

# SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

## “Secret War”: Pilots of Air America, CIA’s Clandestine “Civilian” Airlines

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The pilots of Air America, a CIA clandestine operation posing as a civilian airline, were all civilians, many of them with military experience. Their main mission was to fly missions supporting the Laotian anti communists, who were also supported and funded by the CIA. Here a pilot of the CIA’s “Secret War” speaks.

“Air America’s tenure in Asia began when Civil Air Transport (CAT) crossed the river into Shanghai in 1946. It ended on a rooftop in downtown Saigon in 1975. First in, last out,” according to the website [air-america.org](http://air-america.org) that describes the operation and its pilots.

“Adventure, intrigue, danger, sacrifice—words that fit Air America well. Air America was a CIA – owned and – operated “air proprietary” during the Cold War against the global menace of communism. From 1946 to 1976, Civil Air Transport (CAT) and Air America served alongside U.S. and allied intelligence agents and military personnel in the Far East, often in dangerous combat and combat support roles. Behind a shroud of strict secrecy, many Air America personnel were unaware that they were “shadow people” in counterinsurgency operations. Some 87 of them were killed in action in China, Korea, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and elsewhere. Though many of those Asian countries eventually fell to the communists, the contributions of Air America personnel to the cause of freedom remain unparalleled in aviation history. CAT and Air America personnel were the first Americans in China and Korea and, after the U.S. military had withdrawn from Vietnam, Air America pilots risked their lives to evacuate the last Americans. Air America — “First in, last out,” [air-america.org](http://air-america.org)



*Air America Bell 205 helicopter leaving a Hmong fire support base in the Laotian Plain of Jars, c. 1969 DOD*

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## Former Air America Association President Recalls “AAM”

If it had not been for the fact that Marine Corps aviator John Wiren had grown tired of his day job working the counterfeit desk for the Secret Service in Dallas during the Eisenhower administration; and that Braniff Airlines had cancelled his scheduled interview, Wiren, who had also been a crop duster out of Plano, Texas for the Institute of Foreign Trade, might never have ended up in Laos in 1961 flying for Air America during the so-called “Secret War.”



*Air America Bell 205s being evacuated aboard USS Hancock, in 1975*

As a past president of the Air America Association and now a Florida retiree, he reflects back on his fellow pilots in honest, grand style.

“The Air America chopper pilots, after being there, some for many years, were as good as any in the world. They were very talented, experienced and dedicated. Same with the fixed wing guys. We were probably a little bit unusual to join up and go over there [Indochina], but to be a pilot in Laos, even more so. Some came over and eliminated themselves. Some were eliminated. They couldn’t cut the mustard or deal with the stress.”

In Indochina, Wiren piloted the Helio Courier, the Caribou, C-46 (known in civilian aviation as the DC-3), and the Dornier “Do” 28. Both the Helio Courier and the Dornier were known for their “STOL”, short take-off and landing ability. STOL missions were required of many of the fixed wing pilots, their flight mechanics and “kickers”, those who literally kicked materiel in support of indigenous personnel out of the aircraft, often midflight. They performed materiel drops and take-offs in the steep mountains of Laos when re-supply missions were called for.

“A new pilot had to have 200 hours on the Helio Courier. The surfaces were very rough. On take-off, the aircraft would shoot off the end of the landing strip and gain flying speed as it fell into the valley. It was not for the faint of heart,” Wiren’s fellow Air America pilot Joe Hazen added.

“Some didn’t last but a few days and went home,” Wiren continued. “Some stayed for ten or twelve years.”

Of the Helio Courier, Wiren remembered, “There were two types of guys. Those that had Helio accidents, and those that were going to have Helio accidents. I don’t know many in the program that didn’t bend a Helio at one time or another.”

Wiren himself was involved in three accidents in that airplane. In one he took off early in the morning heavily loaded down. His engine quit 20 feet in the air and he crashed into a field. Water had gotten into his fuel system.



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“Aircraft engines don’t run well on water,” he laughed. “Everybody I know of had dinged an airplane over there. It was really tough weather.”

That wasn’t the only time the tough weather had an effect on Wiren’s piloting. On one mission to Vietnam, he was flying a modified Dornier-28. Eight seats had been removed so that big metal fuel tanks could be placed on board. In route to Saigon, he could see the lines of clouds.

“All of a sudden, I thought the plane had been hit by something solid. Maybe the windshield had been blown out. “ But it was intact. The problem turned out to be the side access freight door. It was standing straight out. I tried to reach out to pull it down but couldn’t get to it without unbuckling my safety strap.”

Eventually, Wiren was able to reach out and, luckily, the airplane righted itself. “I managed to get the door closed and get back on track.”

On another flight in Vietnam, he took off from Danang and flew south. Approaching Saigon, he ran straight into a horrific storm. He was low on fuel, and it was raining so hard the rain was coming through the windshield. On the last leg, he called up the tower at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. The ATC instructed him in a series of directional turns at various degrees until he was advised to turn west in preparation for landing.

“I let down and popped out right over the end of the runway and taxied in. Just as I was pulling onto the tarmac, the engine quit.” He had beat the devil once more.

Still, with all the dangers associated with STOL flying, Wiren felt it was safer and simpler to be able to land loaded down on a steep mountain than to be overhead subjecting himself to ground fire.

No doubt ground fire was on his mind when he flew medevac and SAR (search and rescue) missions, chiefly in the Pathet Lao-infested Plain of Jars region in northern Laos.

