

Air America

Episode 1

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Air America... some may have heard the name, the more educated who have, for reasons best known to themselves, look over their shoulders before commenting. In the movie, 'Air America', Mel Gibson's portrayal of a flamboyant, Gung Ho, irresponsible pilot working with that Airline gave a very a distorted image of the civilian pilots working with Air America. They flew under extreme difficulties and at great risk to themselves, with a company designated to stem the tide of Communist forces seeping down through Laos. Gibson's portrayal in no way depicted the proper image and credit due to those men and their actions, exercised in the course of duty.

At the end of WW2 General Claire Chennault and Whiting Willauer were instrumental in the formation of the airline Civil Air Transport in China. This carrier was created to operate a commercial passenger and cargo service in South East Asia. In the '50's the CIA secretly bought CAT, and under the guise of a commercial operator this company furnished "aircraft and crews for secret intelligence operations". During the Korean War they "made more than 100 hazardous flights over Mainland China, air dropping agents and supplies". Air America was what could be called a subsidiary of CAT and was the transport wing of the Central Intelligence Agency, better known as the CIA. It's job was to transport personnel and supplies when and where they were required.

In 1954, according to the Geneva Conference, Laos got the status of an independent state and like every other state in the world there were groups for and against such a configuration. The Royal Lao Government was the designated governing authority, however the Pathet Laos (PL's) whose pro-Communist characteristics during the cold war, resulted in their endeavoring to take control of that country as they engaged in gorilla type tactics to overthrow, the appointed authority in the Country.

The Ho Chi Min trail, the main Communist supply line, wove its way down through Laos as did the Communists and their supplies while they continued their rampage, to takeover that country. South and west of the Mekong River came Thailand, and though its border outposts suffered an occasional PL attack but their encroachment into Thailand was curtailed despite the fact of that being, no doubt their next goal. From there the remainder of South East Asia was open to them. The Australians and New Zealanders were very aware of this and they had no intention of allowing Communist infiltration into their respective countries.

But to reminisce for a moment. In Nov 1954, CAT pilots flying, C119's in French Air Force markings, flew over six hundred air drop supply missions to the besieged French paratroop garrison at Dien Bien Phu. During these missions several of these aircraft suffered severe flak damage. During one sortie, an aircraft flown by John B "Earthquake Magoon" McGovern, and his copilot Wallace Bufford was shot down, resulting in the death of both these men. "The kicker survived. McGovern and Bufford were amongst the first Americans killed in combat in the Vietnam War". The crash occurred just south of Dien Bien Phu, and while there has been a

delay recovering the remains it is expected that this will eventually be accomplished. After the fall of Dien Bien Phu, CAT crews flying the same C119s continued dropping supplies to isolated French outposts in Indochina. As a result of the Geneva Agreement signed in July 1954, between August and October of that same year CAT transported 19,808 men, women and children South of the 17th parallel in twelve C46 aircraft.

In 1955 the rice crop failed and famine threatened several provinces in Laos. Air America again came to the rescue, this time using 3 C46's based out of Udorn in Thailand. They air dropped over a 1,000 tons of relief supplies. Rice was packed in eight stone bags. Each eight stone bag would then be encased in a sixteen stone bag. The bags would then be allowed to free fall from the aircraft. Normally the inside bag would burst on impact but would be contained by the outer bag, saving the rice. Such operations allowed drops into unconventional locations such as on to the sides of mountains and/or marked locations in the jungle.