

No Typical Day

The life of an Air America CIA pilot in Vietnam

By Neil Hansen

In September 1964, I began a journey that was to be my life's adventure. I was hired as a pilot with Air America, the CIA's secret airline, working on its clandestine operations in Southeast Asia. It was the world of spooks, covert air ops and adventure. Air America's pilots were shadow people. The airline's schedules and operations were irregular and unknown. I was 27 and had already been a pilot for more than half of my life when I left my home in Detroit for the wild escapades that awaited in Southeast Asia.

After orientation in Taipei, Taiwan, and a stint flying big DC-6 transport planes out of Tachikawa, Japan, I was sent to Saigon. When I arrived in March 1965, the war was revving up, and Vietnam provided the aviation playground of my dreams, a place where I could take it to the limit and beyond. Air America's slogan, "Anything, Anytime, Anywhere," would soon become apparent. We delivered everything from rice to munitions to bodies, both living and dead. Our

work was never boring. There was no such thing as a typical day.

Urban Saigon was quite different from the Air America bases in remote areas of Laos and Thailand. It was difficult to go anywhere in the city because of the influx of refugees from the communist-controlled countryside, which in turn caused traffic jams that made the guys from Los Angeles feel right at home. Trips to and from the airport sometimes took one or two hours out of the day, adding to the irritability factor when I was forced to wait another hour or more in a hot cockpit while in line for takeoff.

According to the movie representation of airmen at war, we were gray-suited knights, warriors all, who climbed onto our steeds of shining aluminum, blasting off into the blue skies in support of the battle with the godless communist hordes. Great rhetoric, perhaps, but that romanticized viewpoint could not have been further from the truth.

In reality, when our intrepid birdman arrived at an airfield he was often already

The twin-engine Beechcraft flown by Air America pilot Neil Hansen and shown here on the ramp in Saigon was just one of the planes he piloted on a varied assortment of secret missions for the CIA.

The CIA issued IDs resembling those of a commercial airline to mask its operations across Indochina.



dusty and wrinkled from his ride on the potholed road to the field. He was still bone-tired from the previous day's flying and in a bad mood after mosquitoes feasted on him as he waited in the dark for the Volkswagen bus that transported the crew to the plane. In many cases, a searing hangover coupled with gut-twisting diarrhea also made our knight a bit snappy.

The crew bus dropped us off at Operations, a gray, uninspiring two-story building. In 1965, as our missions expanded, we were receiving new pilots almost daily, and the facilities were being taxed to the extreme. We got our daily flight schedule on the second floor, and then most of us went to the standby room, where there was always a pot of vile coffee. No matter how bad it was, everyone wanted a cup even though—when dumped into an already-troubled gastrointestinal system—it would send the lower intestine into violent spasms. No doubt a Viet Cong architect, or perhaps Ho Chi Minh himself, had placed the restrooms in the back of the building on the second floor.

On the morning of July 5, 1965, I waited to depart Saigon from the midfield intersection of the north/south runway, which was crossed by main runway 25/7. The orange, pre-dawn glow was marred by someone beating a hammer on the inside of my skull behind my right eye, a repercussion from the previous night's Fourth of July party hosted by our base manager. Even though I had gone home early, the pain was there.

Adding to the discomfort was the rumble of the two R-985 radial engines on either side of the cockpit of my Beechcraft, a twin-engine plane built in the U.S. during World War II. The tower cleared for takeoff an Air America Beechcraft in front of me. I watched it roll until the tail came off the ground. Then the pilot cleared a C-46 Commando transport plane to my right on runway 25. As he began his roll I expected to get my own clearance for departure. But then I heard an expletive on the radio.

