

AIR AMERICA: HELIO H-500 TWIN COURIERS by Dr. Joe F. Leeker

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The strangest aircraft said to have been flown by Air America seems to be a Helio H-500 Twin Courier, that is mentioned by Robbins, *Air America*, p. 106. Official Air America records preserved at the Air America Archives do not mention such an aircraft, but there are three ways to explain why Twin Couriers were mentioned to have been in service with Air America:

- In the summer of 1965, Air America pilot William Andresevic, who had flown the regular Helio extensively in Laos, was ordered to fly a Helio Twin Courier to Bolivia for evaluation by the US Embassy (Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA's secret war in Tibet*, p. 288, note 9). "That was in the summer of 1965, not 1964. After some operational use in Bolivia, I returned it to an airstrip in Virginia" (e-mail dated 24 January 2005, kindly sent to the author by William Andresevic). Photos of USAFs Helio U-5A Twin Courier "90336" believed taken at Hulburt Field, FL, in 1962, can be seen at <http://www.stolaircraft.com/heliopics9.html>. In 1962, the USAF evaluated 2 U-5A Twin Couriers, 59-5955 and 59-5956, at Hulburt for use by the air commandos (Andrade, *US military aircraft designations*, p.172), so "90336" is possibly a fake serial for 59-5956.



Air Ventures H-500 taken at Beirut in August 1966 by Guido E. Bühlmann
(submitted by HelioCourier.Net and used here with kind permission from G. Bühlmann)

- In August 64, Air Ventures Inc. of Washington, DC, the CIA's quasi-proprietary based in Nepal, received Helio H-500 N10034 (c/n 4), which was turned over to the Government of India as VT-DVM in December 67. A photo of Twin Courier N10034 taken at Beirut, Lebanon, in August 1966 by Guido E. Bühlmann can be found at <http://www.stolaircraft.com/heliopics4.htm>. Since some Air America helicopter pilots like Elmer Munsell flew with Air Ventures at that time, this may have created the idea that Twin Helio N10034 also belonged to Air America.

- Some Air America pilots flew Twin Helios as instructors for the ARC or *Aviation Research Center* at Charbatia Air Base ("Oak Tree") in India. The best source of information about the ARC is the excellent book by Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA's secret war in Tibet*. As they show in detail (pp.190-242), the ARC was created on 7 September 1963 by the Indian Intelligence Bureau as a front to coordinate aviation cooperation with the CIA. Its main

purpose was to train agents for infiltration into Tibet, to re-supply them at launch sites along the border, to install sensors on high mountain tops close to the border, and later to install wiretaps. Another purpose was to function as a covert airlift wing to infiltrate Indian commandos into Tibet in case of further hostilities as well as supply missions to isolated outposts along India's northern border. For example, the Twin Courier would provide a shuttle between New Delhi and a staging base close to Nanda Devi Sanctuary, to other base camps in the Himalayas (as late as May 67) or to Kalsi airstrip close the General Uban's headquarters at Chakrata, and to fly reconnaissance missions around Nanda Devi; some of these missions were flown by Air America pilot Jim Rhyne (Conboy / Kohli, *Spies in the Himalayas*, pp.54-56, 66/7, 92/3, 152). In 1966, other ARC air bases like Doomdommah or Sarsawa were added for special operations, and three Twin Couriers together with some C-46s were at Kuttack in eastern India in 1966 (Stephen Simms, quoted in: *Air-Britain Aviation World*, Winter 2005, p.187). But in the summer of 1967 the CIA reduced its links to the ARC, and the Indians decided to introduce Antonov An-12s to the ARC fleet and to increase the number of Mil Mi-4 helicopters already introduced earlier. In 1969 cooperation between the CIA and the ARC still existed, but it had come down to nothing, when the war between India and Pakistan began in 1971. As to Air America, they not only supported the ARC by supplying the first 2 C-46s (VT-DRH and VT-DRI) and the first 2 Helio Couriers (VT-DRJ and VT-DRK) in September 1963, but they also sent some of their best pilots to act as instructors for the ARC crews. Head of the C-46 conversion team was Bill Welk, and the Helio Courier and later the Helio Twin Courier conversion team was headed by Jim Rhyne. Other instructors included M.D. Johnson, Al Judkins, and Maurice Clough, with Connie Seigrist and Tom Sailer providing additional C-46 training at Charbatia in early 1964 (Conboy / Morrison, pp.191/2, 255, 286). The website of the Helio Aircraft Company (at http://www.helioaircraft.com/aboutus_history.htm) states about the Twin Courier: "Only seven of these aircraft were built and all were delivered to the CIA." In April 1990, John Davis listed all known registrations of those Twin Couriers (in: AMCAR, no. 45, p.58). In July 1966, 6 of those 7 Twin Couriers were still on the FAA's Civil Aircraft Register, all registered to companies that probably had some connection with the CIA, although the first 2 of those Twin Couriers are known to have been delivered to the ARC in late 1964 (Conboy / Morrison, p. 207). By the end of 1967, all seven of them had appeared on the Civil Aircraft Register of India. All of them were registered to the Government of India, so that probably all of them were operated by the ARC, and all of them had been cancelled from that register by 1979. The following list of Helio H-500 Twin Couriers is based on Burnett / Slack / Davis, *South-East Asia Civil Aircraft Registers*, pp. 186/7, whose civil aircraft register of India is based on official material of Indian Dept. of Civil Aviation:

VT-DTY	c/n "AF.5"	regd. Oct. 65	ex N10035 of Continental Air of Miami
VT-DTZ	c/n "AF.3"	regd. Oct. 65	ex N10033 of Corsair Air Service of Miami
VT-DVC	c/n 2	regd. Feb. 67	ex N8745R (not on the USCAR of 1 July 66); possibly also ex 59-5956 and "90336"
VT-DVD	c/n 7	regd. Feb. 67	ex N10037 of Continental Air of New York
VT-DVE	c/n 1	regd. Feb. 67	ex N92860 of Continental Air of Miami; possibly also ex 59-5955
VT-DVL	c/n 6	regd. Feb. 67	ex N10036 of Marathon Aviation of Miami
VT-DVM	c/n 4	regd. Dec. 67	ex N10034 of Air Ventures of Washington DC

One Twin Courier is known to have crashed in India in 1967 (Conboy / Morrison, p.230), but probably most of the others were also destroyed – except for VT-DVM, which reappeared in 1975 as N48130 (Davis, in: AMCAR, no. 45, p.58). Further details are unknown, but it did

not survive until today (request submitted to the FAA on 10 January 2005).

Other companies called Air America:

After Air America had officially closed its doors in 1976, other companies took profit of the famous name. So in 1976, an “Air America Inc. of Factoryville, PA” registered Helio HST-550A Stallion N10038 (c/n 1 ex N9550A) to their company (*US Register Review 77*, p. 112), and even re-registered it appropriately as N550AA in December 76; however, the registration N550AA was not taken up, and the aircraft was sold to Royal Aviation of Mesquite, TX, as N10038 in November 77. Already in January 78, the registration was cancelled, and the aircraft was sold to Asian Alcohol Corp. of Manila as RP-C1550, which still owned it as of 1990.

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