

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. That is they were used only for specific missions and flown by military crews upon. As former Skycrane pilot Leo Kuneman points out: "We NEVER loaned a Skycrane to Air America. We just used their ramp because they had the space. Our missions came from the customer (enough said)" (e-mail dated 17 May 2015 kindly sent by former US Army Captain Leo Kuneman to Paul Oelkrug who forwarded it to the author). This is also 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 runup¹ and another which crashed up north while landing with a heavy external load on a high mountain peak.” The second accident happened on 24 April 72, as Tom Matthews noted in his diary: “The Army Flying Crane was sling-loading a bulldozer up to HIGHTOWER station, dropped the dozer and the crane crashed and burned; one pilot killed, three other crew members seriously injured, plus the destruction of the \$ 3,000,000.00 crane” (Tom Matthews, Diary, p. 34, formerly in: UTD/Leary/Ser.I, B8F13). 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).

Philip S. Lee, who flew those Skycranes in Laos in the early seventies, adds the following details (e-mail dated 13 August 2012, kindly sent by Philip S. Lee to Paul Oelkrug who forwarded it to the author): “I flew helicopters for the US Army in Vietnam/Laos/North Vietnam 1968-1969 then Thailand late 1969 and then Laos from Thailand from 1969 thru 1975. I did seven (7) continuous combat tours. [...] The CH-54s in Laos had nothing to do with AA except that they were sometimes parked on the AA ramp in Udorn. The US Army crashed two (2) of these aircraft in Laotian Ops, one (1) on the Udorn Ramp and one on a mountain side near LS-20A. [...] Furthermore agencies in Laos tried to bring CH-47s to Laos in lieu of CH-54s, but they never could make it to Udorn without seriously breaking down. One sat at Ubon, Thailand for months with a blown engine. The CH-54/CH-47 aircraft would cross the trail Danang-Ubon then to Udorn, then fly to northern regions where most of the artillery was moved. The UTT Flt Det (UH-1H) would then escort these aircraft into Laos and take them around the bad areas like the Plain of Jars. UTT was used primarily because it took almost a year to understand these military regions and how to operate within them without getting shot down. Laos was not a backwater war like Vietnam but a war with front

¹ Former CH-54 pilot Leo Kuneman recalls: “I [...] was there for the one that was supposedly lost during a maintenance run up at Udorn. Actually the truth is stranger than fiction, but remember we were never there – officially, at the time, and this was never publicly reported. On the CH54 we had three crew members. An Aircraft Commander (Pilot) - Officer, a co-pilot - Officer, and a flight engineer – Enlisted, normally an E6 or E7 sitting in the third rear seat facing aft toward the tail. The purpose of that seat was to conduct lifting and hoist operations while hovering the aircraft from the third seat controls. The Army did not allow that and the pilots did all those operations from the front seats. They also provided everyday maintenance while away from Da Nang. What really happened was one night our flight engineer got drunk and wanted to show his Thai girlfriend he knew how to start the big helicopter. He got her on the base, somehow. What we figured out was he started number one engine and brought it to flight idle. At that point, you are supposed to release the main rotor brake, then start number two engine after the rotor is up to idle speed. Well, he did not release the rotor brake. He started number two and brought it up to idle, which at that point the rotor brake failed, the main rotor over spun lifting the aircraft off the ground and on its back. Not a pretty picture. We got a call from the Air Force and the next day, Sarge was on the Air Force packet back to Da Nang and the States. Never saw him again. We got the helicopter righted with the help of Air America, repaired it so it was flyable and returned it to Da Nang for further maintenance” (e-mail dated 17 May 2015 kindly sent by former US Army Captain Leo Kuneman to Paul Oelkrug who forwarded it to the author).

lines. Heavy duty attack, tanks and rockets. And then there was the Chinese Road which extended to the Lao/Thai border and guarded by the Chinese Army with 100 mil radar guided guns. As I flew constant combat operations in both, first South Vietnam, Laos/North Vietnam and then Laos from Thailand, I know the difference between the combat zones in South Vietnam versus Laos was stark.”

Former CH-54 pilot Leo Kuneman recalls. “I was assigned to the 478th Aviation Company, in Da Nang from October 1970 to October 1971 as a pilot, then aircraft commander. [...] During the time I was there, I made 3 trips to Udorn to pilot our CH-54As in support of operations in Laos and the Plain of Jars. We maintained one to two Skycranes in Udorn, based on the Air America side of the US Air Force base there. They were unmarked and we did fly in civilian clothing, except when transporting the aircraft either to Udorn or back to Da Nang for maintenance. [...] While in Udorn, we all stayed at the Paradise Hotel on Posri Road in the center of the city. The Hotel is still there. The normal tour was 30 days, but some of the guys stayed up to 90 days, dependent on the needs of the unit. [...] On the tours I made to Udorn, we did not fly every day, but only flew based on the needs of the people we supported. We did have a lot of free time. It would average out to about every 3 days on a whole. We would normally fly from Udorn to Vientiane and pick up our mission there. Complete our mission and return to Udorn. Most of the time, we would move ammo, guns, artillery, small trucks, or dozer from mountain top to mountain top. The smallest load we could move was 4000 lbs. because anything less would gyrate and be dangerous for us.” (e-mail dated 17 May 2015 kindly sent by former US Army Captain Leo Kuneman to Paul Oelkrug who forwarded it to the author).

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> .