ROYAL LAO AIR FORCE: CURTISS C-46s
by Dr. Joe F. Leeker

First published on 4 March 2013, last updated on 24 August 2015

RLAF C-46 “632” (?), photo probably taken in 1963 by David Hickler
(photo no. 1-DH54-6-PC103 in UTD/Hickler)

Official reports like Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970* (CHECO)\(^1\) or Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972* (CHECO)\(^2\) do not mention the existence of any Curtiss C-46s with the Royal Lao Air Force. Yet, photographic evidence shows that at least 2 or 3 C-46s were painted in RLAF colors, probably in the early sixties. Their identities are unknown, but it is believed that they, too, were maintained by Air America. The RLAF C-46 shown on the photo above, which was taken by David Hickler in 1963, seems to be “632”. A second photo, also taken by David Hickler in 1963, shows the serials of 2 Royal Lao Air Force C-46s as being “621” and “630”. As the RLAF usually used the last 4 digits of the former USAF or US Navy serial as their serial, it seems logical to assume that the identities of these C-46s were, for example, USAF 44-77621 (msn 33017), USAF 44-77630 (msn 33026), and USAF 44-77632 (msn 33028) or so. But that would mean that these C-46s really entered service with the RLAF, although there is no trace of RLAF C-46s in the documents by Pratt and Liebchen.

---

\(^{1}\) John C. Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, Christiansburg, VA (Project CHECO Report, no 185), no date, 5 files, at: [http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch.exe?mdlF68qLGRlqMWTEfSFCAsWVZBGXaFjol5H4vAF1uTdXlXikUgmSkx1PpYqo1gJlZ63hZdTdUWq654gJC05XuAfzaR3Pq4gkAO50PiY039010301a.pdf](http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch.exe?mdlF68qLGRlqMWTEfSFCAsWVZBGXaFjol5H4vAF1uTdXlXikUgmSkx1PpYqo1gJlZ63hZdTdUWq654gJC05XuAfzaR3Pq4gkAO50PiY039010301a.pdf) (= first of 5 files).

\(^{2}\) Peter A. W. Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos 1959-1972*, Christiansburg, VA (Project CHECO Report), no date, at: [http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch](http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch) (etc.).
RLAF C-46s “621” and “630”, taken David Hickler in 1963
(Photo no. 1-DH54-6-PC82 in UTD/Hickler)

mentioned above. So it is more likely to assume that the RLAF serials were just not taken up. Well, there were 2 C-46s in Laos that bore the Erawan from 1963 to 1975, i.e. the 2 former Air America C-46s that were sold to USAID-Laos, Vientiane, on 8 March 63:3 B-914 (msn 22232, former USAF 44-78409) and B-918 (msn 33451, former USAF 44-78055, whose identity was always quoted as “1887” in official documents). When these C-46s still flew for Air America, they had been devoid of all markings, as the photo of B-914 below shows.

C-46D B-914 somewhere in Laos in 1961/2, i.e. before being sold to USAID/Laos
(UTD/Landry/B1F4)

---

3 Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air Asia Co Ltd. of 9 April 63 (in: UTD/CIA/B7F2); Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air America Inc of 11 June 63 (in: UTD/CIA/B3F4); Aircraft list of June 62, corrected to Sept. 1963 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1).
As these aircraft were officially sold to USAID/Laos, it can be assumed that it was for this occasion that they received the livery of the Royal Laotian Government and probably also the Royal Lao Air Force serials “621” and “630” – the photo of the C-46 that seems to have “632” painted on the tail may be another shot of C-46 “630”. As it seems, the 2 former Air America C-46s had been painted in full RLAF colors and with their RLAF serials in early March 1963, but then, in his letter dated 29 March 1963, USAID’s Contracting officer wrote to Air America’s Field Office that “it is requested that all present aircraft identification markings, except the insignia of the Royal Kingdom of Laos, be obliterated from the two Curtiss C-46-D type aircraft referred to therein [i.e. in Contract AID-439-390] and that the following official registry numbers, which have been assigned by the Government of the Kingdom of Laos, be applied to the wing and tail surfaces of said aircraft in accordance with appropriate international regulations pertaining to such markings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manufacturer’s Serial Number</th>
<th>Laos Registry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22232</td>
<td>XW-EAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>XW-EAB</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sincerely yours,