I looked at the Beechcraft that had been cleared and noticed that it was flying, but in trouble and dropping. As though in slow-motion, it drifted down and crashed just outside the airport in the courtyard of a Catholic church. Dust and debris rose, almost gracefully, and

obsured the airplane. I thought the pilot had managed to make a survivable crash landing, but suddenly a ball of flame blossomed over the crash site. It was a tragedy, but I had no time to process it. After the emergency vehicles cleared the tarmac on the way to the crash site, the tower resumed business as usual. Another C-46 was cleared for takeoff on runway 25. As soon as it passed the intersection, the tower cleared me to roll on the north/south runway. I began the takeoff. *Ease the throttles up, lead with the left a little for torque, tail comin' up, the gauges lookin' good, ease it off and snap up the gear.*

I flashed through the smoke from the funeral pyre and wallowed slightly from its rising heat. An odor from the conflagration below wafted through the air vents—the putrescent breath of the dying beast. According to the accident investigation report, some witnesses claimed to have seen an orange flash under the ill-fated aircraft as it cleared the end of the runway. The investigators surmised that it came from a “sky horse,” a simple piece of pipe implanted in the ground with a charge at the bottom and debris (nuts, rocks, etc.) placed on top. A Viet Cong hiding nearby probably set it off as a plane passed overhead.

It had been a very close call for me. The totally uncontrollable dumbass luck factor had been in my favor.

With the escalation of Air America operations, we were getting more airplanes every week and hiring several hundred pilots, which turned us into a sea of interesting characters. Some were the “hee-haw” funny kind. Others were the volatile punch-you-in-the-mouth-for-fun type. A few were one notch from being skid row alcoholics. There were also plenty of normal people, but some of them just didn't stay very long. Most of the new pilots came from the retired or ex-military group. Civilian-trained pilots were the minority.

I was assistant manager of flying and in charge of several aircraft programs, a job description that included training the new arrivals. Those who washed out considered me the rottenest son of a bitch who ever crapped between two boots. My washout rate was indeed alarming, but I was looking for eagles, not buzzards. In the entire time I spent with Air America in Vietnam, not a single pilot approved by me for a certain aircraft ever killed himself in that type of aircraft.



Silver wings, mimicking those of other airlines, were awarded to pilots who passed Hansen's CIA training course.



A C-123 Provider transport plane, on the ground in southern Laos, typifies the hard landings that were an ever-present danger for Air America pilots operating in isolated locations.

I kept up the pressure on the trainees until I could smell their fear. I wanted to see if they could cope with the situation I had put them in. The winners of the Marquis de Sade School of Airborne Survival received a handshake and a set of wings with a star on top. The losers received a chance to go to some other company.

Air America frowned on some of my methods, but never asked me to stop. I was getting the job done. Some of my screening practices were drenched in graveyard humor: I would give a new pilot a body bag with his name on it or put pictures of burnt crash victims on my desk. The trainees' reactions would give me a glimpse into their ability to handle the unusual.

Tom Harper (not his real name) was a short, pudgy pilot in his late 40s with a dusting of gray in his hair. He had recently retired from the Air Force and wanted to make some “big bucks” to add to his retirement check. In the briefing room with three others before their first training flight in-country, I noticed a tremble in his hands as he kept smoothing the chart laying across his knees.

Airborne, Tom was even less than I expected. His abilities were barely average, but as he lost his nervousness he began to think he was better than his actual abilities. In such cases, especially when other trainees were observing from the cabin, I would make a cocky

pilot look the fool. This made an enemy for life, but I wasn't in the friend-making business.

This first leg took us from Saigon to the old Michelin rubber plantation at An Loc, about 65 miles north of Saigon near Cambodia. We did a couple of touch-and-go landings on the airstrip at the plantation and then flew to Tay Ninh, near the Parrot's Beak area above the Mekong Delta on the Cambodian border. There we did full-stop landings. Each trainee got a turn doing takeoffs and landings at all of the locations.

En route to Tay Ninh, Tom, now at the controls, was telling me how he used to be a chief check pilot in the Air Force and could help me lay out a similar program. I just kept smiling and nodding. Keeping in mind the possibility of groundfire, we were up to 6,000 feet, so I asked Tom to give me a 60-degree banked turn to the left.

Tom looked over his left shoulder to check for traffic as he rolled into the turn, and while he was looking out the window I reached down and shut the fuel off on the left engine. It takes a little while for the fuel line to empty, so I started to get on him to tighten the turn and “pull some Gs”—increase the gravitational force in the plane. By the time he had it honked in good and tight, the left engine quit. The sudden shock from the drag of the now

Refugees escaping the heavy bombing near Khe Sanh board an Air America C-46 Commando transport at Da Nang on Jan. 29, 1968, for a flight to a refugee camp at Phu Bai.



