

# **AIR AMERICA: HUGHES 500s:**

**by Dr. Joe F. Leeker**

First published on 15 August 2003, last updated on 24 August 2015.



An unknown Hughes 500 taken by Tom Lum, probably at Udorn in the early seventies (photo no.VA024847, No Date, Allen Cates Collection, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, with kind permission from Steve Maxner)

## **The types of missions flown by Air America's Hughes 500s:**

Most official Air America papers like the Flight Operations Circulars speak of only two Air America Hughes 500s (N353X and N354X), and those aircraft were operated out of Udorn on medevac and communications missions into Laos and could carry 3 passengers (Aircraft and avionics information as of 1 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14). But those two aircraft only served as cover for two others – the “Quiet Ones” – that were used for a secret wiretap mission into North Vietnam and whose complete identities appear only in one Air America paper hidden among others preserved at the Air America Archives: in a letter dated 15 June 73, by which Air America's Senior Vice President Clyde S. Carter asked the FAA to note a change of ownership for those two Hughes 500Ps. As their conversion to Hughes 500Ps is not mentioned in that letter, they may have become regular Hughes 500s again at that time. Those documents also reveal that from the very beginning, the two regular Hughes 500s had only one purpose – to be used as cover for the Hughes 500Ps, as all four aircraft were registered on the very same day, that is on 15 July 71, although the regular ones came to Laos only about one year later.

## **Statistics according to official Air America documents:**

- Inventories of 31 March 72 > 30 November 72 (in: UTD/CIA/B1F10): 2 > 2

## The individual aircraft histories:

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
------	-----------------------	-----------	---------------	--------



The Air America Hughes 500P that was used on the mission to Vinh at PS-44 in December 1972, with US Army colors painted out (with kind permission from Ken Conboy)

Hughes 369HS	N351X	900257S	July 71	probably ex US Army 68-17297
--------------	-------	---------	---------	------------------------------

**Previous history:** probably ex US Army 68-17297 (that seems to be the US Army serial still visible below the rotor), which would make it msn 1257

**Service history:** regd. on 15 July 71 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 15 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5); not listed in the Flight Operations Circular of 15 July 71 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); not covered with Aircraft Public Liability, Property Damage Liability and Passenger Liability Insurance in July 71 (Air America Aircraft Insurances as of 15 July 71 / Memorandum dated 19 July 71, in: UTD/Herd/B2); believed converted to Hughes 500P (“The Quiet One”) in the USA between July and October 71 for a communications-intercept project called “Main Street”; directly controlled by Washington in September 71 (Memorandum of 29 September 71, p. 6, in: UTD/CIA/B19F8); ferried to Air Asia’s base at Tainan in “late 1971” (Conboy / Morrison, *The Quiet One*, p. 45) or in January 72 and used there until the spring of 1972 to train 6 senior officers from the 34th Squadron of the Republic of China Air Force for a wiretap mission into North Vietnam (Conboy / Morrison, *The Quiet One*, p. 46); the project “Main Street”, employing Messrs. Smith and Lamothe as special pilots, ended on 31 December 71 or in early 1972 (Memorandum of 30 September 71, p. 4, in: UTD/CIA/B19F8); not listed as maintained by Air America, Udorn, on 1 April 72 (List of assigned / maintained aircraft as of 1 April 72, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2); loaded into an Air America C-130 and flown to Takhli (T-05) about June 72; flown to PS 44 in June 72 for a wiretap mission into North Vietnam;

used by Taiwanese crewmen from the RoCAF's 34th Squadron to practice night missions near PS 44 until early September 72, when the Taiwanese were sent home; then, Air America crews were trained to fly to Vinh in North Vietnam and to tap the telephone line; after several failures, that mission was successfully completed in the night of 6 to 7 December 72 (Conboy / Morrison, *The quiet one*, pp. 46-49). The 2 Hughes 500Ps had been left painted in US Army colors with markings and serials painted over (see the photo on p. 46), possibly to make believe that they had been stolen from the military. Flown to Thailand on board an Air America C-130 in December 72, immediately after the Vinh mission was completed (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 385). Possibly reverted to a regular Hughes 500.

