AIR AMERICA: AERO COMMANDER U-4

by Dr. Joe F. Leeker

Last updated on 1 June 2009

RLAF Aero Commander U-4 "2714", probably taken at Vientiane in the early seventies (photo no.VA031003, No Date, John Anthony Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, with kind permission from Steve Maxner)

The types of missions flown by Air America's U-4:
The aircraft was painted in the colors of the Royal Laotian Air Force and noted on all Air America documents as a grant aircraft. In the early days, it was probably mainly flown by sheep-dipped USAF personnel, but between 1971 and 1973, it appeared on official Air America inventories. Probably it was used for FAC missions as well as for reconnaissance and communications flights.

Statistics according to official Air America documents:
- Inventory of 1 Feb. 66, in: UTD/Herd/B2: 0
- Reference: Attachment 1, in: UTD/Dexter/F1: Hostilities pay per block for aircraft based at Vientiane, undated, but after 12 March 70
- Inventories of 31 March 72 > 30 November 72 (UTD/CIA/B1F10): 1L > 1L

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
Aero Comm. U-4	"2714"	560-214	7 January 71	N2714B / "55-2714"

Origin: official Air America papers give this aircraft as being ex "55-2714" (F.O.C. of 1 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); even USAID's Implementation Order no. 439-342-046 dated 7 January 71 (in: UTD/Bisson/B5 microfilm reel no.29) gives this identity; on the other hand, USAF "55-2714" is known to have been a North American F-100C-10-NH (e-mail dated 15 February 2004, sent by Barry Collman to Dr. Erik Carlson, who kindly forwarded it to the author; confirmed by Andrade, *US Military aircraft designations*, p.106); instead, Barry Collman gives the following information: "Aero Commander s/n 214 was built as N2714B and sold on May 19th 1955 to Johnson Air Interests Inc., of Racine, Wisconsin. On December 13th 1955,

they sold it to the Air Carrier Service Corporation, of Washington, DC., a company often used by the Aero Design & Engineering Company to deliver Commanders around the World. On January 6th 1956, the original Certificate of Airworthiness was renewed, showing that 238:25 hours had accrued. It is my understanding that the aircraft was then delivered to the Government of Laos, Royal Lao Air Force, in Vientiane. Strangely, N2714B was not cancelled from the FAA register though, until

CONTRACT NO. AID-439-342
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IMPLEMENTATION ORDER

IMPLEMENTATION ORDER 439-342-046
DATE 7 January 1971

TO: Base Manager
Air America, Inc.

Pursuant to Part I, Article 3, paragraph b of subject contract, the Government plans to make available the following aircraft:

Type of Aircraft	MSN	Point of Availability	Estimated Period of Use	Services to be Furnished
U-4	55-2714	Vientiane	Date of order thru duration of contract	Art. 3b. (3) Part I (a) (i) (b) (i) (c) (i) (d) (i)

The above aircraft is the property of the Government of the Kingdom of Laos and pursuant to Royal Lao Armed Force Order S.P. 24.078 dated 6 August 1970, USAID has agreed to provide for flight operations and maintenance thereof under arrangements accommodated by the United States Government for flight crew and POL.

Please indicate your agreement to the request and the flying hour prices per hour for each aircraft for a calendar quarter and return four copies to the undersigned.

William R. Leonard
Contracting Officer
or Authorized Representative, USAID/L

USAID Contract no. 439-342, Implementation Order no. 439-342-046 dated 7 Jan.71
(in: UTD/Bisson/B5 microfilm reel no.29)

February 21st 1974. Intriguingly, that date almost ties in with your last few lines under the “Fate” heading. Now, I recently discovered another oddball Commander and it's almost a sister ship. Serial number 216 was ordered on an unknown date under US Air Force contract AF29616 for the US Army. Factory records show that there was a Special Work Release Order dated February 11th 1955, which authorized the building of this aircraft. It was to be painted in Polar White and Ceram Green colours,

with the registration N2716B to be applied in temporary format only. A later amendment to the Special Work Release Order dated March 14th 1955 authorized the marks “55-3815” to be eventually used. On April 30th that year, the aircraft had a 67 US gallon auxiliary fuel tank installed in the baggage compartment. It was Certificated the same day, then sold to a Mr George Hamm, of Coraopolis, Pennsylvania on May 4th. Factory records indicate delivery to the US Army on June 29th., but the aircraft crashed, reportedly still as N2716B, on July 10th near Enid, Pennsylvania. Now, the really interesting part is that the Warranty File Card, showed the operator as “Government of Laos, USA Operations, Saigon, Vietnam”. In a line - three Countries involved! Now, I’m wondering whether this is the Commander that should have gone to Laos, but after its demise, s/n 214 N2714B was acquired instead.” (e-mail dated 15 February 2004); reportedly this aircraft was a gift of President Eisenhower to the King of Laos, and possibly it was loaned to the RLAF by the USAF under a MAP; the real owner is unknown. On the FAA’s US Civil Aircraft Register of 1 July 66, Commander N2714B c/n 214 is still registered to Air Carrier Service Corp. of Washington DC, but an * in the address section probably means that the actual owner of the aircraft was unknown to the FAA, while an * in the status section indicates that no inspection report had been received during the last 13 months

Service history: used from 8 July 64 to probably September 64 in Operation *Triangle*, when Joe Potter and others flew it acting as Forward Air Controllers who directed the T-28s; operation *Triangle* lasted for more than 10 weeks and consisted of attacks on Pathet Lao positions west of the Plain of Jars near the junction of Routes 7 and 13 (Caste, *At war*, pp. 73/4; Leary, *Outline - Air America in Laos*, 1964, pp. 24-26); hereafter, it was probably flown by USAF or RLAF personnel, as it was not current with Air America in February 66 (Inventory of 1 Feb. 66, in: UTD/Herd/B2); it was assigned to contract AID-439-342 for use out of Vientiane at least between 1 July 71 and 31 July 71 (Flight Operations Circulars of 1 July 71 and 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); painted in the colors of the Royal Lao Air Force; noted as “grant aircraft” in May 72 (Company confidential dated 26 May 72, in: UTD/Hickler/F8F7C); on 18 June 72, “2714” made 2 trips from Vientiane to Paksane (L-35) and back (Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule of 18 June 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7); photos taken at Udorn are published in: Love, *Wings of Air America*, p.90; current on 30 November 72 (Inventory in: UTD/CIA/B1F10); assigned to contract F04606-71-C-0002 for use out of Udorn 16-30 April 73 (F.O.C. of 16 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14).

Fate: given to the RLAF in late May or in June 73; was dropped from the F04606-71-C-0002 contract at the end of May 73 (Letter dated 24 March, sent by James Cunningham to Paul Velte, in: UTD/CIA/B31F4); no longer listed in the list of “Assigned, maintained aircraft at Vientiane” as of 1 July 73 (in: UTD/CIA/B31F10); not listed as current with Air America on 1 November 73; but still mentioned in: Hostilities pay for U4 for Vientiane on 1 October 73 (Pay Rates dated 8 September 73, in: UTD/CIA/B20F1), and Area pay rates for Udorn U4 for 1 February 74 (in: UTD/CIA/B20F1), so maybe Air America pilots still flew the aircraft during that period. Apparently, the aircraft survived the war and remained in Laos; on 4 September 1981, the civil registration N92619 was issued to this Aero Commander for J. D. Melvin Co., Glendale, CA; this registration was never taken up.

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