

Air America: The History of the CIA's Covert Airline



ALEC SMITH SEPTEMBER 20, 2022



Gary Gentz stands in front of an Air America Bell Huey 204B (sourced from <https://www.air-america.org/virtualmuseum-missions.html>)

"Air America" was an air transport and logistics enterprise owned and operated by the Central Intelligence Agency. The agency denied its involvement in the airline for years, eventually selling its interest in 1978. Its pilots were considered deniable assets and its aircraft fleet was either sold, destroyed or repatriated. The purpose of Air America was to provide clandestine air support to America's allies in Southeast Asia. This included search and rescue operations, tactical insertions of special forces, the smuggling of weapons and trafficking of narcotics.

1. The Relevance of Air America Today:

Former pilots of the airline are still lobbying for pensions, healthcare and recognition for their actions during the war [source]. Human remains are still in the process of being identified and repatriated, the most recent case of

robative to the effect of illuminating a little-known, often

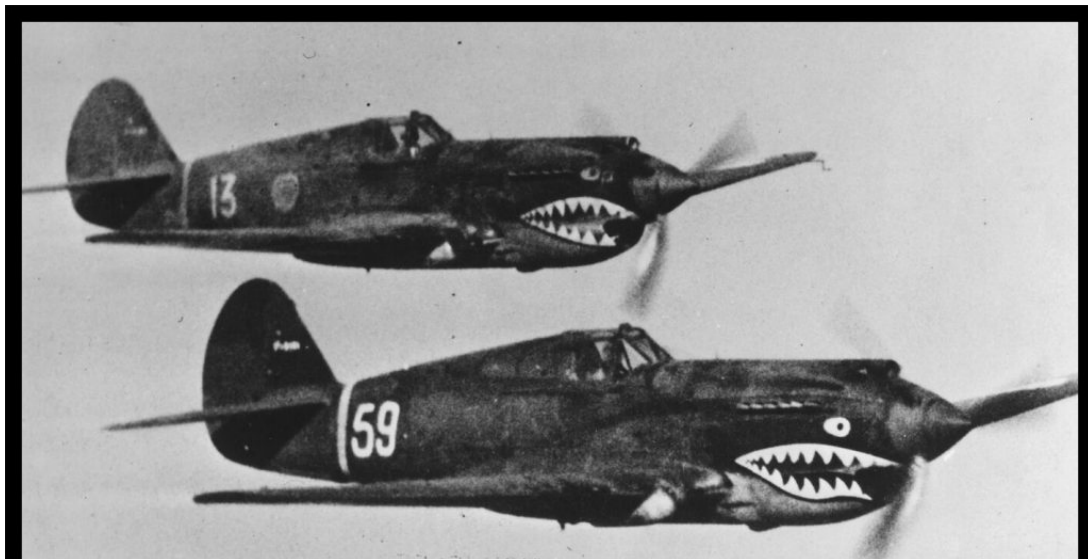
Unravelling the story of Air America is a complex endeavour because of the sparse amount of publicly available information. The history of the organization is murky. It operated in a darkly shaded grey area of international law

afflicting narcotics is still a subject of intense debate. There

2. History of Air America

The story of Air America begins not in Vietnam or Laos, but in China. During the Second World War, the United States offered support to the Chinese nationalist faction led by General Chiang Kai-Shek. Major General Claire Lee Chennault was tasked with developing the air power of the Chinese with leftover aircraft and volunteer airmen [source]. It was a formidable task given the objective. Chennault was to impede the Japanese invasion force and conduct air raids on the Japanese mainland. After establishing the American Volunteer Group (AVG) [source], Chennault was given roughly 100 Curtiss P-40 Warhawks to accomplish the task. They were shipped on a neutral freighter to Rangoon and delivered into China via Burma.

The Warhawks had a distinctive tiger-tooth, red and white eye pattern on the nose of the aircraft. The Chinese took to calling these planes 'Tigers'. When American airmen got word of their newfound nicknames, they in turn took to calling themselves "The Flying Tigers" [source]. The AVG became an official unit of the US Army Air Force in 1942, when the United States officially entered the Chinese theater as a formal combatant, adopting the name and the distinctive pattern. Today, A-10s of the USAF's 23rd Fighting Group still bear a tiger-tooth pattern [source].



The distinctive Tiger Tooth pattern on the nose of the aircraft led to unit's timeless nickname (Sourced from <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/19/1062091832/flying-tigers-americans-china-world-war-ii-history-japan> – Getty Images)

The Tigers were a successful air unit given its lack of resources. The success of the group placed Chennault in a position of the good grace of General Shek himself. Chennault used his good standing to obtain meetings with high-level nationalist officials in Yunnan province. He pitched the idea of establishing an airline which would carry tin ore to seaports in Burma, offering to link Yunnan's main export to international markets [source].