**Fate:** sold to The Pacific Corp., Washington, in 1973; sold to Southern Sky Inc., Dallas, TX, on 27 June 73 (Invoice of 27 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5; Minutes BoD-AAM of 15 November 73, in: UTD/CIA/B4F3; Minutes of the Pacific Corp. of 30 October 73, in: UTD/CIA/B1F6); change of registered owner requested on 15 June 73 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 15 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5); believed transferred to the US Army Night Vision lab as ? (e-mail dated 9 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by LTC Hugh Mills); if the identity ex US Army 68-17297 msn 1257 is correct, it became N6188L with the United States Border Patrol Air Operations, El Paso, TX, on 19 May 1993. On October 25, 2004, about 1425 mountain standard time, Hughes OH-6A N6188L landed hard during a forced landing following a loss of engine power near Tucson, Arizona. The United States Border Patrol was operating the helicopter under the provisions of 14 CFR Part 91. The commercial pilot and one passenger sustained serious injuries; the helicopter sustained substantial damage. The public-use flight departed Ajo, Arizona, about 1100, with a planned destination of Tucson ([http://www.nts.gov/aviationquery/brief2.aspx?ev\\_id=20041116X01830&ntsbno=LAX05TA018&akey=1](http://www.nts.gov/aviationquery/brief2.aspx?ev_id=20041116X01830&ntsbno=LAX05TA018&akey=1)); the reg. was cancelled on 16 February 2005, with the aircraft given as "destroyed" (inquiry submitted to the FAA on 11 August 2014 at [http://registry.faa.gov/aircraftinquiry/NNum\\_Results.aspx?NNumbertxt=6188L](http://registry.faa.gov/aircraftinquiry/NNum_Results.aspx?NNumbertxt=6188L) ).

Hughes 369HS          N352X          800248S          July 71          probably ex US Army 68-17288

**Previous history:** probably ex US Army 68-17297, which would probably make it c/n 1248

**Service history:** regd. on 15 July 71 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 15 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5); not listed in the Flight Operations Circular of 15 July 71 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); not covered with Aircraft Public Liability, Property Damage Liability and Passenger Liability Insurance in July 71 (Air America Aircraft Insurances as of 15 July 71 / Memorandum dated 19 July 71, in: UTD/Herd/B2); believed converted to Hughes 500P ("The Quiet One") in the USA between July and October 71 for a communications-intercept project called "Main Street"; directly controlled by Washington in September 71 (Memorandum of 29 September 71, p. 6, in: UTD/CIA/B19F8); ferried to Air Asia's base at Tainan in "late 1971" (Conboy / Morrison, *The Quiet One*, p. 45) or in January 72 and used there until the spring of 1972 to train 6 senior officers from the 34th Squadron of the Republic of China Air Force for a wiretap mission into North Vietnam (Conboy / Morrison, *The Quiet One*, p. 46); the project "Main Street", employing Messrs. Smith and Lamothe as special pilots, ended on 31 December 71 (Memorandum of 30 September 71, p. 4, in: UTD/CIA/B19F8); not listed as maintained by Air America, Udorn, on 1 April 72 (List of assigned / maintained aircraft as of 1 April 72, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2); loaded



into an Air America C-130 and flown to Takhli (T-05) about June 72; flown to PS 44 in June 72 for a wiretap mission into North Vietnam; used by Taiwanese crewmen from the RoCAF's 34th Squadron to practice nightly mission profiles along stream beds near PS 44. With a month, however, pilot error claimed one of the two modified choppers as it landed hard in front of the hangar. This seems to have been N352X, as N351X seems to have survived as OH-6A N6188L. "According to Col Lu, the infrared system was not working properly, and the high ground surrounding PS-44 required the two pilots to land the small helicopter downwind at too high an approach speed" (Fu / Pocock, *The Black Bats*, p.117). As a result, the six Chinese were repatriated to Taiwan in early September 72; ; then, Air America crews were trained to fly to Vinh in North Vietnam and to tap the telephone line; after several failures, that mission was successfully completed in the night of 6 to 7 December 72 (Conboy / Morrison, *The quiet one*, pp. 46-49). The 2 Hughes 500Ps had been left painted in US Army colors with markings and serials painted over (see the photo on p. 46), possibly to make believe that they had been stolen from the military. Flown to Thailand on board an Air America C-130 in December 72, immediately after the Vinh mission was completed (Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 385). Possibly reverted to a regular Hughes 500.

**Fate:** sold to The Pacific Corp., Washington, in 1973; sold to Southern Sky Inc., Dallas, TX, on 27 June 73 (Invoice of 27 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5; Minutes BoD-AAM of 15 November 73, in: UTD/CIA/B4F3; Minutes of the Pacific Corp. of 30 October 73, in: UTD/CIA/B1F6); change of registered owner requested on 15 June 73 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 15 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5); believed transferred to the US Army Night Vision lab as ? (e-mail dated 9 December 2005, kindly sent to the author by LTC Hugh Mills); did no longer exist in 1995.



