BLUE RIDGE] AT THAT TIME [CARPENTER] AND [ANGLES (FM)] CHOSE TO REMAIN ON THE SHIP. I FLEW THE REMAINDER OF THE DAY SOLO - SHUTTLING FROM THE EMBASSY ROOFTOP TO SHIP WITH INTERMESHED TRIPS TO [DAO, LZ, 23, 259] AND INTERSHIP TRANSPORT, LANDING ABOUT 1850 ON THE HANCOCK] MY DEPARTURE FROM [SAIGON] WAS ABOUT 0900 WITH ABOUT [5] TRIPS TO VARIOUS SHIPS] I DON'T KNOW THE STATUS OF THE [DANANG OPERATOR (RADIO)] OR HER SISTER.

[CAPTAIN COALSON (19491)]  
AIR AMERICA, INC.

AFTER  
ACTION REPORT

### A Belated Thank You to the Pilots of Air America

“ I want to thank the Air America pilots for rescuing me from the rooftop of the American Embassy in Saigon in the early evening of 30 April 1975. I had served in Vietnam from 1 November 1972 to that last day in April 1975. My name then was Joan Fritz.

Before I was rescued, I had the pleasure of working with the Air America pilots on the radio. About a week before Saigon fell, I was asked to work in the office that coordinated with the Air American pilots. The chief there, O.B., had broken his glasses and could not read; and it was too late for him to get new prescription glasses. So, I became his eyes. He taught me to work the radio and write down the tail numbers of planes when they took off and landed. O.B. had, among other duties, the responsibility of preparing and checking over many different lists involving Vietnamese and other personnel scheduled to be rescued and ferried out of the country. I recognized the importance of his work, and I was happy to be able to assist him.

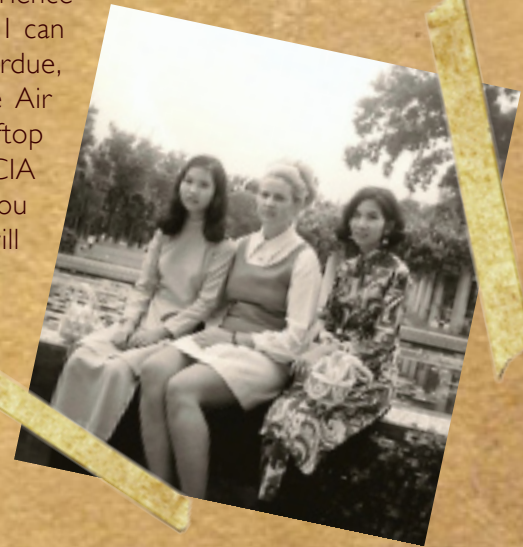
One rather comical part of my rescue occurred when the chopper pilot took a map out and started looking at it over the water. I did not want to ask him if he knew where he was going, so I more tactfully asked him whether he had ever landed on an aircraft

carrier before. He said that he had done so a few times, and I was greatly relieved to hear the news! The Air America chopper flew me to the U.S.S. Hancock. While safely aboard the U.S.S. Hancock, I observed some other non-Air America helicopters landing on the deck of the carrier. Apparently there was not room to accommodate all of these helicopters, so after the passengers and pilots exited them, the helicopters were pushed overboard. (No, they didn't sink the Air America choppers!) I was aboard the aircraft carrier for about six days before we arrived at Subic Bay in the Philippines.

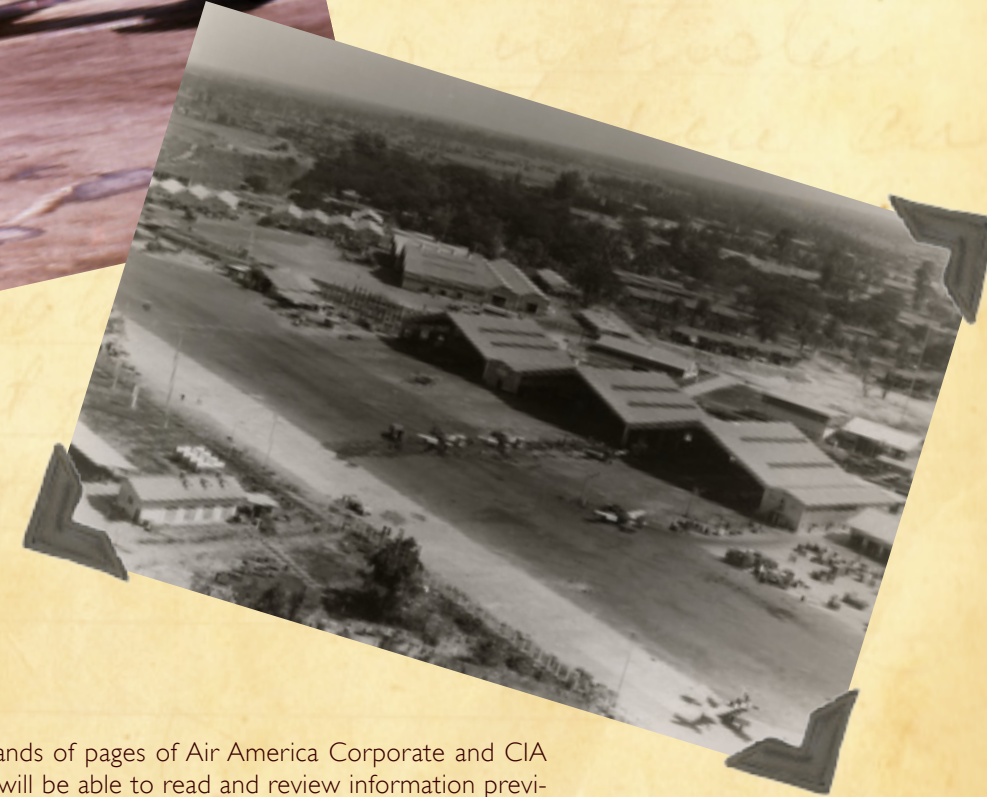
As I flew out of Saigon on that Air America chopper, I remember thinking to myself, this is the end of the movie. And I thought then – and I continue to think today – about all the men and women who served in Vietnam in any capacity over the years. Supporting U.S. efforts in Vietnam was a sometimes painful but ultimately great experience for me. I am grateful that I can finally give my long-overdue, heartfelt Thank You to the Air America pilots for my rooftop rescue. My colleagues at CIA and I honor you for what you did for all of us, and we will never forget. ”