However, the communists eventually overthrew Chennault's political benefactors in Yunnan, forcing him to turn elsewhere for finance. Chennault drew upon the talent of the AVG to establish the airline. He met with Whiting Willauer, a director in the Foreign Economic Administration, to secure 50,000\$ of funding from Rio Cathay SA, a firm which financed American ventures in China. Willauer had helped Chennault establish the AVG and the Flying Tigers during the war, and the two had built up a degree of trust [source].

2.1 CAT Takes Off

Although initially welcomed by provincial officials, the two encountered fierce resistance from established Chinese capitalizing on the dire need for reliable air transport from d by Col. Ralph Olmstead, the director of the UN's new NRRA contract led to the establishment of the Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. On 25 October 1946, this cumbersome name was shortened to the Civil Air Transport (CAT).





General Chennault, Willauer and Director P.H. Ho (Director General of CNRAA) on October 25, 1946, affixing their signatures to the original founding documents of CAT (Sourced from <https://www.catassociation.org/history/history-project/>)

The organization purchased five C-47 Skytrains from the United States and established a route between Shanghai and Canton (Guangzhou). To finance operations, CAT would fly commercial flights on return from delivering aid. By 1947, the company had 5 C-47s in service and over 150 employees, and soon after a number of C-46s were delivered as well [source]. In a nod to its wartime legacy, the original CAT logo bore a tiger, visible in the photo below [source].



Identified as John G. McMeeking, Carl Prisbeck, Gene Bable and Robert Rousselot, the four men stand in front of an early CAT C-47 (UTD photo No. 1-PR1-6-PB1, sourced from <https://utdallas.app.box.com/v/history-China1>)

CAT was tasked with transporting the UN's relief supplies which had built up on the docks of Shanghai. Difficulties started from the very beginning. Two accident reports show that CAT lost at least two C-47s in the first year of operations [source]. Moreover, CAT were regularly impounded by Chinese Air Force base commanders [source].

CHINA AIR TRANSPORT ACCIDENT REPORT	
DATE: April 11, 1947	TIME: 0700
PLACE OF ACCIDENT: West Field, Peiping, China	
TYPE OF AIRCRAFT: Douglas C-47	SERIAL NO.: 578
AIRCRAFT OWNER: CHINA AIR TRANSPORT	
CREW MEMBERS:	
Captain: Yeh H. Green	
First Officer: C. J. Chow	
Radio Operator: P. Walsh	
Flight Engineer: Donald Kavery	
PERSONNEL INJURED:	None
INSPECTION DATA:	
Total time of aircraft:	12:45:25
Total engine time R/L:	2:59:30
Time since last inspection:	10:00
Last 50 hr. inspection:	April 7, 1947 Peiping by D. Kavery
Last 100 hr. inspection:	March 5, 1947 Canton by H. Wood
EXTENT OF DAMAGE BRIEFLY:	Total loss of right hand engine, nacelle, landing gear, outboard wing panel, center wing panel, and distorted skin and stringers of fuselage at radio operators compartment. Also small amount of wiring.
TYPE OF ACCIDENT:	Wreck
CAUSE OF ACCIDENT:	Unknown
ACCIDENT IN DETAIL:	On the morning of the accident 578 was prepared for one of its routine flights from Peiping to Tia Tsan. The usual daily preflight was carried out by the flight engineer; the visual checking of the engines, landing gear, airframe and the draining of the gasoline tank sumps etc. The engines were started at 0630 with the engineer standing by as fire guard. The aircraft then proceeded to the south end of the north-south runway for final check before take-off. The right hand engine was run up to 2700 RPM and 40" manifold pressure to

CHINA AIR TRANSPORT ACCIDENT REPORT	
DATE: NOV. 17, 1947	TIME: 0915
PLACE OF ACCIDENT: West Field, Peiping	
TYPE OF AIRCRAFT: DOUGLAS C-47S	SERIAL NO.: 315
AIRCRAFT OWNER: CHINA AIR TRANSPORT	
INSPECTION DATA:	
Total time of aircraft:	22:51:25
Total time of left engine:	3:41:15
Total time of right engine:	5:11:15
Time since last inspection:	00:00
Last 50hr. inspection:	22:21:25
Last 100hr. inspection:	22:21:25
CREW MEMBERS:	Crew Chief R. S. Lewis
PERSONNEL INJURED:	None
TYPE OF ACCIDENT:	Major
CAUSE OF ACCIDENT:	High winds and negligence
EXTENT OF DAMAGE BRIEFLY:	All three blades of both propellers nicked severely from the tip to the eight inch station of each blade.
ACCIDENT IN DETAIL:	The aircraft was loaded northwest in the parking area and there was a forty mile an hour wind blowing from the northwest. A fifty hour inspection had just been completed on the aircraft and it was ready for run-up. The mechanics had been on the job this day since six A.M. and had come to work without breakfast so the crew chief had dismissed all of them for about two hours, when he kept to act as fire guard and standby man. He ran the engines up by himself and in the process of the run discovered it necessary to parallel the generators. He pulled the elevator trim tab into full nose up position and ran the engines up to 1800RPM, then stepped from the cockpit to the main junction box, which is located directly behind the pilots seat, to carry out the balancing of the generators. When he looked up from the voltage regulator to the amp meters the horizon was coming up into view through the windshield. He immediately reached into the cockpit and pulled the yolk back with one hand and the throttles back with the other simultaneously. When the ship was back in a three point position the engines were still running and they were then cut off immediately. Neither engine was stopped when coming in contact with the ground. During all of this action the aircraft was empty and the control locks were off. There was about two hundred and fifty gallons of gasoline in the rear tanks.
DESCRIPTION OF MATERIAL FAILURE:	No material failure.