Hughes 369HS N353X in 1972/3  
(UTD/Jenkins)

Hughes 369HS      N353X      110289S      July 71      bought new from Hughes  
**Service history:** registration reserved in 1971, request of registration dated 25 June

71 (Letters by Clyde S. Carter dated 25 June 71 and 29 June 71, in: UTD/CIA/B15F1); registered on 15 July 71 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 15 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5); not listed in the Flight Operations Circular of 15 July 71 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); a photo is preserved in UTD/Jenkins; covered with Aircraft Public Liability, Property Damage Liability and Passenger Liability Insurance in July 71 (Air America Aircraft Insurances as of 15 July 71 / Memorandum dated 19 July 71, in: UTD/Herd/B2); left the US in late 71; operated at Tainan under contract DAJB17-72-C-1021 for a short period, before being assigned to contract AID-439-713 in Laos in 1972 (Minutes ExCom-AAAC/AAM of 11 January 72, in: UTD/CIA/B9F7); not listed as maintained by Air America, Udorn, on 1 April 72 (List of assigned / maintained aircraft as of 1 April 72, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2); based at Udorn in April 72 as a cover for the Hughes 500Ps to arrive later and used on Medevac missions into Laos (Conboy / Morrison, *The quiet one*, p. 46); the main rotor blade struck the tail boom at the termination of a practice autorotative landing at Udorn (T-08) on 1 June 72, causing substantial damage to the tail boom and 3 main rotor blades; repaired and returned to service on 4 June 72 (XOXO of 1 June 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; Minutes ExCom-AAAC/AAM of 13 June 72, in: UTD/CIA/B9F7, give 2 June 72); due to engine problems, N353X made a forced landing near Nam Song (LS-363), Laos, on 6 January 73, when flying under the provisions of contract no. F04606-71-C-0002; neither Captain D. J. E. Overfield nor the indigenous passenger were injured (XOXO of 6 Jan. 73, in: UTD/Hickler/B25F12); repaired; 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); flew Udorn (T-08) - Ban Xieng Lom (LS-69A) on 18 April 73 (Udorn daily flight schedule of 18 April 73, in: UTD/Dexter/F1); no titles; at Udorn in June 73 (a photo is preserved in: UTD/Anthony/F9); a photo of another Air America Hughes 500D was published in: Conboy, *War in Laos*, p. 53, but the small black registration on the tail cannot be seen.

**Fate:** sold to The Pacific Corp., Washington, in 1973; sold to Southern Sky Inc., Dallas, TX, on 27 June 73 (Invoice of 27 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5; Minutes BoD-AAM of 15 November 73, in: UTD/CIA/B4F3; Minutes of the Pacific Corp. of 30 October 73, in: UTD/CIA/B1F6); change of registered owner requested on 15 June 73 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 15 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5); sold to? as N2769 in 1975 (*US Register Review* 1976, p. 84); sold to the US Department of Energy, Las Vegas, NV, as N2769, regd. on 17 March 76; cancelled as destroyed on 23 December 1981 (inquiry submitted to the FAA on 11 August 2012).



Two photos of Hughes 369HS N354X, both taken at Udorn in 1973  
(with kind permission from Judy Porter)

Hughes 369HS          N354X          210298S          July 71          bought new from Hughes

**Service history:** registration reserved in 1971, request of registration dated 7 July 71 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 7 July 71, in: UTD/CIA/B15F1); regd. on 15 July 71 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 15 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5); not listed in the Flight Operations Circular of 15 July 71 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); covered with Aircraft Public Liability, Property Damage Liability and Passenger Liability Insurance in July 71 (Air America Aircraft Insurances as of 15 July 71 / Memorandum dated 19 July 71, in: UTD/Herd/B2); left the US in late 71; operated in Taiwan under contract DAJB17-72-C-1021 for a short period, before being assigned to contract AID-439-713 in Laos in 1972 (Minutes ExCom-AACL/AAM of 11 January 72, in: UTD/CIA/B9F7); not listed as maintained by Air America, Udorn, on 1 April 72 (List of assigned / maintained aircraft as of 1 April 72, in: UTD/CIA/B49F2); based at Udorn in April 72 as a cover for the Hughes 500Ps to arrive later and used on Medevac missions into Laos (Conboy / Morrison, *The quiet one*, p. 46); made an autorotative landing at Long Tieng (LS-20A), Laos, on 27 June 72, following fuel starvation; the main rotor blades struck the tail boom, damaging both the boom and the blades; repaired and returned to service on 26 July 72 (XOXO of 27 June 72, in: UTD/Hickler/B27F2; Minutes ExCom-AACL/AAM of 11 July 72, in: UTD/CIA/B9F7); flew Udorn (T-08) - Long Tieng (LS-20A) for RON on 1 September 72 (Udorn daily flight schedule of 1 Sept. 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7); flew Udorn (T-08) - Pakse (L-11) for RON on 7 January 73 (Udorn daily flight schedule of 7 Jan. 73, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7); flew Udorn (T-08) - Long Tieng (LS-20A) on 2 March 73 (Udorn daily flight schedule of 2 March 73, in: UTD/Bonansinga) and Udorn (T-08) - as directed by Requirements Office on 18 April 73 (Udorn daily flight schedule of 18 April 73, in: UTD/Dexter/F1); 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); based at Udorn; in "Air America"-titles (photos in UTD/Landry/B1F2 and in: UTD/Miller/B6).