Sincerely,

*Joan Peterson*



## FLIGHTS YET TAKEN



**Note:** With the declassification of thousands of pages of Air America Corporate and CIA formerly-classified documents, historians will be able to read and review information previously not available, allowing a more rounded and fuller history of Air America. An example of this is the following article written by Larry D. Sall, Ph.D., Dean of Libraries at The University of Texas at Dallas. Dr Sall reviewed declassified accident report files including the only known hijacking of an Air America plane. This is not only a fascinating article but an example of the stories to be written with the release of these documents. Also included in this section are some examples of the various documents that have been released to the public.



## The Crash of Civil Air Transport Flight B-908

By Larry D. Sall, Ph.D.,

Dean of Libraries at The University of Texas at Dallas

About 5:30 on the afternoon of June 20, 1964, a Civil Air Transport C-46, Flight B-908, took off from Suinan Airport at Taichung on the island of Taiwan with 52 passengers and a crew of five. Less than 15 minutes later, all on board perished when Flight B-908 crashed into a rice paddy a few miles north of the Suinan airfield. In just released files from the Central Intelligence Agency, the story of this tragic event is detailed. According to newspaper accounts at the time, this was the first crash of a scheduled domestic flight that Civil Air Transport had experienced.

Why did the CIA maintain files on this Taiwanese accident? What could have been its interest in such a tragedy that it felt compelled to keep such extensive files? The answer to both questions is straight forward; CAT was owned by the CIA and had been since the Korean War. CAT was an asset to the agency, used to maintain a presence and an influence in East Asia. When not operating during the day as a civilian airline, the CIA used CAT's personnel and equipment for clandestine missions.

CAT was established following World War II in China by General Claire Chennault and his associate Whiting Willauer to provide air transport in China, a country wracked by civil war and the devastation left by the Japanese invasion. When the Korean Conflict began, there was a serious absence of American airlift capacity in that part of the world, so seeking a solution to the problem, the CIA purchased CAT under the cover of a private corporation. Thus the CIA came to be operating a civilian airline in Asia and so needed

to be closely involved in the investigation of the crash of Flight B-908.

Both the Taiwanese authorities and the American authorities carefully studied the circumstances leading to the crash and its aftermath. Among the first questions were: what were the conditions at the time of the crash and could they have been a contributing factor? The flight took off in daylight, in clear weather over flat terrain, and according to eyewitnesses the takeoff appeared entirely normal. As Flight B-908 flew past the airfield, the pilot indicated everything was normal and said he would see the tower personnel the next day.

Taking off to the south and heading on a round island route with its next stop scheduled to be Taipei, the plane made a 180-degree turn to the east and headed north when suddenly it veered sharply to the west and began a steep descent from an altitude of approximately 1500 feet. Flight B-908 struck the ground at an angle of about 30 degrees with its nose and left wing down. The C-46 was destroyed by the impact with only the tail section remaining more or less intact. The wreckage was scattered over a 200-300 meter square area in a rice paddy and a ditch.

Farmers working nearby heard the plane descending and saw it crash. The consensus was that the plane was fully intact before impact; there was no sign of smoke or fire prior to impact, and the engines did not sound unusual. First on the scene were the farmers who could find no sign of survivors; they also reported that fire broke out in some

places in the wreckage, but these fires did not spread and soon died out. When the local police arrived shortly after the crash, they took charge of the scene. Chinese Civil Aviation Authorities did not reach the area until about twelve hours later. CAT personnel arrived soon after and were kept from handling the remains or wreckage while the Chinese officials pursued their initial investigation.

In its own report CAT noted that the "sudden transition from normal climbing flight in the direction of Taipei to a sharp turn to the left and diving into the ground almost certainly establishes only two possible causes:

- a. A sudden and major mechanical trouble which made it impossible for the pilots to control the aircraft.
- b. Sudden incapacitation or restraint of both pilots which rendered them unable to control the aircraft through some act of other aircraft occupants."

