

# The CIA's Airline Has Its Problems

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There is increasing disension among the pilots who fly in Laos for Air America, Inc. that is based on the refusal of Air America management and the Central Intelligence Agency, the charter airline's major customer, to make what the pilots consider to be minimal efforts to insure their safe return from highly hazardous missions.

The accident and death rate for Air America pilots (there are about 275 flying now in Laos) has risen dramatically as the military situation there has deteriorated badly since last January, and particularly since the spring offensive. Air America this year has averaged a pilot killed in Laos each month.

The situation has resulted in the recent resignation of many pilots, several of whom were family men who, despite the high pay, said they simply could not continue to take the risks they were being asked to take.

## 'CUSTOMER'

A chief source of irritation, according to one pilot here on leave, is that "the customer," a euphemism among Air America personnel for the CIA, has in recent months refused to level with pilots as to the relative dangers the men will encounter on missions. The pilot also complained that Air America management "always sides with the customer," urging pilots to "do this one for the customer."

A typical Air America flying assignment for the CIA is to evacuate wounded Laotian soldiers, deliver materiel to the front, rescue downed pilots, or fly cover for Laotian T-28 bombers—in general, combat support. The pilots also fly refugee relief missions for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

## CIVILIANS

The pilots—who are highly paid civilians—belong to the Far East Pilots' Association, a union that for reasons unique to flying for the CIA in embattled Laos is the weak party in contract negotiations. (A new contract will be negotiated within the next two months by the three parties — the pilots' union, Air America management and the CIA.)

"One of our problems is that there's a surplus of pilots," said a pilot recently in Vientiane. "We're expendable and we know it."

Air America relies heavily upon helicopters in Laos. Better suited to the mountainous terrain and climatic conditions, the choppers too are less vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire.

## UNEMPLOYED

But hundreds of helicopter pilots, trained by the American military and with a tour of combat duty behind them in Vietnam, were unable to find flying jobs back home. Many of these men have their names on the waiting list (hiring is done in Washington) for Air America jobs because of the pay—about \$40,000, tax-free, for 800 to 1000 flying hours a year.

"It's not a question of money," said one pilot. "It's a question of safety. We're all willing to take a risk. We do it every day. But if there's a 50-50 chance I'm going to be killed, I'm not going out."

Air America pilots may refuse assignments—nearly all have at one time or another. Pilots also may volunteer for "special missions," but lately few have volunteered.

## ROUTINE

With pilots refusing to volunteer for the more hazardous missions, the CIA and Air America management lately have made such assignments on a routine basis. This summer the company's only black helicopter pilot, a Vietnam veteran from Los Angeles, was killed in northern Laos on an assignment his friend said "he should have refused."