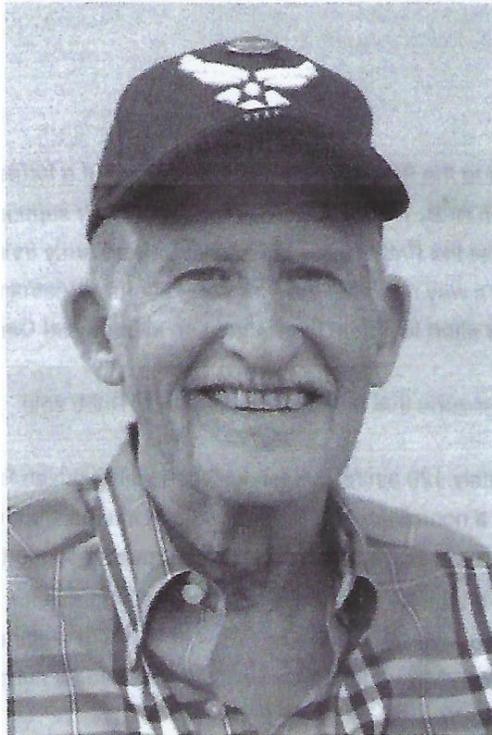


# Air Force officer served in secret with Air America

By SKIP VAUGHN Rocket editor [skip.vaughn@theredstonerocket.com](mailto:skip.vaughn@theredstonerocket.com) Feb 13, 2019



Carroll Babb didn't know what he was getting into in 1968. The then Air Force captain figured he'd probably be assigned as a procurement officer in Vietnam since he'd been sent to procurement training as preparation at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

But then a one-star general told him privately that he was handpicked to go to a place that was not what it seemed to be.

On Sept. 1, 1968, Bobb was flown to Udorn, Thailand, to join the Air Force Logistics Command. Officially he got assigned to serve as officer in charge of the Air Force Far East Procurement Office. The contract he was tasked to manage was Air America.

Air America, under contract to the State Department, was based at a former Japanese World War II air strip located next to Udorn AFB, Thailand. Air America provided air support to the Free Lao and Hmong peoples' fight against the Pathet Lao Communist-backed army trying to overthrow Laos and also put Cambodia in harm's way mirroring the Viet Cong efforts in Vietnam. Air America was tasked to provide air support in the effort to defeat the Pathet Lao in Laos and Cambodia.

"We were doing this in a war zone that nobody knew existed," Bobb said.

Air America had approximately 120 aircraft, which included piston driven fixed wing aircraft and helicopters. Designated as a nonmilitary effort, all crews and aircraft were unarmed and flew with Air America markings — this in a war zone. The contract also provided support to U.S. Air Force special operations group stationed on the Air America facility that trained Laotians to fly T-28s (1950s fighter trainers) that were used in counter-insurgency missions in Vietnam and the 64 fighters stationed at the Udorn facility. These T-28s flew under Laotian control for close air support missions in Laos and Cambodia. They became the "Royal Laotian Air Force."

"This was the secret war you've read about," Bobb said. The covert airline's exploits were over-glamorized in a 1990 movie, "Air America," starring Mel Gibson. Bobb said it missed on the exceptional flying and danger the pilots and crews faced in this effort.

"And we, Air America, delivered everything that supported the war effort including medical supplies, pigs, goats, gasoline, food, people, and Laotian and Hmong troops," he said. "Some called Air America the CIA airline, as some of the cargo could be ammo, weapons, fuel."

He remembers that they had unmarked "black" airplanes drop in for sport and missions which were flown by crew members that nobody talked about. Information released over the years mentions the Central Intelligence Agency.

Air America's motto was "First In, Last Out." Their aircraft usually went into areas where America had strategic interests but no military involvement except some special ops people.

Depending on the need, the contract authorized both daylight and night-time missions and also corresponding pay rate if hazard or nonhazardous missions. In 1968-69 the war was very active and the crash and battle damage maintenance effort reflected the toll on the aircraft and crews. They worked hard under the contract to keep Air America aircraft maintained and flying, tactical navigation sites up and running, and supporting the Laotian ground forces. Air America flew many missions in UH-340 helicopters. And when they were on missions and received a downed aircraft call, the pilot would divert to the downed American pilots anywhere that they could. Many air rescues were achieved during the Vietnam War.

Bobb, whose first wife and three sons waited back home in Greenville, South Carolina, had certain missions during his yearlong assignment where it was necessary to go up country with Air America crews. Some of the flights encountered hazardous conditions; in 1968-69 Air America had a lot of crash and battle damage repairs on their aircraft. Bobb wore a civilian flight suit and had credentials identifying him as a U.S. Embassy employee. "By the small arms fire damage, I knew by the grace of God I was protected," he said. But as a noncombatant, and officially never there, Bobb didn't qualify for combat pay. "The Air America pilots were mainly former Army pilots or former Air Force pilots. There were a few select pilots that were active duty on assignment but you couldn't tell who," he said. "That's why this assignment was so unusual and it was under the U.S. ambassador to Laos supporting: keep Laos free.

"We did good and because of all the people supporting this effort we met our missions until America pulled out at the end of the Vietnam conflict and the Pathet Lao forces took over the country in May 1975. What I most remember is the truly amazing flying ability of the Air America pilots in places I didn't think you could fly or land. The other thing I remember is the people we supported up country. The Laos and Hmong people were tough, strong people and they were good people they just wanted to be free."

He has an Air America coin with the operation's motto and its years in service, 1946-76. Bobb said he most regrets the people they left behind in Laos and Cambodia who were fighting for democracy.

Bobb, the son of a World War I Navy veteran, returned home in October 1969. The 1963 Clemson ROTC graduate decided to wear his dress uniform on the commercial flight from San Francisco to Greenville despite the Air Force advice to wear civilian attire. He took a seat next to a couple on the plane and was alarmed when they complained to the stewardess. He was asked to sit in the back with several other returning uniformed men.

His cousin, Army 1st Lt. Melvin "Tommy" Rose, was killed in Vietnam Feb. 1, 1969, while serving with D Company, 60th Infantry and 9th Infantry Division.

Bobb retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1983 after 20 years of service. He went on to work in program management in the defense industry. He retired in summer 2003 from contractor ATK as vice president for Air Force programs and he served as a consultant to Space Command and later to various aerospace companies from 2003-11. Bobb came to Huntsville in 2010.

He has been married 28 years to his second wife, Marie. He has three sons — Gary of Sussex, Wisconsin, Randy of Frisco, Texas, and Andy of Beverly Hills, California — and five grandsons.

At 78 he is a life member of the Air Force Association and he volunteers for the Downtown Rescue Mission and Tut Fann Veterans Home. He attends Asbury United Methodist Church on Hughes Road in Madison where he does altar prayer.

He appreciates this nation's commemoration of 50 years since the Vietnam War and the public's support for the military since the Vietnam era. In 2011 when a woman hugged him at Heroes Week in Huntsville was the first time he could recall being thanked as a Vietnam veteran by someone outside his family.

"We just did our job and I was privileged and proud to be part of it, my small piece," Bobb said. "And by the grace of God, I came home uninjured."

*Editor's note (Redstone Rocket): This is the 206th in a series of articles about Vietnam veterans as the United States commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War.*