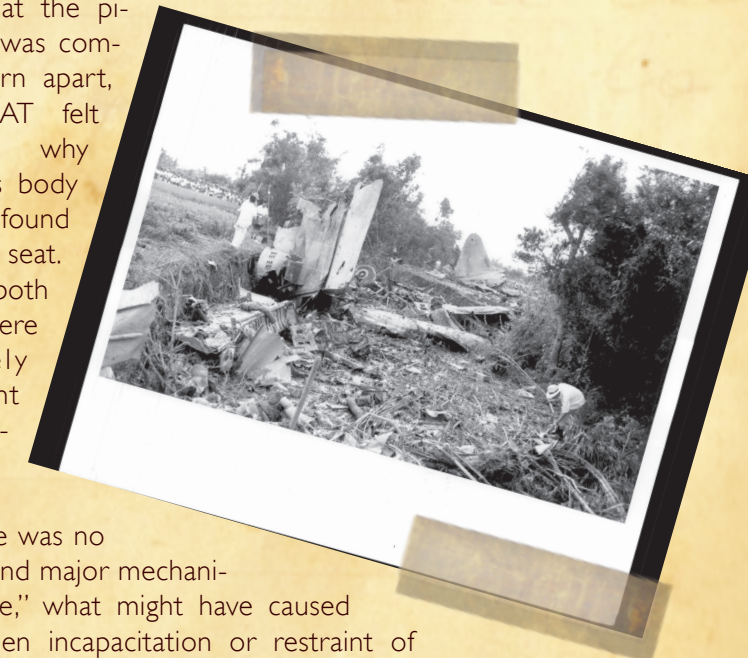
After an exhaustive investigation of the plane's mechanical condition, both prior to and following the crash, the only significant questions were the condition of two control cables found broken following the crash, a claim that the left engine was over speeding at the time of the crash, and the condition of the pilots. CAT's analysis of the propeller hubs and gears indicated both propellers were set at the proper pitch, and other clues including reports from people on the ground found no indication that either engine was performing outside of expected parameters.

The broken control cables were sent to laboratories in the United States for analysis. The normal stress on the cables when functioning was about 20 pounds while the cables themselves were rated to handle 1000 pounds. Also it was noted that during the crash the cables had cut into the fuselage. While after

their initial investigation Chinese officials regarded the broken cables as contributing factors, further tests indicated the cables broke during the crash when subjected to extreme stress. Also, even if the cables had broken in flight, according to CAT the two onboard pilots would have been able to control the aircraft with little difficulty. In addition CAT's report stated that had an engine over accelerated, as was initially suspected by the local authorities, both pilots would have had no trouble dealing with that issue either.

Upon discovering that pilot Bengee Lin's body was not strapped into his seat, the Chinese authorities initially believed that the he had behaved in an overconfident manner that could have led to the crash. This was further investigated by CAT. The crash was so violent that the pilot's seat was completely torn apart, which CAT felt explained why the pilot's body was not found with the seat. Also both pilots were extremely competent and experienced.

So if there was no "sudden and major mechanical trouble," what might have caused the "sudden incapacitation or restraint of both pilots?" The two pilots, Bengee Lin, the Pilot in Command, and M. H. Kung, Second in Command, had extensive C-46 experience. Pilot Bengee Lin had 17 years of flight experience, having logged 11,881 hours, 4,914 of them in a C-46. M.H. Kung had been a



professional pilot for 19 years with 13,074 hours logged of which 9,270 were in a C-46. Both pilots were in good physical condition according to their most recent examinations, and both were regarded as mentally healthy. The likelihood that both would collapse simultaneously would have been remote in the extreme.

If the pilots were not incapacitated by individual physical maladies, and mechanical problems had been ruled out, that left the most troubling possibility: the pilots had been rendered "unable to control the aircraft through some act of other aircraft occupants." The likelihood that this was the

case became stronger when two .45 caliber automatic pistols were found in the wreckage. The hammer was found in the cocked position with the carriage forward on one of the pistols. Two radar manuals were found in the debris the day after the crash. The inside pages of both manuals had been hollowed out in the shape of a .45 caliber automatic. Neither pistol was found with the manuals.

Lt. Tseng Yang, an engineering officer in the Chinese Navy, had checked out the manuals from the library of the Chinese Navy's Peng Hu Ship Building Yard No. 2. Also, two pistols had been reported missing from the Armory of the Peng Hu Ship Building Yard No. 2.



What was Lt. Tseng's story? He was listed as a passenger on Flight B-908 along with a civilian companion, Wang Tseng Yee. On June 17 a civilian, Wang Tseng Yee, made reservations for himself and Lt. Tseng Yang to fly the following day to Makung/Taipei. However, on the 18th Lt. Tseng changed the reservation to June 20th. That day Lt. Tseng checked in about 3:30 p.m. in the afternoon wearing his navy uniform and with no checked luggage.

One conclusion can be drawn immediately; Lt. Tseng had no intent of returning the manuals to the library as they had been ruined before being taken on the plane. Lt. Tseng would also have had access to both the pistols and the manuals, immediately pointing suspicion at him. Because both Lt. Tseng and Wang Tseng Yee had booked the flight for each other, the circumstantial case against them as co-conspirators is extremely strong. During the investigation of the crash site, while the victim's bodies were being recovered, one body with its abdomen ripped open was found near the pilots' bodies. It was passenger Wang's body, and according to the medical examiner, the nature of Wang's injuries indicated he was standing at the moment of impact.