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These two CAT accidents reports detail a difficult mission profile for the airline (sourced from <https://utdallas.app.box.com/v/history-China1>)

...t circumstances and under immense pressure to produce
...were punched through with bomb marks and shell holes.
...the work which CAT performed was well regarded and recognized as a humanitarian endeavor by the Chinese
nationalist government and the UN accordingly [source].

typical commercial airline. It maintained an 'around the island service', transporting passengers in the old C-46s and some newer Cessnas [source]. How exactly the CIA was made aware of the airline's willingness to fulfill dangerous contracts is an unexplored chapter of the airlines history.



Gen. Chennault at his desk in the CNRRA HQ in Shanghai (sourced from <https://www.catassociation.org/history/history-project/>)

In most versions of the story, the CIA happens upon the airline, buys it and everyone slips away into a veil of mystery. In fact, CAT seems to have offered itself up to the US government. It was in dire financial straits and was losing revenue at an unsustainable pace.

The decision to buy the airline was communicated by Frank Wisner, a CIA official, to the Department of State, Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in June of 1950. The Director of the CIA approved the project to purchase the airline that same month. The agency directly communicated its intention to Willauer in July [source].

The onset of the Korean War provided increasing impetus for the US government to acquire the airline and put its assets to work. When the North Koreans rolled across the 38th parallel, the CAT office in Hong Kong immediately began preparations for increased operations in Asia. Chennault, advised by CIA field officer Al Cox, wrote a telegram to General Douglas MacArthur offering the use of CAT facilities on Taiwan as a logistical staging ground [source].

Cox was an OSS veteran, experienced in the finer points of paratrooper operations. He had developed and led a series of operations groups (OGs), parachuting into Nazi occupied France. The OGs worked closely with the French Resistance to frustrate the Nazi war machine behind enemy lines [source]. Along with Conrad La Gueux, John Mason (former head of the 90th Infantry Division) and Hans Tofte, a paramilitary specialist, the CIA began assisting CAT operations in preparation for extraction missions of US military pilots who were shot down behind enemy lines in Korea [source].

MacArthur wrote back and declined the offer. He advised CAT that the US Military had sufficient logistical capacity to deal with the requirements of sustaining a war on the Korean peninsula. CAT's contacts in the US Air Force reportedly told CAT representatives that the presence of Chennault in the organization was problematic for MacArthur. MacArthur did not want another highly decorated, highly respected general stealing the spotlight for answer. CAT sent two representatives, Joe Rosbert and another, who were told to sell CAT's capabilities and to highlight how CAT could cross the country by CAT. MacArthur was not impressed [source].

Five weeks later
and told to prepa

and CAT went to work airlifting supplies into the Korean theater [source].

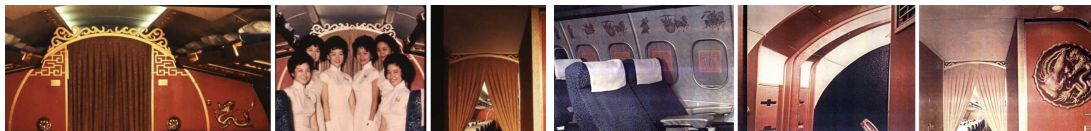
It should also be noted that Willauer went on to be the US Ambassador to Costa Rica and Honduras. During his capacity as the Ambassador to Honduras, Willauer played an instrumental role in **Operation PBSuccess** in 1954. If Willauer was an agent of the agency prior to the purchase of CAT, there are no records to prove it, but in any event, he maintained close contact with the organization after his departure [source].

2.4 From Korea to Indochina

The CIA found a pressing need for the particular skillset of CAT pilots who were hardened by their experience in the Chinese Civil War. During the Korean War, CAT pilots conducted several dozen missions over mainland China, inserting CIA agents and equipment into hostile territory. CAT also provided critical maintenance for USAF aircraft damaged in Korea [source]. The Korean War was the first main combat engagement which CAT undertook for the United States government.