“The guys flying off the aircraft carriers [in the South China Sea] had no idea what world they were flying into. They were occasionally shot down in the Plain of Jars because they did things that were not too smart. For example, flying east to west for photo reconnaissance. They figured the faster they went, the less apt they were to get shot at.”

That wasn’t the case.

“It was not unusual for them to have to bail out into the jungle and get hung up in their chutes in the triple canopy 50 to 60 feet in the air.”

Pilots weren’t the only legends who found themselves in Laos during America’s long tenure in Indochina. Some of the people they flew were equally legendary.

One was Edgar “Pop” Buell, an Indiana farmer who had lost his wife and decided to head to the Orient for adventure. Laos beckoned and the IVS, the Peace Corps-like International Voluntary Services, hired him on. He taught the indigenous personnel more about farming than anyone and was highly beloved and respected by everyone who had come to Laos during the Secret War.

“Pop Buell was a sweet guy. The Hmong thought he could walk on water. He did a wonderful job. He knew more than anyone in the Agency [CIA], or foreign service,” Wiren said.

“I don’t recall when I first met Pop,” said Joe Hazen. “I think it was early in 1962 at Sam Thong [Landing Site-20]. He didn’t talk much. He pretty much stayed there. I don’t recall ever seeing him elsewhere.”

By most reports, Buell pretty much kept to himself.



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“Even after the Air America Chalet was built in 1965 at LS [Landing Site-20] to accommodate pilots overnighing, I don’t recall seeing him come over for a meal or a drink,” Hazen added.

“He would have the flights to various villages planned when the Helios or the Dorniers came to LS-20 from Vientiane to begin work for the day,” Hazen remembered.

Another of those legends was the noted, some might label him infamous, CIA operative Tony “Po” (Anthony Poshepny).

Po’s reputation for the extent to which he went to kill Pathet Lao remains legendary to this day. At one point, he was reputed to have offered kip, Lao currency, to anyone who would bring him the ears of a communist cadre. He only stopped when he learned that villagers were cutting off the ears of their own children to be able to make enough money to survive in the poverty that gripped Laos at the time.

“118 Alternate [a site operated by the CIA which Air America flew in and out of] sent reports to Vientiane. There were so many KIAs, so many whacked bad guys that CIA headquarters there started doubting Po’s reports,” Wiren said.

Wiren remembers meeting Po for the first time and being invited to a villa Po called home in the Laotian woods.

“Tony and I had a few drinks and I went to bed in a sleeping bag. Soon I heard a funny noise on the linoleum. A scratching. All of a sudden, a rat ran across my face.”

Wiren then moved atop a wooden table to get away from the rat and pulled his sleeping bag up over his face leaving only his nose exposed so he could breathe, but that did not deter the rat one bit. “I invited him to stay,” Wiren laughs.

Wiren also befriended the Hmong General Vang Pao. Like his American counterpart Tony Po, whom Vang Pao reportedly did not like, according to Wiren, Pao could also act brutally.

Wiren remembers flying the general to Long Tieng before it became the major CIA base that it would become.

“It was nothing more than a dirt landing strip. When we landed, we spotted two young captured Pathet Lao who had been ordered to dig their own graves. Vang Pao walked over and shot them both dead.”

“I was not enamored of him. He could be mean,” Wiren added. “He would get some White Lightning in him and get very ornery. He’d say, ‘Hey John! Want to have fun? Want to shoot some prisoners?’”

But he also had to be mean, according to Wiren. “It was his job.” It was also how he maintained respect among his troops. At the same time, it is obvious that Wiren respected Vang Pao for a host of other reasons.

“He was actually a good co-pilot. I let him fly the Helio Courier and he always knew where we were. We got along very well. He was good for what he needed to do at that time.”

Wiren knows, too, that when the subject of Vang Pao comes up, the belief that he and others transported opium on Air America flights does not trail far behind the general. Wiren does not deny that it happened, for selling the opium was how Vang Pao paid his troops. But he also feels that the notion that Air America pilots were somehow complicit couriers in the transporting of opium on their planes is totally inaccurate.

With the threat of being attacked at any moment by Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese, “there was never enough time to check the baggage of the Lao and Hmong Air America personnel transported,” he said.

When he’s said all there is to say about some of the legends of Laos, Wiren’s thoughts return to his fellow pilots.



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“Some ended up with ‘Air America Syndrome’,“ he admits. “Either they needed the money, or they just wanted to relive the adventure, or gain back the thrill. Others didn’t necessarily need the money, but they ended up in jail. But most just stayed in aviation.”

One was his Air America colleague Hazen, who flew for Japan Airlines for many years before retiring, Wiren, too, had an illustrious career flying in Central America and the Middle East. In 2004, a book Wiren wrote about Air America was published. He titled his book, *Flight of the Erawan*, “fiction with a lot of truth to it.

“It was just the life and times of Air America pilots starting in the early 60s, the things they had to do deal with, the training, the lifestyle. I wrote it for guys who had been there. Those who read it enjoyed it.”

However, Wiren believes that anyone who worked for Air America could write a book about his experiences.

“It’s not a masterpiece,” he says, underestimating the work. Anyone there a couple of years could easily have the material to write about it. There were so many things going on. I suppose people think ‘Why in the hell don’t you get a life? Air America seems to be the center of your universe.’ Well it was a great experience. I was fortunate to have flown for Air America.”

A movie was made based on the Air America story.