The Chinese medical examiner, Dr. W. S. Cheng, noticed "a small hole at the right side of the face" of Pilot Bengee Lin in a photograph made by the Chinese security division at the crash site. He also observed that "approximately from that hole a large part of the front of the face and skull was thrown open and to the left and upward." Dr. Cheng also reported that following the cremation of Co-pilot M. H. Kung, a three-inch spike was found in the ashes. The source of the spike was unknown.

It appears from the evidence that for reasons unknown, Lt. Tseng and passenger Wang attempted to take control of Flight B-908 shortly after takeoff. In that attempt the pilots were incapacitated; possibly Pilot Bengee Lin was shot and Co-pilot Kung was stabbed. In any event, both pilots were rendered incapable of flying the plane, and it crashed. What the motive of the alleged hijackers may have been is not clear. That they were suicidal is a remote possibility, but a more likely possibility was that they wanted to take the plane to the Chinese Mainland which was just across the Taiwan Straits from Taichung. In any event, 55 innocent people died as a result of this act of terror, including 19 Americans, a Korean flight attendant, and 35 Chinese people.



**CONFIDENTIAL**

Copy #3

A. Conduct of Crash Site Investigation

1. Subsequent to notification of the crash of B-908, a Security representative arrived at the crash site at 0040 hours local time 21 June 1964 to assist CAT's Man. Dir. and members of CAT's Accident Investigation Team (AIT). In the interim, arrangements were being made through U.S. Government Navy and Air Force units to immediately dispatch medical aid to the crash site, in the event survivors existed, to augment the CAT medical aid accompanying the AIT.
2. The crash site was cordoned off by local police. Liaison was effected with the Chief of Police, Taichung Hsien Police Bureau and the Chief, Feng Yuan Sub-Police Bureau, who were the two officers responsible for necessary security measures at the crash site. Permission was granted to allow the AIT members and the CAT official photographer to conduct a preliminary examination of the site.
3. Observation indicated that there were no survivors and the remaining parts of B-908 were distributed over an area estimated to be 200-300 meters square. The bodies of the victims were littered throughout the rice paddy area, beyond immediate recognition, and personal effects were widely spread over the crash site.
4. CAT and Air Asia representatives were prohibited by police from touching the victims or wreckage prior to the contemplated arrival of the coroner and procurator in the early morning of 21 June 1964. Photographs, however, were taken by the CAT photographer.
5. Although the coroner and procurator did not arrive until 0745L 21 June, preliminary preparation was made in the interim with regards to blankets, plastic bags and ropes as well as providing laborers to effect the removal of the corpses at such time as post mortem examinations were conducted and proper judgments made by the coroner and procurator. While awaiting the latter two officials, anxious relatives, newspapermen and others voiced loud and emotional disapproval of the delay.
6. Although effective liaison developed with the police and facilitated the movement of CAT and Air Asia representatives in the inquest area, at 1900L 21 June local police advised that they were withdrawing from the crash site. In order to preserve the remaining wreckage, arrangements were made by CAT to maintain a 10 man police force to insure proper protection of the wreckage so that investigation could be properly facilitated.
7. A searching examination was continued by CAT, Air Asia, and government personnel at the crash site until 26 June. Mine detector teams furnished by Taiwan General Garrison Headquarters along with AIT and Security team members and locally hired diggers, examined every piece of earth, rice paddy field and ditches. Where reactions were received on the mine detector meter, the laborers immediately dug into the soil.
8. On 26 June, the wreckage of B-908 was removed to Tainan with Air Asia personnel acting as guards to protect the materials removed.

**SECRET**  
**MEMORANDUM**

18 JAN 1968

*See Contact [redacted] in any info regarding de-activation of station and please take note of equipment.*  
DATE: 1 January 1968

TO : BM via SOM/VTE  
FROM : SCC/VTE  
SUBJECT: L61 Recovery Trip Report

REF. No. R/S-L08-68/001

REC'D WAS JAN 16 1968

28/Dec.

Departed VTE 0758L, arrived L39 0922L via PBW. Standby for aircraft and information from AB-1 customer, however reported L61 area still not secured till 1400L, customer said will try to-morrow then returned L08 with PEA. It was too late to receive SOM's message for L39 RON while I arrived L08 at 1350L.

29/Dec.

Departed VTE by M/R/S 58Z 0830L, arrived L39 0950L. Proceed to AB-1 customer office. Have learnt that friendly troop already moved to L61 but security information still expecting from LS54 Army Headquarter. At P.M. I went to confirm with AB-1 customer again, said that search aircraft PCL still unable to land L61 presumed situation still questionable, the team probably will go there by to-morrow morning. Rough briefing has been given by AB-1 customer. Returned to L39 radio station for standby and RON.

30/Dec.

Arrived airport 0730L and proceeded to AB-1 customer office at 0820L. There PIC of H52 gave all SAR team briefing as following:

- 1) A red panel made by rubber cloth was handed over to me by customer.
- 2) I was appointed by PIC of H52 that I will on board H54, also I am supposed in the first aircraft to land at L61. As soon as aircraft touches ground, the aircraft will pull up and circling over head. All I have to do is open my signal panel with red color up place it to a location where considered suitable for chopper to pick up the bodies and myself.
- 3) If I receive ground fire, stay where I am with the red panel, lay down and do not move, the chopper will pick me up and forget about the bodies. No questions arose by team personnel after briefing then our ETD set 0900L proceeding to LS54 where one Lao army colonel and one liaison officer will be picked up. Both choppers standby on ground LS54 for final situation confirmation from L61.

