

Air America

Final Episode

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The 'Secret War' in Laos, as it became known, as was for a time what might be called as seasonal. From October to May the PLs and their buddies the NVA went on the offensive, shooting anything that moved, in particular the Hmong and Government forces. However when the monsoon season came around these fellows had the advantage of having the mobility provided by Air America and kicked butt deep into enemy territory. The situation there was described as “a mirror image of Vietnam”. “The North Vietnamese, impatient with the progress of the Pathet Lao, introduced major new combat forces into Laos and took control of the year’s dry season offensive”, resulting in the Hmong losing more than a thousand men. In 1969 despite their decline in strength the Hmong discarded their gorilla tactics, and using the increased air power available to them, launched a major offensive against the PL and NVA, as a result of which they reversed their position, and reclaimed all that was theirs, and they captured 1,700 tons of food, 2,500 tons of ammunition, 640 heavy weapons and 25 Soviet tanks. Their success was short lived as the NVA brought in two divisions to reclaim all they had lost.

It soon became obvious that Laos would become Communist dominated despite all the efforts to insure that this would not happen. Between ‘72 and ‘74 twenty-three Air America crew were killed in flight operations in Laos. On 27 Jan 1973 the Paris Agreement on Vietnam was concluded. American troops would move out of Vietnam. The following month, a cease-fire was declared, resulting in the formation of a coalition government for Laos. On the 3rd June 1974 Air America ceased operations in Laos and moved to Saigon, where they flew until 1975. The CIA then disbanded the Company but, Air America, like the West Clare Railway, will forever remain a myth and while people will speak and read about it, many will wonder if in fact the writings are a work of fiction.

The crews, operations personnel, mechanics and all others employed with Air America, were employed by an airline. All other airlines in the world did the identical same work, moving passengers and cargo from one place to another with circumstances dictating policy as to places and loads. The people of Air America gave it their all, to the extent that one hundred of them in total gave their lives in the course of duty in Laos. “Never in the history of the British Empire has so much been done by so few for so many”, complimented Winston Churchill on the actions of the Royal Air Force during WW2. Had Mr. Churchill been around in the mid 70’s he could just as easily have said “Never in the history of Civilian Aviation, have employees shown loyalty as did the personnel of Air America. Some gave the ultimate, which did not deter the remainder from carrying on, despite knowing the possible consequences”. A total of 243 Air America personnel gave their lives as well as those missing presumed dead, in the course of duty, during Air America's tenure in South East Asia.

12 Feb 1969, was no different to any other day. Most aircraft were in the air. Glancing at the large clock in the Operations Office I saw that it was 1200L and was about to go to lunch when the phone rang, It was Bob Crone, one of the Operations Managers from Vientiane. Due to their work load at that particular time he had a requirement for an additional C123 to help them. Our board showed we had a C123 which was presently enroute from LP to Udorn, and I requested that he position to Vientiane. At 1400L I called the Operations Office in Vientiane to enquire when this aircraft would be released back to us. I asked to speak with Bob only to be told that he had been killed an hour previously. The story I heard was that soon after he had spoken to me, he and a pilot were flying a Piper Cub which was blown out of the air by PL fire. Those two men from Vientiane, and Pat McCarthy from Udorn, Thailand were only three of the one hundred Air America people, who had life snuffed from their grasp in the course of duty in Laos.

They may be gone but are not forgotten as their names are engraved for all to see, on the role of honor at the CAT/Air America Memorial on display in the McDermott Library, at the University of Texas in Dallas, Texas.

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*'Slán' I murmured on reading the name,
Of Pat McCarthy who from Cork came,
For North of the Mekong, came a thunderous sound,
As Pat in the chopper crashed into the ground.
No more he'll reply, his spirit is free,
As his mortal remains lay in Cork by the Lee.*

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