An Air America crewman, called a “kicker,” pushes cargo out the door of a C-46, likely for a resupply mission to support local fighters allied

TOP: NEIL HANSEN; CENTER: HISTORINET ARCHIVES; BOTTOM LEFT: KEVSTON/GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: RICH COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, DALLAS

windmilling propeller (a propeller spinning on its own without power from the engine) rolled us partially inverted, mainly because Tom didn't react fast enough to the unexpected event. During his ensuing struggle to regain control, I moved the fuel selector valve back to the "on" position, which went unobserved by Tom. Just as he got the bird leveled, the left engine burst back to life, swiveling the airplane in the other direction.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Engine quit," he wheezed through a sharp intake of air.

"Gosh, wonder why? Maybe water in the gas?"

"Uh, guess so. Let's not do any more steep turns."

"Okay, Tom, let's do a power-on stall straight ahead then."

As he began pulling the nose up into a stalling angle, I slipped my hand down between the seats onto the elevator trim wheel (a device that helps the pilot keep the plane at a constant speed and angle) and began to roll full nose up. As the speed bled off and the elevator control pressure became looser, he couldn't feel what I was doing. The bird shuddered, and Tom dropped the nose to recover from the stall while applying full power to the engines. The resulting propeller blast now hit the fully deflected trim tab, which in turn slammed the hand wheel back into his gut, with a little help from my right hand on the side of the control column. This made the nose pitch up violently.

Tom's eyes started to bug out.

He was oblivious to anything I was doing, so, as the aircraft entered a secondary stall in about a 45-degree nose-up angle, I shoved in full left rudder. This caused the machine to rotate in a neat snap roll. I leveled the airplane and released the controls to Tom, a move unnoticed and unfelt in his current state, as the dust was still settling in the cockpit.

"Damn, that was pretty neat, Tom," I commented.

"Uh...huh," he replied, "the elevator jammed!"

"We better let the wrench benders know about that little problem. For now, we just won't do any more of those."

Tom seemed a little nervous as we entered the traffic pattern at Tay Ninh. I had placed my left arm over the back of his seat, not in a gesture of friendliness as he thought, but to get my hand by the circuit breaker panel and pluck out the circuit breakers for the flaps and landing gear motor. As we came to the runway, I urged Tom to make a tight approach and get the plane on the

ground as soon as possible. Eager to comply, he flipped the landing gear handle down, pulled off some power and rolled in close to the runway.

To keep his mind occupied I said, "Hey, Tom, they're shootin' at us over here on the right!"

The whites of his eyes expanded as he slammed the flap lever full down and pulled more power off, whipping it onto final approach. Without the landing gear and flaps down for drag, it is hard to slow an airplane and lose altitude at the same time. By the time Tom got to the approach end of the runway, he had pulled the throttles all the way back, but we were still high and fast.

"Tom, you dipshit—go around before you put us in



Air America pilots, like this one in a Pilatus PC-6 Porter, often landed on grass strips hacked out of the jungle.

the dirt!" yelled one of the other trainees, concerned about our proximity to terra firma.

The go-around brought a red flush to Tom's neck and the sick realization that I had been doing something to make him look the buffoon in front of everybody. I am sure I hurt his feelings, but I hoped that a glimmer of the reasoning behind my actions had been imparted to him. If not, like Rhett Butler before me, "frankly, I don't give a damn." (Tom was a co-pilot for about a month before being given another check ride. He eventually made captain.)

Black flights—secret/covert/possibly illegal—were for the most part utterly useless. If something went wrong, they were also dangerous for the crew because you would get no support. It was like the opening lines from the TV series *Mission: Impossible*: "The secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions." How true that proved to be for John T. Downey and Richard G. Fecteau, CIA agents who were captured trying to infiltrate China in 1952 and spent 20 years in a Chinese prison, waiting for the U.S. government to admit that they were agency operatives, all the Chinese government wanted to hear. Fecteau was released in 1971 and

Downey in 1972 as U.S. relations with China improved during President Richard Nixon's administration.