**SECRET**

GROUP 1  
Excluded from automatic  
downgrading and  
declassification

Accidents  
Moong Phatane

**SECRET**  
**MEMORANDUM**

TO :  
FROM :  
SUBJECT: Cont'd

DATE :  
REF. No.

Parties departed LS54 1107L, arrived L61 after few circling made in area and landed in front of the station about 50 yards. After we jumped off from the aircraft. The U.S AIR ATTACHE Capt (NAME UNKWON) and 3 U.S specialists directed to station with me, Captain told me to watch out the unfriendly's booby-trap. I got into the station and looked around has no bodies found, then I rushed to take some photos and walked alone carefully to check both side of the runway, I reached the TACAN area, not seen the rest of us, I also took some snap shots than follow the road to the bodies site. I arrived the body site, the rest of us already there, I have to wait them to complete inspection of all bodies search for possible traps before I can pack the bodies into the bag.

The first one bag was completed by AIRA personnel, it was our late radio operator K. Ratanakosoon, I opened the bag and use inside blanket to clean his face then I took a photo for him, I closed the bag and the local people brought the bag by walk to station site. I walked further about 30 feet where the smell was terrible beyond 30 feet away, one of U.S. Army captain was shown me how to package the bodies then he left the place with other inspection party to TACAN site. While the local people covered their noses and standed there, I could not speak any local language but I presented cigarettes to all soldiers and local people who besides to me, I started to open the blanket and bags to package each body, smell makes hard to breath without physical protection, thousands of flies on their bodies, all of them faces and began deterioraing but still identified except R/O K. Ratanakosoon still in good shape. Other completed three bodies packing in 20 minutes and delivered to station site with army truck, then I inhaled fresh air for about 5 minutes as much as I can, and all my uniforms got wet, 5 minutes later I went to station to double check if anything left, I walked into the building step by step, there radio log, message form and records all messed inside the operating room, the room was directly hit by shell blasted in the center of roofing and no walls left, broken glasses scattered over 30 feet away wide, only ~~Four~~ SSB sets on the floor and one of them seems to be repairable, no tubes and crystals can be found inside, one airconditioner also considered repairable only cover damaged. I took one SSB set to the bodies site then I returned again to station to picked another airconditioner. Nothing can be done of the refrigerator due to time limited. I opened my signal panel and standby for chopper pick-up. About 30 minutes later H54 landed our site and H52 landed TACAN side at same time. I got one aircraft and pull up 4 bodies with the fly mechanic. Everything set and departed L61, arrived L39 about 2:00 P.M. returned to L08 by 545 L39/T08/L08 with bodies ATAL08 1707L.

AIR AMERICA

**SECRET**

**SECRET**  
**MEMORANDUM**

TO :  
FROM :  
SUBJECT: Cont'd

DATE :  
REF. No.

Furthermore, R/O Ampol Chan-aum and R/M Sorita were captured by unfriendly reported by one of Lao paratrooper captain, he said they were taken away to 18 KM north of L61 (Houay Poun) on 27th Dec..

Viewing of no blood stain on station floor, I believed that all five of them (four R/Os one mechanic) had escaped the shell blast but obviously they were captured and three R/Os been shot to dead while run out for safe alone the road side (body site) about 1 KM away from the station.

As for destroyed equipment left on scene are:

|                       |                                   |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| One ea 90T150         | (Repairable, brought back to VTE) |
| One ea 90S150         | (Beyond repair)                   |
| Two ea 9SR            | (Beyond repair)                   |
| Two ea Generators     | (Completely burnt)                |
| One ea Airconditioner | (Repairable, brought back to VTE) |
| One ea Ice box        | (Beyond repair)                   |

All WX observation equipment, personal effects and two telephone sets were lost.

Antenna masts (2) still standing with guy wires on, antennas missing.

*[Signature]*  
SCC/VTE

cc: DCD/TPE - One set of photo attached  
CS via BM OM/UDN  
CU via VR KG KZ/VTE  
File

UPHOLDING THE AIRMEN'S BOND

**SECRET**



## Why We Care

On Sunday the 30th of June 1974 the last flight schedule was published at the Air America Udorn, Thailand Base. Two Volpar Beech aircraft flown by Berl King and Jim Rhyne were being ferried to Saigon, Vietnam. Both King and Rhyne are aviation icons. This faded mimeographed schedule must surely hang framed on many an ex-employee's wall as it does mine.

C.J. Abadie, the Air America Vice President for Northern Thailand, asked his Assistant Richard Ford to write an appropriate commentary to be printed on the last flight schedule for this last day of operations in the Thailand/Laos region,

*"So ends the last sentence of the final paragraph of a saga that may have an epilogue, but never a sequel. It has been to each participating individual an experience which varied according to their role and perspective. However, there is a common bond of knowledge and satisfaction of having taken part in something worthwhile, and with just a slight sense of pity for those lesser souls who could not, or would not, share in it.*

*This last flight schedule is dedicated to those for whom a previous similar schedule represented an appointment with their destiny."*

Air America continued to fly the customer's requirements in Vietnam. Those operations came to an inglorious end in April of 1975. These events were recorded by film and have been viewed by the entire world for the last 34 years. This was a sad end to this saga that should have concluded much differently.