CAT also conducted support missions for French colonial forces as they attempted to regain control over Indochina. Ownership by the CIA came with the benefit of new USAF C-119, an aircraft which later became known as the AC-119 [source]. It was an early predecessor of the modern gunship and veritable counterinsurgency aircraft used to airdrop supplies to French soldiers at Dien Bien Phu. In addition to the airdrops, CAT aircrews also conducted one of the first napalm strikes of the Indochina Wars against Vietnamese positions [source]. Following the closure of that war, CAT used the C-119s to evacuate civilians to South Vietnam.

In order to maintain the appearance of a civilian airline, CAT made every effort to continue normal flight operations. The CIA bankrolled the purchase of a new Convair 880, earmarking \$4.5 million in December of 1958 [source]. The so called "Mandarin Jet" was elegantly decorated and piloted by the very best CAT had to offer. Felix Smith and Harry Cockrell, along side several others took responsibility for the company flagship. The jet was inaugurated by none other than the wife of General Chang Kai-Shek himself. The Mandarin Jet remained in service up until its sale to Cathay Pacific in 1968 [source].



These color stills show an opulently decorated interior (sourced from <https://utdallas.app.box.com/v/history-Taiwan1>)

All manner of accommodations were provided on board, making it a fitting setting for VIP transport (sourced from <https://utdallas.app.box.com/v/history-Taiwan1>)



Photo taken by E. C. Kirkpatrick (sourced from utdallas.app.box.com/v/history-Taiwan1)



CAT's first jet was showcased as a rapid means of luxurious transport, CAT Bulletin Vol. XII, No. 5/6, May/June 1959 (sourced from <https://utdallas.app.box.com/v/history-Taiwan1>)

2.5 CAT Becomes Air America

In 1959, CAT changed its name to Air America to avoid scrutiny by Japanese tax authorities which were investigating the company's origins and benefactors. It adopted a new slogan: "Anything, Anywhere, Anytime, Professionally" [source].

Air America also emphasized the US origin of the company. Its ownership and work for the CIA was still a matter of secrecy, but it would nonetheless need legitimate clients elsewhere where US support was desired [source]. The new name assisted in that. Air America would grow to become a major air service in its own right, and the CIA's own private airline.

Even after its purchase by the CIA and deployment in Korea and French Indochina, the company still flew commercial flights out of major hubs in east Asia. The company had an excellent safety record, broken only by a possible hijacking in June of 1964 which led to the loss of a C-46 and all 56 people aboard [source].

Air America operated an extensive inventory of aircraft, both fixed wing and otherwise. The following is a list of the company and the changing mission profiles, this list should never be used by Air America, but rather a quick overview of the

- Curtiss C-46 Commando

- Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcar
- Lockheed C-130 Hercules
- Helio Twin Courier
- Helio U-10D Courier
- Pilatus PC-6 Porter
- Bell 204/205
- Sikorsky H-34
- Sikorsky S-19

3. Air America in Tibet

Chinese communists invaded Tibet in October 1950, rapidly conquering the province of Kham. Panicked and desperate Tibetan officials pleaded with the United Nations for intervention, but no aid was ever offered. Under intense pressure, Tibet and the Dalai Lama relented to Chinese rule. Beijing encountered little resistance initially. Yet, the Chinese had no means of controlling the Tibetan aristocracy and peasantry, so they set about building the necessary logistical and military infrastructure needed to exert control over the populace. The Dalai Lama eventually left for India in November of 1956, realizing that remaining in Tibet was untenable and dangerous [\[source\]](#). He returned periodically until 1959 [\[source\]](#).

Beijing brought down an iron fist over the newly conquered country. Atheist dogma was mandated education for every Tibetan and forced collectivization, forced displacement and the confiscation of weapons from the peasantry generated a virulent backlash against the Chinese occupation forces [\[source\]](#). Chinese garrisons were attacked by mobs of armed peasants and outposts were besieged by angry locals. Mao's response to the localized unrest was characteristically devoid of any concern for human life. A fleet of Tu-4 heavy bombers was sent over Tibet and innumerable villages and towns were flattened. Several thousand people were killed. The point was made; Tibet was China and Mao could back up that claim by sheer violence [\[source\]](#).

Stories of unspeakable brutality began to emerge from the Tibetan plateau and made their way to Calcutta. The US Consulate in Calcutta had recently welcomed John Hoskins, it's new CIA officer, and he was given orders to meet Gyalo Thondrup, the Dalai Lama's brother [\[source\]](#). Hoskins met Thondrup in Darjeeling in November of 1956, where he was provided with chilling reports of various crimes against humanity. The next year, in January of 1957, the CIA stationed its first case officer for Tibet, John Reagan. Reagan was ordered to assess the level of resistance against Chinese occupation in Tibet and how best the agency could provide assistance. He was also ordered to select six candidates for eventual infiltration and surveillance missions. Thondrup provided those names to Hoskins [\[source\]](#).

