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Secret War Role for

Air America

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Air America Corporation, a private contractor providing special air transport services to the U.S. government in southeast Asia, is reverting to a more clandestine role in the Laotian war.

"The company is strictly a paramilitary operation again," said a source close to the firm following its loss of a "rice drop" contract in competitive bidding recently. "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, General Vang Pao's CIA-supported army and other, more secret, U.S. government operations in Laos.

Until recently, Continental and Air America shared the vital logistics links between Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Longcheng or Udorn airbase, Thailand, and U.S.-supported forces scattered in the mountains north and east of the Mekong basin, dropping food, arms and ammunition to the outposts from cargo planes.

The deliveries came to be called "rice drops" because the staple formed the bulk of the supplies. It is dropped in half-filled sacks without parachutes. U.S. government sources say 50 tons are dropped daily.

Helicopter, short takeoff and landing (STOL) and heavy cargo plane services will continue to be provided by Air America but, according to the sources, company operations will be less open to the public because of the nature of the cargo and its destinations.

Most strategic cargo moved to the mountains of Laos is carried by Air Amer-

ica, in some of the most hazardous and demanding aviation territory in the world. Observers in Southeast Asia universally respect the skill and bravery of the airlines pilots.

Most air-borne military operations conducted in Laos, particularly in the northern sector, also rely on Air America and its veteran pilots, most of whom have recent combat experience though they are now civilians.

In recent weeks, troops and material for both General Vang Pao's current Plain of Jars offensive 100 miles north of Vientiane and the Olovens plateau offensive east of Pakse in southern Laos were ferried by Air America.

The airline was created as a paramilitary air force after World War II. It was built around former combat pilots, the most flamboyant of them from General Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers. 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 feature of U.S. government operations in volatile areas, the bulk of its work being cargo and passenger transport. But its clandestine operations continued, including piloting T-28 bombers in Laos and flying search and rescue missions, according to the Pentagon Papers.

Continental Air Services began cargo hauling for the government in competitive bidding along with smaller companies, allowing — if not forcing — Air America to revert to its earlier paramilitary role.

Local sources note a recent attempt by the airline's management and the U.S. government to reassert security consciousness among Air America employees under threat of revoking security

clearances, and therefore clearance to fly for the company. According to the sources, recent breaches of security have led to a general shake-up.

Air America is also reverting to the 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, as well as a method of creating 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.

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