

AIR AMERICA: SIKORSKY CH-54 SKYCRANE by Dr. Joe F. Leeker

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A US Army CH-54 Skycrane airlifting Air America's ill-fated Caribou "392" out of Ban Muang Ngan (LS-236), Laos, on 21 May 69
(with kind permission from the Air America Association)

Several times it was reported that Air America also operated a Sikorsky CH-54 on loan from the US Army's 1st Aviation Brigade. These reports seem to go back to a photo published in Conboy, *War in Laos*, p. 33, whose text notes: "An unmarked CH-54 Skycrane (known in Laos by the radio call-sign Hurricane), on loan to Air America from the U.S. Army's 1st Aviation Brigade, lifts ammunition to Fire Support Base (FAB) Mustang, during August of 1971. It was not uncommon for USAF and US Army aviation units to loan aircraft to Air America for specific missions. When used on such missions, all U.S. service and national markings were removed or overpainted." Although it is true that Air America loaned USAF and US Army aircraft, the Skycranes were not loaned to Air America in the same way as for example the C-123s or the UH-1Hs. That is they were loaned only for specific missions and flown by military crews. This is proved by the fact that official Air America documents of that period (F.O.C.s of 1 and 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B; Air America Aircraft insurances as of 15 July 71, in: UTD/Herd/B2) do not mention such an aircraft.

Ed Strazzini, who flew those Skycranes in Laos in 1970 and '71, clarifies this point (e-mail dated 12 April 2004, kindly sent by Ed Strazzini to Erik Carlson who forwarded it to the author): "The 478th Aviation Company (Hvy Hel) (101st Abn Div and after 6/71 the 1AvnBde) while based in Danang, RVN, provided when requested by the US Embassy in Laos through the US Air Force, RVN, CH-54A heavy helicopters and crews to support missions in Laos. These were special missions which required airlift beyond the capability of any helicopters operated by Air America (UH-1 and S-58/CH34) during those years. Typically such missions required one aircraft which was flown over to Thailand where it would stage for daily ops into Laos. Aircraft national markings were covered and crews were advised to wear unmarked clothing though many were uncomfortable with that notion while flying over Laos for fear of being mistaken as spies and/or CIA personnel. Missions in Laos

were varied but generally included transport of engineer equipment (dozers, road graders and construction supplies), artillery (155mm and 105mm), ammo, and other odd sized heavy stuff. I have heard from another 478th pilot who was there after my tour that the company eventually stationed two CH-54s at Udorn RTAFB in order to better support the increased mission up north. It is also my understanding that during the several year period of this mission two CH-54s were lost – one on the ramp at Udorn during a maintenance runup and another which crashed up north while landing with a heavy external load on a high mountain peak. These missions were highly coveted by 478th crews because they were so very interesting and challenging and because they got us out of the neighborhood (RVN). The good food and the friendly Thai people were also a big attraction.” MacAlan Thompson, who worked for IVS/USAID in Laos, adds: “The US Army also provided the Sikorsky Skycrane, CH-54, now and then to support in Laos, sometimes moving heavy guns, generators, often moving bull dozers, graders, etc, for USAID” (e-mail dated 29 April 2004, kindly sent to the author by MacAlan Thompson).

Evidently, the Skycrane depicted in Conboy, *War in Laos*, p. 33, also belonged to that category. A US Army Skycrane airlifting Air America’s ill-fated Caribou “392” out of Ban Muang Ngan (LS-236), Laos, on 21 May 69 can be found in a photo series at <http://www.air-america.org/ImageLibrary/ImageGallery1.htm> .

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