It was assumed that the best method of exfiltration was via East Pakistan. The plan was approved jointly by Pakistani President Iskander Mirza and CIA case officer in Dacca named Edward McAllister [\[source\]](#). The operation did not go as planned. At least four Tibetan recruits were killed amid combat with Chinese troops. The converted B-17 used to drop the Tibets had accumulated far too many hours and was put into storage for spare parts. In light of the complications, the CIA gave the job to CAT in August of 1958 [\[source\]](#).

tan rebels from C-54's and C-130A's. The Khampa guerrilla highly effective unit. In 1959, the Chinese formally the proverbial writing on the wall. He contacted two CIA agents known as "Tom" and "Lou" and pleaded with them to radio for immediate assistance. About 80 Khampa Tibetan leader [\[source\]](#). They demonstrated the value of CIA Tibet and into India [\[source\]](#).

stripping excess weight from the C-130A, greatly increasing the amount of payload which could be dropped [source]. Aderholt would later go on to play a central role in the establishment of the Raven Forward Air Controller unit in Laos during the Vietnam war. He would work very closely with Air America pilots to that end [source].

Up until May of 1965, the Air America routinely paradropped arms, ammunition and supplies to the Khampa guerrillas. Tibetan agents were also dropped into Nam Tso to carry out sabotage operations [source].

4. The Bay of Pigs

Air America's subsidiary maintenance company, Air Asia, was contracted out by a CIA front company to provide 4 C-46s. The aircraft were delivered to an airstrip in Guatemala in September of 1960. It soon became apparent to the Air America training pilots who arrived in Guatemala what the exact nature of the operation would be. The US had gathered together a band of Cuban exiles, trained them and was now looking for a way to insert them into Cuba. In short, the CIA was attempting to overthrow Castro without risking American lives or political backlash from Castro's benefactors in Moscow.

The C-46's were used primarily for paratrooper training. Several such training sessions were held daily. The first supply drops to Cuban rebels in the Escambray mountains took place that same month. They were a total failure. The supplies fell almost 7 miles short of their intended drop zone, falling into the hands of Castro's troops. Local contacts in Cuba were located and executed by Castro's men as well [source]. To make matters worse, the pilots practically ruined the aircraft provided to them. At least one C-54 landed in Mexico and was impounded. Several other aircraft landed in Jamaica or the Cayman Islands. The agency reassessed and resumed supply drops the next month. The results were yet again poor. Over 68 supply drops were conducted in November of 1960, and only 7 successfully supplied rebel positions. To quantify the sheer failure of the supply drop operation, some 151,000 lbs of supplies were airlifted. Only 69,000 lbs were actually dropped over Cuba, out of which 46,000 lbs were erroneously dropped on positions occupied by Castro's militia [source].

The CIA's activities in airfields in Guatemala were starting to attract the attention of local press. The CIA moved the operation from Guatemala to **Nicaragua** in October of 1960. Major Aderholt, of Tibetan claim, was present in the delegation which petitioned the President of Nicaragua to allow the move [source]. Nicaragua was to be used to stage B-26 bombers which would strike targets in Cuba, softening up the battlefield for the invasion force. The B-26 force was eventually stationed in Puerto Cabezas [source]. These planes would come to play a central role in the success, or in this case failure, of the operation. Air America assisted in vitalizing the airfield at Puerto Cabezas, and in maintaining the B-26's [source].

On the 15th of April, 1961, a CIA piloted B-26 landed at an airfield in Miami. It was painted in the colors of the Cuban Air Force and carried the registration FAR 933. The pilot claimed to be a Cuban defector and had stolen a B-26, bombing several airfields on his way out of the country. The story was cover for the real B-26 strike force which had taken off from Puerto Cabezas earlier in the day, a means of explaining the destruction of the Cuban Air Force without US involvement [source]. One major problem arose with Operation Pluto, however; the CIA had failed to do its research properly.

The strike had managed to destroy most of Castro's air power, save 3 T-33s. The Cuban Foreign Minister, Raul Roa condemned what were plainly American sponsored bombings. The American Ambassador challenged his account by presenting a photo of FAR 933. Roa deftly pointed out that Cuban B-26's had plexiglass nose covers, whereas this B-26 had a solid nose cover. The plane was simply not Cuban. Despite the failure to convince the public that there was a revolt among the Cuban Armed Forces, Kennedy wanted to destroy the remaining T-33's as quick as possible [source]. A strike was ordered but never carried out.

McGeorge Bundy, the special advisor to the president, informed the CIA on April 16 that the strikes were off the table. The CIA was to inform the Cuban government of the decision. Upon hearing of the decision, Col. Beerli, head of the Cuban Air Force, called the CIA and in his words: "urged in the strongest terms that the CIA make a decision and that the disastrous consequences of cancelling these attacks be explained to him" [source]. This did not happen. The T-33's were leveraged against the invasion force, and it's very likely that they greatly contributed to the eventual failure of Operation Pluto [source].

