

Air America

Episode 3

©Joe Hennessy

As well there were DC3's, Porters, Sikorsky UH34's and who knows what else. The day came to life around 5 AM and as mechanics checked the aircraft, tankers pumped fuel aboard as forklifts shot up and down the ramp loading pallets, some which were rigged with parachutes for dropping. I often wondered why other Airlines did not adapt to this type of delivery, it saves lots of money in wear and tare, as well as landing charges. The Operations Office prepared the flight plans as crews had breakfast in the cafeteria better known as the Club Rendezvous. Finished they immediately headed for the office to be briefed on the weather, NVA activity, flight plans, fuel loads, and possible ultimate destinations.

The 123's and DC'3's usually carried a crew of two pilots and a kicker. The man known as 'the kicker' rigged the 'chutes for drops. Once the drag went flying through the rear door his next priority was to keep out of the way, as the pallets left the airplane, like "it", left the goose. Porters carried one pilot while Helicopters, a pilot, a kicker or flight mechanic. The first morning I just stood and watched taking note of what went on. In WW2 movies I had seen flight crews getting prepared to fly but I never thought I would witness such an experience. They took careful note of what was said, commented on "Charlie's" activities and as though they were going on a joy flight, picked up their 'chutes, some carried them by the straps others threw them over their shoulders and with a smile the captain would quip "See you..." With that they were on their way across the ramp to their respective aircraft. Once everything was moving the operations people went and had breakfast.

And on one such morning I saw this low sized red headed smiling character, with a 'chute hanging from his shoulder approach me. "I'm from Cork," said the smiling Pat McCarthy who flew as a flight mechanic on the Sikorskys "I live in Limerick" I replied as we shook each other's hand. The Thais considered our accents to be the common denominator and made him aware of my presence, which resulted in Pat going out of his way to make himself known to me. We spoke for a few moments. "I got'a go... Slán..." he smiled as he left the operations office. "Slán..." I replied. From that day, every time we met we got the greatest kick out of uttering the couple of words of Gaelic we could remember, to each other, as the Thais and Americans alike tried to figure out what this language was and were in fact a possible threat to security.

Some weeks later I received a letter from the personnel department in Taipei, with insurance papers, and a bunch of other stuff, which included my company ID number. I looked at it, nodded my head and thought "James Bond 007 ... how are." Here now was I '009', two pints ahead of him, in real life, but then Bond never worked with Air America.

Not alone did Air America transport supplies but they were always on hand to go looking for those Air Force Wallies, who despite all the money that had been spent on their training, and all they had been told about the evasive action they should take in order to avoid getting themselves shot but did they listen... did they listen... oh no... Some of 'em still went and managed to go and just do that. And who went looking for them... Air America crews, these were the fellows who had no training for such tactics but they still went looking and found most of them. They were in fact so successful in this type operation that someone thought that there had to be something in it for the Air America crews and that was what gave them such incentive. A rumor quickly spread that for each Air Force crew member they rescued they were paid a bonus of \$1500.00 which was completely untrue.

From the mid to the late 60's the police action in Laos had turned into a real war and there was I in the middle of it all. Security at the time did not allowed me to write home and say what I was doing. In fact when Mary wrote the address I had was an APO Box in San Francisco. Anyway if I had mentioned what I was involved in she would probably have thought "he should keep his head covered now he's having hallucinations."

From 1965 to '67 Air America lost a total of eleven crew members up in Laos, five of which were as a result of enemy action. In fact I could very easily been the twelfth.