Civil Air Transport (CAT) began USG contract operations in Vientiane Laos in 1957. This division of CAT became Air America in 1959. The purpose of this aviation company in the Kingdom of Lao at the time was largely humanitarian. CAT/Air America aircraft flew many missions to drop food (rice) to Lao and Hmoung in northern Laos after a bad harvest. In 1961 the company added rotor wing (helicopter) aircraft based in Udorn which greatly increased operational capabilities. Short field Takeoff/Landing (STOL) aircraft had also been added to the fleet. These types of specialized aircraft required exceptionally skilled pilots, loadmasters, and maintenance support. Operations control, area security information specialists, and logistical capability developed to support flight operations in a very difficult and often dangerous environment. Navigation aids, landing strip and HLZ development, and weather forecasting services were rudimentary at best.

The ability of the CAT/Air America management to find, train, and control what we knew to be a very unusual (the term crazy is often used) team of employees for so many years, is now acknowledged as absolutely astounding. Over forty nationalities, worked, played, and often bled together. "Their individual experiences varied according to their role and perspective."

There were heroes and villains of course, as in any form of quasi-military human endeavor. But for those who toiled throughout the CAT/Air America, SAT, and Air Asia system, as well as our brothers in direct government service - the 'Customers', Continental Air Services (brand 'X') who were involved throughout this part and place of American

History, - who would have imagined that after nearly four decades that "common bond" remains so much a part of our lives. This bond is as solid and viable today as it was then, is now, and forever will be. - (except, of course, for those same lesser souls, who cannot or will not understand why.)

As civilian veterans of a very sad and misunderstood conflict in South Asia, we have not fared well in the media, or in some literature. Even though company aircraft and crews rescued more than 150 downed U.S. airmen, provided food and medical aid to thousands of refugees, assisted our primary customer's directed Lao and Hmong forces in holding down 2 crack NVA divisions until 1974 when they were released to participate in the final siege of Saigon that ended the war, very few knew or cared. But we knew that we had "taken part in something worthwhile."

The continued myths of customer/Air America participation in drug trafficking are still being found and published by unknowing and uncaring writers. The silly 'Air America' movie advanced this agenda by those who seek to savage the reputation of this great country, our customers, and our fellow workers.

So why do we care? Our fraternity—The CAT/Air America associations exists largely because we see and believe it is proper and necessary to meet periodically; to access our mutual place in history, learn of our consequences, and celebrate the lives of our friends and associates—our family, and particularly those who have gone before. We should continue to build and strengthen this legacy which history will receive from us. It is our 'epilogue'.

Over the years there was never a concentrated effort to refute these fables. We



Earthquake's Final Flight by Jeffrey W. Bass  
Donated Courtesy of the Fairchild Corporation

now see that it is possible and entirely proper to stand up and confront those who would tarnish our history. Though the efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency who has provided the materials, and the McDermott Library at The University of Texas at Dallas, who has archived the true and accurate records for the unbiased students of history, we are greatly appreciative. We also are grateful that the Vietnam Center at the Texas Tech University that also provides excellent resources to serious students of history. This association is proud that so many of our members have contributed their personal accounts.

CAT/Air America associations are indebted to the McDermott Library where our Memorial plaque is located. It is our 'Wall' and provides a place for quiet and respectful contemplation of the lives of our brothers whose names were on the flight schedule of destiny.

"And God will raise you up on eagle's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of His hand."

And hear the piper,

L. Michael Kandt,  
Chaplain and General Secretary  
Air America Association, Inc.

**The CAT/Air America Memorial Plaque**

| Date              | Type of Machine | Number of Missions | Durham | Other | Post             |
|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------|-------|------------------|
| 25 October 1964   | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       | LA BIRDECKER, EA |
| 19 May 1972       | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 12 September 1964 | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 4 October 1963    | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 13 October 1962   | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 17 November 1967  | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 8 August 1967     | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 26 July 1962      | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 8 September 1972  | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 27 July 1969      | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 24 December 1967  | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 14 January 1966   | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 20 June 1964      | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 20 June 1964      | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 16 February 1968  | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 23 November 1972  | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 20 June 1964      | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 7 April 1973      | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 8 August 1967     | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 10 January 1971   | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |
| 19 August 1969    | T-28            | 1                  | 1      |       |                  |

