

Air America's Role in Laos Becoming More Clandestine

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Aug. 6—The role of Air America, a private contractor providing special air transport services to the U.S. government in Southeast Asia, is reverting to a more specific clandestine nature in Laotian operations.

"The company is strictly a paramilitary operation again," following its loss of a "rice drop" contract in competitive bidding recently, says one source close to the company. "It is moving back to its original role."

Air America lost the supply contract to Continental Air Services, another contractor in Southeast Asia, but will continue transport services to the Royal Laotian Army, Vang Pao's CIA-supported clandestine army and other, more secret U.S. government operations in Laos.

Until recently, Continental and Air America shared the service as logistics links to U.S.-supported forces scattered in the mountains north and east of the Mekong basin, dropping them food, arms and ammunition from Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Longcheng or Thailand's Udon Airbase.

Foodstuff dropping has come to be called "rice drops" because the double-bagged, half-filled sacks of rice, free-falling to outposts, makes up the bulk of the supplies. U.S. government sources say 50 tons are dropped daily.

Air America's helicopters, short takeoff and landing planes and heavy cargo

planes will continue to provide such services, but, according to the sources, company operations will be less open to the public than before because of the nature of the cargo and its destinations. Most strategic cargo moved to the mountains of Laos is moved by Air America.

Most air mobile military operations conducted in Laos, particularly in the northern sector, rely on Air America and its veteran pilots—most of whom, though civilians, have combat experience.

In recent weeks troops and material both for Gen. Vang Pao's current Plain of Jars offensive, 100 miles north of Vientiane, and for the Bolovens Plateau offensive east of Pakse in southern Laos, were ferried by Air America. The operations could not continue without the company's planes and helicopters.

The airline was created as a paramilitary air force following World War II being built around former combat pilots, the most flamboyant of them from Gen. Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers which operated in Asia.

Some of the original Flying Tigers remain with the company, as do former Army Air Corps pilots from the European theater.

The majority today, however, are U.S. Air Force veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Originally a highly secret service, Air America became famous during the earlier days of the Vietnam war and gradually became a fea-

ture of U.S. government operations in volatile areas, the bulk of its work being cargo and passenger transport. Clandestine operations continued, including piloting T-28 bombers in Laos and search and rescue missions, according to the Pentagon Papers.

Continental Air Services entered cargo hauling for the government in competitive bidding, along with smaller companies, allowing and forcing Air America to revert to its earlier paramilitary role.

Local sources note a recent management and government program to reassert security consciousness among the airlines employees under threat of revoking their security clearances and hence their clearance to fly for the company. According to the sources, recent breaches of security have led to a general shakeup.

Air America is also revert-

ing to use of Asian co-pilots on its less sensitive missions and on smaller planes. Former Nationalist Chinese co-pilots still with the company are being retired, and replacements taken from a small training program for Lao and Thai pilots conducted by the company for the U.S. government.

Use of such co-pilots is said to be a financial saving for the company and also creates a pool of pilots for local aviation. Most of the new co-pilots will be "volunteers" of Thai origin passing as Laotian, according to sources.

Sources say, however, that the larger cargo planes will retain American co-pilots because of the greater skill needed to fly them and the secrecy of many of the missions, particularly troop and war material movements.

"Asians have a low security consciousness quotient," says an American government official.