On one day, after my manager and I finished covering the day's schedule behind closed doors, he asked if I would be interested in taking a Beechcraft on a black flight to the Ranch later that afternoon. The "Ranch" was a secret-customer operation at the Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, roughly 145 miles northwest of Bangkok.

My job was to get a guy out of Vietnam and into Thailand without going through the legal formalities of customs and immigration. It was made very clear that I was not to even look at the passenger. The embassy would call as soon as he left from downtown in a car, and I was to sit in the cockpit with the door closed until he knocked and climbed in, signaling me to crank up and go.

We filed a legitimate flight plan to Bangkok with Takhli as my alternate. Then, just before letting down into Bangkok, I was to announce that I was diverting to my alternate. U.S. Embassy officials in Saigon assured me that no one would get upset over this minor change in plans. They would send one of the spooks from the embassy to make sure everything went smoothly.

As soon as embassy called and said that my passenger was on his way, I did as they requested. I sat and waited...and waited...and waited. The cockpit temperature was over 130 degrees Fahrenheit, and I was starting to see little floating spots in my vision. Then a black car with curtained windows finally drove onto the ramp and pulled up out of sight behind the airplane. While I waited for The Knock, I wondered how he was going to get from the car to the airplane without 50 ramp workers seeing him. Or could it be that I was the only one not supposed to see him? I really didn't care if it was LBJ, the pope or Adolf Hitler—just as long as I could start the engines and get some cool air moving before I passed out.

After The Knock, everything went like clockwork. The passenger got off in Takhli and walked to another curtained black car. I refueled, cranked up and was halfway out to the runway when two jeeploads of Thai soldiers blocked the taxiway and raised their rifles. When in deep crap, it is best to act very dumb and quiet. Although the Thais detained me for a week, they finally bought my story of being lost and let me go back to Saigon.

So who was the mystery stranger and why did we smuggle him into a friendly country? Beats the hell out of me.

One night in 1967, the bedside radio set woke me at 1 a.m. It was Operations calling to tell me that an embassy car would get me in 30 minutes and take me to the



Today, Hansen is a volunteer and speaker at the EAA Aviation Center museum in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

airport. On the way, I was to pick up an American to fly co-pilot. I dressed hurriedly, stuffed some underwear in my flight kit and went down to the front gate. The car arrived with an armed escort and swung by the co-pilot's house to ruin his night of rest.

At Operations, one of the embassy spooks pulled me into a corner, where even my co-pilot couldn't overhear us, and briefed me. He had cargo already loaded in a C-46 that we were to fly non-stop to Hong Kong, without the

normal refueling in Da Nang. As usual, we were not to look at the cargo, nor file a flight plan, nor contact anyone on the radio until we were 100 nautical miles (115 miles) from Hong Kong. Of course, we weren't to worry about busting into the Hong Kong airspace unannounced—except we did worry. If Hong Kong didn't like the idea, we wouldn't have enough gas to fly anywhere else, and then the only options would be to face the heat or ditch the bird.

At 100 nautical miles out, I gave Hong Kong air traffic control a call, and they responded as if we were a regularly scheduled flight; obviously someone had gotten the message at their end. Nevertheless, I didn't really breathe a sigh of relief until we were in the terminal drinking a cup of coffee while the airplane was being offloaded into British military trucks. As soon as the customer's stuff was well away, we departed Hong Kong, again sans a flight plan, nonstop to Saigon. And that was that.

Once home, I ended my typical atypical day with a tepid shower and an 8-ounce very dry martini—made by whispering "vermouth" softly over the top of a gin-filled tumbler. ▼

Neil Hansen left Air America in October 1973. He travels the country on the speaking circuit, recounting stories about his Air America days to military, civic and veterans' groups. He lives in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. This article was compiled from his forthcoming book **FLIGHT: An Air America Pilot's Story of Adventure, Descent and Redemption**, History Publishing Co., 2019.