Air America began operations on behalf of the US government in Southeast Asia as a logistics service. Ammunition was flown on a regular route from Hanoi to Saigon, and tear gas was imported from Okinawa. Air America operated in close proximity to another CIA front, a South Vietnamese firm known as VIAT. Around 1964, as the US involvement in Indochina ballooned into a full campaign, Air America began to work closely with CIA Special Activities Division (SAD) (later this would become the Special Activities Center (SAC)) as well as Navy SEALs [source].



The Air America station in Danang

Hank Schiller, Air America's station manager at Danang, illustrates how Air America became "the primary means of support" for CIA and Navy commandoes during the early stages of the Vietnam War. Another Air America pilot recounts how the airline provided travel for the CIA's station chief, William Kolby, to remote airstrips located along the Vietnamese-Laotian border. Other Air America pilots recount similar stories of CIA field operatives requiring quick and discreet insertions into remote airstrips and villages. Air America also performed missions on behalf of the US Embassy in Vietnam, transporting diplomats and dignitaries to and from major Vietnamese cities. MEDEVAC missions became common as the war progressed, often achieved with skillful piloting of Bell 204B helicopters [source].

ie, was given the task of inserting agents into North Vietnam was in the process of setting up American backed insurgencies in North Vietnam, and VIAT was the primary provider of air services to these guerrillas. Air America pilots were tasked with training the Vietnamese pilots who would fly the VIAT flights [source]. Air America would

5.2 Operation Water Pump and the Air America A-Team

Air America came to train Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) pilots in the use of the AT-28 through Operation Water Pump. Often times, Air America pilots would themselves fly combat missions on behalf of the RLAF. Air America pilots would refer to their CIA paymasters and State Department patrons as “customers” [source]. These missions were generally eventful and could have been potentially fatal. To quote John Wiren, the Air America A-Team pilot for Waterpump:

When we were doing the strikes around the *Plain of Jars*, the “customer” sat on a ridge with a helo to rescue us if needed. The helo pilot told us, “I never saw so many tracers in my life!”

Ambassador Unger, then the mission chief to Laos, halted the Air America sorties after observing the amount of bullet holes peppering the AT-28s. His Air Attache convinced him to resume the flight operations, insisting that the loss of air cover for Royal and Neutralist forces in Laos would practically guarantee a communist victory [source]. Air operations with the A-Team resumed. Thai military officers were keen to obtain use of the T-28 crews. Per John Wiren’s account:

“When we landed back at Wattay, all of the planes had bullet holes in them. General Ma met us there and told us he wanted our T-28s for his own use. We told him, “General, go get your own holes!”

As the Thai and Royal Lao T-28 pilots underwent training, the Air America pilots were gradually replaced with the Thai and Lao students. In total, about 20-25 Air America personnel were involved in Water Pump [source].

5.3 Value of Deniability

The organization was essential to the CIA’s functioning in Southeast Asia. It was so crucial, that White House was regularly appraised of Air America flights and incidents [source]. A memorandum sent to Henry Kissinger from John Holdridge details the loss of an Air America C-123 to ground fire from Chinese regular troops. Holdridge theorizes that the Chinese regular troops were positioned in Laos to facilitate an insurgency against American allies in Laos and Thailand. He also specifies the “passive” nature of the American response, indicating that the CIA’s activities in Laos must be given the air of plausible deniability. The memo acknowledges the total loss of the Air America C-123 [source].

Another memorandum dated February 1970, marked with the White House’s letterhead, bluntly stated that Air America was “proprietary activity of the CIA” [source]. The memo was written by Henry Kissinger and was addressed to President Nixon, illustrating the high-level nature of Air America’s activities. It also confirms that Air America pilots have “accumulated a vast knowledge of the terrain in Laos which is of critical importance to the success of this operation”. The bottom half of the memo is entirely redacted, raising questions as to the exact nature of the Laotian operation.

6. The CIA and Narcotics Trafficking

The operation in Laos was elegantly simple, yet enormously questionable. In the backdrop of the Vietnam War, a brutal civil war was raging in Laos since the late 1950’s. The Royal Lao government fought the Pathet Lao, a Chinese backed communist insurgency, for control over the country. The Laotian Civil War was alternatively known by another name in the CIA: ‘The Secret War’ [source]. The 1954 Geneva Conference had forced the neutral status of Laos after the First Indochina War, thereby prohibiting US involvement in fighting the Pathet Lao [source]. Any action against the communist insurgents would have to be taken covertly.

