

Air America

Episode 2

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When the troubles started in Laos in 1959 there was concern for the Hmong tribesmen there, lest they suffer retaliation from the Communists as a result of their association with the French. Vang Pao, a Hmong leader, was motivated by General Phoumi of the Royal Lao Army and assisted by the US Special Forces trained and turned the Hmong into a fighting force to be reckoned with. Vang Pao maintained they would fight the Communists or leave the Country while adding that he could raise an army of 10,000 men. These tribesmen were scattered over the mountains in Laos. The CIA realized the necessity of good communications as a result of which Air America entered the Rotary Wing business in earnest and supported the Hmong during their many battles but in particular with the one fought against the Pathet Lao, at Pa Dong. Charles Mateer and Walter Wizbowski were the first two Air America helicopter pilots killed as they attempted to land supplies to besieged Hmong in bad weather. Ousted from Pa Dong, Vang Pao moved his forces southeast to Pha Khao. The United States Special Forces had trained 9000 Hmong tribesmen and furnished them with equipment to engage in gorilla tactics. As their numbers grew, so did the Air America Rotary wing fleet and went on to become their lifeline. While the men were away fighting Air America kept the villages supplied with food while furnishing supplies and equipment to their fighting men. This hall-marked the beginning of the Air America operation out of Udorn in Thailand.

In the mid 60's the Company I worked with went out of business and I headed back to New York to try find another job. I saw an advertisement in the New York Times from an employment agency, who needed FAA licensed dispatchers. I had an interview with the Air Asia Company in Washington on the following day, and I was told that the position was with CAT in Taiwan. When the interviewers saw that the location was not a problem for me, all they asked was "When can you start." "Immediately" was my reply. So the Air Asia Company, on behalf of their subsidiary Civil Air Transport in Taipei hired me.

I expected to be travelling immediately from NY to Taiwan, but a gentleman at the interview allowed me to travel via Shannon and London, and therefore pay a visit to my wife and kids in Limerick.

The following week I left Shannon for Heathrow, picked up a JAL DC8 via Munich /Anchorage, before continuing on to Tokyo, where I overnighted. Next day, I continued on to Okinawa, to pick up a CAT Convair 880, which got me to Taipei several hours later. In Taipei I met Al Ozorio who introduced me to so many people over the next couple of days that I really came to the stage that I did not know who was who. One day Al called me into his office, and out of the blue told me that I was seconded to Air America and said, "You will be going to Udorn tomorrow". "Udorn" I thought, "where in God's name is that..." After my meeting, I headed to the operations office and asked the man behind the counter, "Where is Udorn" and he went on to show me on the map exactly where it was, in Thailand. The following day I met Hank Schulte, an A&P also a new arrival to the Company and who, like myself, was heading for Udorn. We both boarded the CAT aeroplane for Hong Kong where I met Joe Kane, a former Trans-ocean crew member but who now was the CAT Station Manager there. The transit was brief

and we were soon back in the air headed for Bangkok where we arrived late in the evening.

The CAT people had arranged an hotel and all the trimmings which came to an abrupt halt on the following morning, when we boarded a train, which I was to learn was on a par with the legendary West Clare Railway. Prior to leaving Bangkok we were told that bandits occasionally held up the train, and should that happen on this occasion we should just give them what we had, without creating hassle. For once I had reservations as to whether I had chosen the right career in the first instance. Dispatching airplanes was one thing however hearing that the James gang has a subsidiary, which had no qualms about taking someone out, and operating in Thailand was something else.

We eventually got to Udorn, and set up in the Siri Udorn Hotel. Arriving at the airport on the following day I met Dick Ford who was my immediate boss. He was a retired army Lt.Colonel and he proved to be an exceptionally pleasant man. The operations office was big, with an abnormally large movement board to facilitate the large number of operating aircraft.

A very efficient cordial staff of Thai personnel manned this office and they soon showed me the do's and don'ts of the operation. I immediately became aware my position in Air America was no different to the ones I had had with the other Airlines. My job for the most part was juggling aeroplanes and crews, which was a thing I had a lot of experience doing. I learned crews were type rated and those assigned to fixed wing aircraft such as C130's, C123's, DC3, and Porters did not jump into helicopters to start charging all over Laos buying guns as Mel Gibson's portrayal would seem to indicate.

North of the Mekong was "Indian Country", Rotary wing aircraft operating there were required to call in with position reports every ten minutes. The C123 fleet was used on what one might call a charter basis. There were two Customers, AB1, which was run by Jack Deegan, later substituted by Jim Butler. This group was assigned one C123. Roger Bartell ran AB2 and two C123's were assigned to this "customer". These "customers" were located in different parts of the Airport and the aircraft assigned to them shuttled back and forth carrying supplies from Udorn to various zones "up country" all day. The aircraft were normally allocated in this manner. However on occasions it would be necessary to give AB1 preference and so allocate them additional C123's.