Letter dated 29 March 1963, sent by USAID’s Contracting officer to Air America (UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel no.4)
The text of this letter of 29 March 63 suggests two things: a) that the aircraft already bore the Royal Lao insignia – which excludes that they still had their Taiwanese registrations painted on them, and b) that they bore other identification markings – apparently the RLAF serials “621” and “630” – that were to be replaced by regular XW-registrations. The formula “in accordance with appropriate international regulations” may indicate one reason for this change, because with XW-registrations painted on them, the aircraft could also be operated outside Laos. All this makes believe that the photos of Royal Lao C-46s “621” and “630” – the serials that were not taken up – were taken in March 1963.

The official owner of C-46s XW-EAA and XW-EAB probably was the Government of Laos – the E in the registration may have been intended to stand for “État” or State –, but when both C-46s were reregistered as XW-PBV and XW-PBW respectively on 29 May 64,

C-46Ds XW-PBV and XW-PBW: Certificates of Registration to the Lao Government, both dated 29 May 64
(both documents in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel 3)

the owner was again the Government of Laos. There was, however, also another reason for painting those C-46 as XW-EAA and XW-EAB in March 1963. After the Geneva Accords of 23 July 1962, Prime Minister Souvanna Phoumi of the Neutralists still distrusted Air America as the company that the rightist General Phoumi Nosavan, also distrusted by Souvanna, had relied on to retake Vientiane after the Kong Le coup of August 1960. When open hostilities broke out in late 1962 between the Neutralists and the Pathet Lao, the Soviets halted the airlift to the Neutralist troops on the Plain of Jars. As these Neutralist troops of Kong Le were the only ones personally loyal to Souvanna Phouma, someone else had to feed them. “To

5 Air America’s Helios only received the Erawan insignia on the tail, after their Taiwanese B-registrations had been replaced by Laotian XW-registrations. See the Helio file of this e-book.
bring the Prime Minister into consistently active opposition to the Communists had been an American goal ever since the conclusion of the Geneva Agreements. The US Mission now sought to engage him in supporting the anticommunist forces in the northeast by offering the government a gift of several C-46 cargo planes. Souvanna accepted these, for they gave him the capability to support Kong Le’s units, the only forces personally loyal to him. He then began allowing airport authorities to clear other C-46s, merely leased to the Lao but also carrying Laotian markings, to pick up ordnance at the border town of Paksane for delivery to Long Tieng. One of them even picked up ammunition and flew it direct to Kong Le’s headquarters on the Plain of Jars.\(^6\) Apparently, in this climate of mutual distrust, the unusual registration numbers beginning with an “E” for “État” or “State” were probably to demonstrate that these aircraft belonged to Souvanna Phouma and flew for his Neutralists. The RLAF serial would probably have meant that they were to fly for the rightist Minister of Defense Phoumi Nosavan.

Both aircraft were first operated by Bird & Sons and their successor Continental Air Services Inc, and from 1969 onwards by Air America, who transferred them to Royal Air Lao in December 73. Because of their Laotian ownership, they always bore an Erawan on the fuselage, i.e. the symbol of the Kingdom of Laos consisting of three white elephants in a red circle.\(^7\) For details about Air America’s C-46s, see [http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/Leeker/aircraft/c462.pdf](http://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/Leeker/aircraft/c462.pdf).

---

\(^6\) Ahern, *Undercover armies*, p.155.

\(^7\) For more details, see the Air America C-46 file of this e-book.
Air America C-46 XW-PBV in 1973, probably at Udorn
(with kind permission from Paul Czaplicki)

C-46D XW-PBW at Vientiane in the early seventies
(UTD/Anthony/F9)

© University of Texas at Dallas, 2013-2015