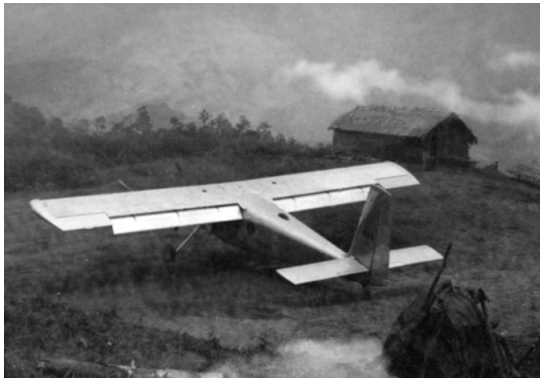
ical landscape of Laos, General Vang Pao, an ethnic Hmong
 Pathet Lao. In April of 1961, the CIA used Air America C-130As to deliver highly skilled Thai artillery units to the Royal Lao forces in Seno. The USSR had also conducted open flights of delivery to the Pathet Lao, dropping arms and ammunition into the contested regions [source].

trapped with the anti-communist forces. Arms and ammunition supply runs soon became known as 'hard rice drops' [source]. Project Momentum, the CIA's official name for the weapons deliveries to Hmong insurgents, led to a new and lucrative contract for Air America with the US Embassy in Laos [source]. According to Laotian General Oudone Sananikone:

"The distribution was usually made by land transport, but in some cases where the land routes were not available, Air America made the deliveries."

In order to fight the Pathet Lao on equal terms to the Soviet Union's support, Kennedy approved a plan to establish a 'Secret Army' of roughly 20,000 ethnic Hmong insurgents under the command of General Pao [source]. These insurgents would be directly supported, funded, trained and equipped by the CIA. The CIA set about establishing covert airstrips along the Vietnamese-Laotian border [source]. The work done by Air America in inserting CIA operatives in this region clearly paid off. Kissinger was correct in speculating that Air America pilots would have extensive knowledge of the terrain and therefore be invaluable assets to General Pao.

The most famous of these covert landing strips was Lima Site 85, a mountain top base which provided radar coverage for US bombers on missions over northern Vietnam. Lima Site was the location of an intense firefight which resulted in a Pathet Lao victory [source]. The **Raven Forward Air Controllers** evacuated the location upon realization that the battle would turn in the communists favor. The facility's CIA staff was in turn evacuated by an Air America helicopter [source].



A Helio U-10D at Lima Site 85, date unknown



An overview of Lima Site-85

In 1964, the Pathet Lao captured the Plain of Jars, a strategically vital location for the Hmong insurgents. The Plain of Jars in an ancient landscape of great historical significance to the Lao people. More crucially, it was the only area which Hmong paramilitaries could land aircraft. The loss of the plains and the loss of airstrips led to a severe reduction in the export of opium [source]. Opium was the financial backbone of the Hmong people and the source of most of its funding. To fund his Secret Army, General Pao would need an alternative means of air transport. The CIA offered Air America to this end.

After the French defeat in the First Indochina war, several hundred French veterans were left behind in the country. They began smuggling opium on small, light aircraft across Southeast Asia. Their enterprise was known as "Air Opium". It was through the involvement of French and criminal elements in Thailand, that the Corsican Mafia became involved in the Laotian opium trade [source].



Air America Pilatus PC-6 Porters delivering goods to General Vang Pao's troops on the Plain De Jars (sourced from https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/02/2002153035/-1/-1/0/B_0156_CELESKI_SPECIAL_AIR_WARFARE_%20AND_THE_SECRET_WAR_IN_LAOS_AIR_COMMANDOS_1964_1975.PDF)

According to Alfred McCoy, a leading authority on the Secret War and Air America, the airline quickly became a narcotic trafficking service for General Pao. From McCoy's seminal work, 'The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia', McCoy writes:

"Air America began flying opium from mountain villages north and east of the Plain of Jars to Gen. Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng...The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane adopted an attitude of benign neglect toward the opium traffic."

McCoy further details how the CIA actively encouraged the cultivation of Opium with improved agricultural techniques, with the assistance of a former farmer from Indiana, Edgar "Pop" Buell:

"[Buell used his] agricultural skills to improve Hmong techniques for planting and cultivating opium. "If you're gonna grow it, grow it good," Buell told the Hmong, "but don't let anybody smoke the stuff."

To what extent Air America pilots knew about the cargo which they were hauling is subject to debate. It is difficult to believe that Air America was entirely ignorant of the nature of their work for General Pao. The airline delivered raw opium to General Pao's headquarters in Long Tien. The finished product, "high-grade no. 4 heroin" [source], was then delivered by Air America directly to the narcotics dealers in Manila, Bangkok and Saigon [source].