**PASSENGERS**

**REMARKS**

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Gerald C Delong<br>10 April 1970         | Rafael A DeVera<br>24 July 1962           | Charles T Dieffenbach<br>22 July 1964  |
| Reggie Dimaculangan<br>22 December 1967  | Carlos Dominguez<br>30 March 1971         | Clarence N Driver<br>MIA               |
| Jean H Dubuque<br>16 July 1960           | Bernardo L Dychitan<br>7 December 1968    | Wayne W Esminger<br>6 March 1966       |
| Darrel A Eubanks<br>13 August 1961       | Frank Farthing<br>11 January 1967         | Roberto O Finney<br>2 December 1972    |
| Norwood N Forte<br>13 August 1961        | Benjamin A Franklin<br>11 January 1967    | William J Fraser<br>7 December 1968    |
| Vincente B Garza<br>MIA                  | William J Gibbs<br>13 May 1969            | Norman A Grammer<br>14 August 1969     |
| John Grover<br>25 July 1972              | Joel M Gudahl<br>27 August 1972           | Nguyen van Hahn<br>16 January 1972     |
| Y S Har<br>29 July 1948                  | Truett H Harper<br>6 March 1970           | Robert Hartle<br>28 April 1972         |
| Howard F Heinrich<br>4 February 1962     | Robert Heising<br>9 December 1950         | Charles C Heritage<br>27 November 1968 |
| Charles G Herrick<br>5 September 1963    | Billy K Hester<br>10 April 1970           | Fu Shuyong Ho<br>13 September 1967     |
| Emmons B Hodgkins Jr<br>25 November 1968 | Paul Holden<br>7 June 1967                | D M Hoskins<br>18 June 1972            |
| Kenneth A Houp<br>17 March 1971          | Jack T Houston<br>5 December 1967         | Tsuan ho Hsieh<br>27 December 1963     |
| T H Hu<br>20 June 1964                   | Quang Huang Du<br>11 July 1964            | Hua Ming Huang<br>16 October 1968      |
| Throng Lien Huynh<br>12 August 1971      | Alfredo Joco<br>31 July 1966              | Norman R Jones<br>8 November 1949      |
| Charles D Jones<br>5 March 1965          | K C Kan<br>20 June 1964                   | Niram Kasorphon<br>3 July 1973         |
| Howard W Kelly<br>16 January 1969        | Throngkham Khammanephet<br>27 August 1972 | Souphang Khamphanh<br>2 March 1969     |
| Thanom Khanthaphengxay<br>25 July 1972   | Paul Y H King<br>16 February 1968         | George Kirkland<br>22 July 1973        |
| Mu Shuen Kung<br>20 June 1964            | Manu Latoi<br>18 April 1974               | Thi Mau Le<br>5 September 1965         |
| Xuan Duc Le<br>4 February 1962           | Hsu Chiu Lee<br>4 February 1962           | Z T Lee<br>17 August 1963              |
| CY Lee<br>20 June 1964                   | Ruby Lee<br>20 June 1964                  | Robert E Lee<br>5 May 1968             |
| V L Lee Jr<br>27 July 1974               | Arthur Leonard<br>1 December 1969         | John S Lewis<br>13 August 1961         |
| Richard H Lieberth<br>12 October 1965    | Benji Lin<br>20 June 1964                 | Herbert Liu<br>27 December 1963        |

**The CAT/Air America Memorial Plaque (cont.)**

| Date              | Type of Machine | Number of Missions | Duties Performed | Officer's Name        | Year |
|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------|
| 11 December 1967  | T-28            | 1.0                | 1.0              | Nicholas B Loss       | 1967 |
| 6 December 1972   | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Abdul H Marchecar     | 1972 |
| 16 January 1969   | "               | 2.0                | 2.0              | Milton N Matheson     | 1969 |
| 23 November 1972  | "               | 2.0                | 2.0              | Charles J McCarthy    | 1972 |
| 31 December 1973  | "               | 4.0                | 4.0              | William L Meek        | 1973 |
| 3 December 1972   | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Robert S Moore        | 1972 |
| 25 November 1968  | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Jon Charles Murray    | 1968 |
| 11 July 1961      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Caferino B Nabung     | 1961 |
| 19 July 1949      | "               | 3.0                | 3.0              | Edward Norwich        | 1949 |
| 27 September 1965 | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | John L Oyer           | 1965 |
| 24 December 1967  | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Phanomphom Phochan    | 1967 |
| 3 August 1967     | "               | 3.0                | 3.0              | Lowell Z Pirkle       | 1967 |
| 22 September 1971 | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Billy P Pratt         | 1971 |
| 14 January 1966   | "               | 3.0                | 3.0              | William P Pruner      | 1966 |
| 24 December 1967  | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Kosoom Ratanakosoom   | 1967 |
| 25 November 1968  | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Baltazar Reyes        | 1968 |
| 10 April 1970     | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Hury D Rogers         | 1970 |
| 24 August 1964    | "               | 2.0                | 2.0              | Albert Sandoval       | 1964 |
| 27 August 1972    | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Praves Satarsakij     | 1972 |
| 27 September 1965 | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Justin G Mahony       | 1965 |
| 23 March 1967     | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Bruce C Massey        | 1967 |
| 5 April 1969      | "               | 2.0                | 2.0              | L T Mau               | 1969 |
| 6 May 1954        | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | James B McGovern      | 1954 |
| 18 February 1970  | "               | 4.0                | 4.0              | Jon Christian Merkel  | 1970 |
| 1 July 1968       | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Vincent Morales       | 1968 |
| 4 March 1969      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Thomas J Murray       | 1969 |
| MIA               | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Kenekeo Narissack     | MIA  |
| 7 April 1973      | "               | 3.0                | 3.0              | Charles L Osterman    | 1973 |
| 18 August 1964    | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Cornelio N Pascual    | 1964 |
| 31 December 1966  | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Hua Khan Phuoc        | 1966 |
| 25 November 1968  | "               | 3.0                | 3.0              | Lester M Porter       | 1968 |
| MIA               | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Prasit Promsuwan      | MIA  |
| 24 April 1972     | "               | 3.0                | 3.0              | Lloyd Randel          | 1972 |
| 12 June 1972      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | James E Rausch        | 1972 |
| 27 November 1962  | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Frederick J Riley     | 1962 |
| 7 April 1973      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Valeriano P Rosales   | 1973 |
| 13 August 1961    | "               | 2.0                | 2.0              | Roger J Sarno         | 1961 |
| MIA               | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Khamphonh Saysongkham | MIA  |
| 16 July 1972      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Feliciano C Manalo    | 1972 |
| 30 May 1961       | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Charles H Mateer      | 1961 |
| 7 December 1968   | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Patrick F McCarthy    | 1968 |
| 10 April 1970     | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Roger B McKean        | 1970 |
| 17 July 1963      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Charuk Milindre       | 1963 |
| 29 April 1971     | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Harry E Mulholland    | 1971 |
| 3 October 1965    | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Frank Muscal          | 1965 |
| 17 July 1963      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Gideon A Newton       | 1963 |
| 22 October 1967   | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Norman M Owens        | 1967 |
| MIA               | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | W A Peng              | MIA  |
| 5 April 1969      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Nguyen Thi Phuoc      | 1969 |
| 2 March 1970      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Harvey B Potter       | 1970 |
| 17 July 1963      | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Gerald I Prudhomme    | 1963 |
| 18 February 1962  | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | James A Rasmussen     | 1962 |
| 27 August 1972    | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | William E Reeves      | 1972 |
| MIA               | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | George L Ritter       | MIA  |
| 17 February 1972  | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Coonrang Samburan     | 1972 |
| 11 April 1969     | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Meiko Sase            | 1969 |
| 5 July 1965       | "               | 1.0                | 1.0              | Alexander Scandalis   | 1965 |

