

ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE: AERO COMMANDER U-4

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RLAF Aero 560 “2714”, taken at Thakhek West, November 65, by Dr. Jonathan Pote
(with kind permission from Dr. Jonathan Pote)

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
Aero Comm. U-4	“2714”	560-214	Dec. 1955	N2714B / “55-2714” ¹

“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 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

¹ 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 micro-film reel no.29) gives this identity; on the other hand, the real USAF “55-2714” is known to have been a North American F-100C-10-NH (Andrade, *US Military aircraft designations*, p.106).

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.”²

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. On the FAA’s US Civil Aircraft Register of 1 July 66, Commander N2714B msn 214 is still registered to Air Carrier Service Corp. of Washington DC, but an * in the address section 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.

As it seems, it was seldom used as an aircraft of the Royal Flight. During Operation *Triangle*, i.e. from 8 July 64 to probably September 64, Joe Potter and other sheep-dipped USAF personnel flew it acting as Forward Air Controllers who directed the T-28 attacks. 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 13.³ Hereafter, the aircraft was probably flown by USAF or RLAf personnel, maybe on FAC missions as well as on reconnaissance and communications flights. On 7 January 71, Aero Commander “2714” was assigned to contract AID-439-342 for use out of Vientiane by Air America pilots,⁴ and this was still the case during the summer of 1971.⁵ At that time, it was painted in a different way, but still in the colors of the Royal Lao Air Force,⁶ and in Air America documents, the Aero Commander always appeared as a “grant aircraft”.⁷



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)

² E-mail dated 15 February 2004, sent by Barry Collman to Dr. Erik Carlson, who kindly forwarded it to the author.

³ Caste, *At war*, pp. 73/4; Leary, *Outline - Air America in Laos*, 1964, pp. 24-26.

⁴ USAID Contract no. 439-342, Implementation Order no. 439-342-046 dated 7 Jan.71, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.29

⁵ Flight Operations Circulars of 1 July 71 and 15 July 71, in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B.

⁶ Photos taken at Udorn were published in: Love, *Wings of Air America*, p.90.

⁷ For example in the 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 back⁸ – possibly communication flights. It was still current on 30 November 72,⁹ but in April 1973, it was assigned to Air America’s USAF/DepChief contract no. F04606-71-C-0002 for use out of Udorn.¹⁰ At the end of May 73, the aircraft was dropped from the F04606-71-C-0002 contract¹¹ and apparently handed over to the RLAF. On 1 July 73, it is no longer listed in the list of “Assigned, maintained aircraft at Vientiane”,¹² and on 1 November 73, it is no longer listed as current with Air America. As Air America’s Pay Rates dated 8 September 73 still mention Hostilities pay for U-4 for Vientiane for 1 October 73,¹³ and Area pay rates for Udorn U-4 for 1 February 74,¹⁴ it seems that 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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⁸ Vientiane Daily Flight Schedule of 18 June 72, in: UTD/Severson/B1F7.

⁹ Inventory in: UTD/CIA/B1F10.

¹⁰ Air America’s Flight Operations Circular of 16 April 73, in: UTD/Kaufman/B1F14.

¹¹ Letter dated 24 March, sent by James Cunningham to Paul Velte, in: UTD/CIA/B31F4.

¹² List “Assigned, maintained aircraft at Vientiane” as of 1 July 73, in: UTD/CIA/B31F10.

¹³ Pay Rates dated 8 September 73, in: UTD/CIA/B20F1.

¹⁴ Area pay rates for Udorn for 1 February 74, in: UTD/CIA/B20F1.