**Fate:** sold to The Pacific Corp., Washington, in 1973; sold to Southern Sky Inc., Dallas, TX, on 27 June 73 (Invoice of 27 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5; Minutes BoD-AAM of 15 November 73, in: UTD/CIA/B4F3; Minutes of the Pacific Corp. of 30 October 73, in: UTD/CIA/B1F6); change of registered owner requested on 15 June 73 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter dated 15 June 73, in: UTD/CIA/B15F5); sold to? as N5537 in 1975 (*US Register Review* 1976, p. 84); sold to the US Department of Energy, Las Vegas, NV, as N5537, regd. on 17 March 76; cancelled as destroyed on 23 December 1981 (inquiry submitted to the FAA on 11 August 2012).

Hughes OH-6A/500P "12968"          570053          April 71          bailed from US Army 65-12968

**Service history:** prototype of the Hughes OH-6A/500P "The Quiet One" (photo in: Conboy / Morrison, *Shadow war*, p. 361); believed used to train three Air America pilots at the USAF's secret Area 51 testing range in Nevada between the end of April 71 and July 71 for a wiretap mission into North Vietnam (Conboy / Morrison, *The quiet one*, p. 46); then probably served as a model for the conversion of Air America's own 2 Hughes 369s to Hughes 500Ps.

**Fate:** eventually became N45780 in December 77 (*US Register Quarterly* 2, winter 77, p. 32); with the US Border Patrol, El Paso TX, as N45780 at least 1995-96 (*BuchAir Helicopters* 1995/6, p. 252; *BuchAir Helicopters* 1996/7, p. 265; *Heli* 1997/8, p. 237); rereg. to Helton Volunteer Search & Rescue, Danville, Indiana, on 9 December 1996; current with them in March 2004 (request submitted to the FAA on

13 March 2004 at <http://162.58.35.241/acdatabase/>).

Hughes OH-6A                   ?                   ?           December 71 (?)           to be bailed from  
the US Army

**Service history:** was to be bailed to Air Asia Co Ltd under contract DAJ001-72-L-0013 (P20); not mentioned in the F.O.C.s of 1 July 71 or 15 July 71 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); mentioned in the letter by Clyde S. Carter to the Dept. of the Army dated 2 December 71 (in: UTD/CIA/B15F2); probably, this was to be one of the OH-6As used to train 6 Taiwanese crewmen of the RoCAF's 34th Squadron at Air Asia's facility at Tainan for a wiretap mission into North Vietnam in July 71 (Conboy / Morrison, *The quiet one*, p. 46).

**Fate:** was to be returned to the US Army before the end of December 71 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter to the Dept. of the Army, dated 2 December 71, in: UTD/CIA/B15F2); possibly never materialized.

Hughes OH-6A                   ?                   ?           December 71 (?)           to be bailed from  
the US Army

**Service history:** was to be bailed to Air Asia Co Ltd under contract DAJ001-72-L-0013 (P20); not mentioned in the F.O.C.s of 1 July 71 or 15 July 71 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B); mentioned in the letter by Clyde S. Carter to the Dept. of the Army dated 2 December 71 (in: UTD/CIA/B15F2); probably, this was to be one of the OH-6As used to train 6 Taiwanese crewmen of the RoCAF's 34th Squadron at Air Asia's facility at Tainan for a wiretap mission into North Vietnam in July 71 (Conboy / Morrison, *The quiet one*, p. 46).

**Fate:** was to be returned to the US Army before the end of December 71 (Letter by Clyde S. Carter to the Dept. of the Army, dated 2 December 71, in: UTD/CIA/B15F2); possibly never materialized.

Hughes 500 Project: 2 rigs were to be placed at Udorn on 1 January 72, the fate of the other 2 was still to be decided at that time (Memorandum of 29 September 71, p. 3, in: UTD/CIA/B19F8).

© University of Texas at Dallas, 2003-2015