**PASSENGERS**

| Name                | Date              | Remarks                                |
|---------------------|-------------------|--|
| Norman A Schwartz   | 3 December 1952   | Welcome A Scott<br>30 September 1960   |
| K H Shia            | 20 June 1964      | K H Shih<br>20 June 1964               |
| Milton E SMarcht    | 10 April 1970     | Franklin D Smith<br>12 October 1965    |
| Wilson P Smith      | 15 March 1973     | Robert C Snoddy<br>3 December 1952     |
| B Somchai           | 23 November 1972  | R Somphone<br>16 February 1966         |
| Sampas Sreesuraj    | 6 January 1968    | Somboon Sripa<br>6 January 1968        |
| William J Sullivan  | 12 April 1962     | Eduardo T Sunga<br>26 November 1968    |
| Narong Tantilohakul | 17 July 1963      | Clyde T Tarbet<br>29 July 1948         |
| Nguyen Van Thai     | 14 January 1966   | Prasidhi Thanee<br>MIA                 |
| Trikit Thuttanon    | 2 June 1971       | Yik Chiu To<br>MIA                     |
| Nit Tongkorn        | 24 December 1967  | Jaime Torres<br>19 March 1967          |
| Roy F Townley       | MIA               | Earl Trager<br>7 December 1969         |
| Leon M Tucker       | 21 September 1966 | BY Van<br>20 June 1964                 |
| George A Varney     | 6 April 1962      | George A Verdon<br>17 July 1963        |
| S C Wang            | 2 June 1971       | Arnold Weir<br>1 April 1949            |
| T W Wen             | 9 December 1950   | H C Weng<br>20 June 1964               |
| John W Wilmont Jr   | 19 May 1966       | Walter L Wizbowski<br>30 May 1961      |
| Glen R Woods        | 14 August 1969    | Aubrey A Wooten<br>17 July 1963        |
| C Youthipana        | 22 July 1966      | L S Yu<br>27 December 1963             |
|                     |                   | Pratheep Sermsakul<br>11 October 1971  |
|                     |                   | Buncha Sirisapya<br>4 July 1969        |
|                     |                   | Thomas C Smith<br>22 February 1969     |
|                     |                   | Louis B Soha<br>9 October 1956         |
|                     |                   | Khamouth Sousadalay<br>4 February 1972 |
|                     |                   | Herbert S Strouss<br>4 February 1962   |
|                     |                   | Betty Tang<br>16 February 1968         |
|                     |                   | James Tate<br>26 June 1967             |
|                     |                   | Frank G Thorsen<br>32 July 1973        |
|                     |                   | S L (Eddie) Tong<br>26 November 1960   |
|                     |                   | Vichit Tovira<br>18 June 1968          |
|                     |                   | T B Trai<br>22 June 1969               |
|                     |                   | Tu Van<br>28 August 1972               |
|                     |                   | Boumy Vongachak<br>28 December 1970    |
|                     |                   | Edward A Weissenback<br>MIA            |
|                     |                   | Leonard I Wiehrdt<br>8 April 1972      |
|                     |                   | K S Wong<br>26 November 1960           |
|                     |                   | Morimitsu Yazima<br>20 June 1962       |
|                     |                   | Chaveng Yuphaphin<br>25 November 1968  |