An Air America C-123 is pictured here delivering supplies to Royal Laotian troops at Long Tien (sourced from <https://warbirdnews.com/warbird-articles/air-america-anything-anywhere-anytime-professionally.html>)

It is possible that Air America pilots learned over the years to reserve their questions about the contents of their flight manifests, but it borders on disbelief to suggest that none were aware of the illicit nature of their activities. Declassified CIA files show that Air America flights were routinely impounded [source], [source]. In any event, Air America narcotics flights took the following itinerary:

- Air America aircraft would fly to remote mountain villages, likely using a STOL aircraft such as the PC-6 Porter or U-10D, or rotor wing aircraft such as the Bell 204.
- Raw opium would be loaded onto the aircraft by Hmong farmers.
- Air America would then fly the raw opium to Long Tien, where it was refined into high-grade heroin.
- The finished product would be then loaded onto Air America aircraft and flown to Manila, Saigon or Bangkok, depending where the buyers were.

McCoy similarly believes that the CIA was aware of the nature of General Pao's flight manifests. He writes: "In most cases, the CIA's role involved various forms of complicity, tolerance or studied ignorance about the trade, not any direct culpability in the actual trafficking". He points out that "the CIA did not handle heroin, but it did provide its drug lord allies with transport, arms, and political protection" [source].

The CIA accidentally revealed its complicity in the trade by leaking a document to the New York Times that outlined the extent of opium production in Laos. Directly from McCoy's work:

"According to a former CIA operative who worked in the area for a number of years, the heroin laboratory at Nam Keung is protected by Maj. Chao La, commander of Yao mercenary troops for the CIA in north western Laos. One of the heroin laboratories near Ban Houei Sai reportedly belongs to Gen. Ouane Rattikone, former commander in chief of the Royal Laotian Army – the only army in the world, except for the US. army, entirely financed by the U.S. government."

According to McCoy, the Corsican Mafia had a close relationship with the president, who also happened to be the head of the state apparatus. In order to provide the necessary funds to keep the police apparatus afloat, Ngo Dinh Nhu turned to the Laotian poppy fields for help. To quote again directly from McCoy:

"Rock" Francisci...According to Lt. Col. Lucien Conein, a former high-ranking CIA officer in Saigon, their relationship began in 1958 when Francisci made a deal with Ngo Dinh Nhu to smuggle Laotian opium into South Vietnam."

It appears the CIA was well aware of the connection between organized crime and their South Vietnamese counterparts. Instead of shutting the operation down, the agency seems to have learned from the Corsican example and applied it to Laos. Air America was flying opium for Laotian drug lords up to 1971 [source].

The Air America operation did not go unnoticed. At least one American journalist wrote to U.S. Ambassador to Laos G. McMurtrie Godley, demanding to know why Laotian officials were actively participating in the drug trade. The Ambassador wrote back in December of 1970:

"I believe the Royal Laotian Government takes its responsibility seriously to prohibit international opium traffic...as you undoubtedly are already aware, our government is making every effort to contain this traffic"

The CIA did not act as the drug dealers, selling the finished product directly to consumers, but it certainly did not make any effort to "contain" the flow of narcotics. It found willing partners in Southeast Asian narcotics markets to assume the role of dealer and consumers. Narcotics trafficking was the extent of the Agency's involvement in the Laotian heroin trade. This was the elegant simplicity of the operation. The CIA would fight a war in secret with a covert army funded with narcotics trafficked by an airline with no ostensible connection to the Agency itself.

7. End of Air America

Air America was eventually disbanded in 1974 by the CIA as the Vietnam War came to an end. Operations ceased and what little operationally viable assets were left had been transferred to Continental Air Services Inc. (CASI). An effort was made to continue operations in Thailand with CASI, but this effort appears to have died out by 1975 [source].

In some sense, Air America had a fitting end. The world-famous photo of a helicopter evacuating civilian and diplomatic staff from the US Embassy rooftop in Saigon was an Air America helicopter. The final acts of the company would be humanitarian in nature, just as its first activities were largely charitable. It would be one of the last flights of the storied yet controversial airline.

The world famous photo of a helicopter evacuating refugees from the US Embassy in Saigon was in fact an Air America chopper

From a different angle, the Air America logo is visible on the chopper tail

George Ritter was 49 when he was lost over Laos. His

A postcard showing a Royal Lao Helio with its underwing armaments

- Air America underwent several mutations from the CAT to its recognizable form in Vietnam. It began initially as a relief outfit focused on humanitarian flights.
- Air America began its work in espionage as an air service for the Chinese nationalist government.
- There is a lack of recognition by the US Federal Government of the dangerous and sometime fatal work done by Air America pilots in the interest of the anti-communist movements of Southeast Asia.
- Air America performed logistics flights for the French during the First Indochina War.
- Air America was involved in the Tibetan resistance and the Bay of Pigs invasion.
- It is likely that Air America had an implicit knowledge of Laotian narcotics trafficking and that its pilots maintained a tacit complicity with the trade.
- The CIA used the airline for patently illegal operations. It prosecuted a secret war in a neutral country with funding obtained through the trafficking of narcotics.