CAT Association Reunion Visits Texas, HAC

During October the Civil Air Transport Association (CAT) met in Richardson, Texas. More than 100 former CAT employees, spouses, and families attended the three-day event. Members gathered for a Chinese dinner, meet and greet sessions, a business meeting, and a formal banquet.

The highlight of the reunion was a visit to the History of Aviation Collection, the official home of the CAT Archive and Memorial. The Special Collections Department staff organized an open-house reception for CAT on Saturday afternoon. Members were greeted by Carole Thomas, Paul Oelkru, Toni Huckaby, Thomas Allen, Patricia Nava, and Erik Carlson. CAT Association members toured the CAT Archive, saw the CAT Memorial, and viewed a presentation of CAT photographs from the Digital Archive.

HAC Advisory Board Holds Annual Meeting

The History of Aviation Collection held its annual advisory board meeting on Nov. 9, 2004. HAC Advisory Board members attending were Dutch Barbettini, Janice Barden, Erik D. Carlson, C. V. Glines, George Jalonick IV, Brian Johnson, Dora McKeown, Sam Stuart, Johnson Taylor, William Thompson, David Witts, and Richard Emery. HAC Department Coordinator, Erik D. Carlson, Ph.D., led the morning meeting with a point presentation. During the meeting, Carlson gave highlights of the HAC staff's 2004 accomplishments and outlined the goals for the upcoming year.

After the meeting the board members joined HAC staff members Paul Oelkru, Carole Thomas, Toni Huckaby, Thomas Allen, and Patrizia Nava, HAC volunteers, and friends of the Special Collections Dept. for lunch in the McDermott Suite.

Volunteer
George Campbell "Cam" McGill
(1919-2004)

George C. "Cam" McGill, one of the dozen volunteers who have assisted the History of Aviation Collection for more than a decade, died of cancer complications on Nov. 16 and was buried on Saturday, Nov. 20, his 85th birthday. A memorial service was attended by Dr. Larry D. Sall, volunteers and staff from the Special Collections Dept.

Cam was born in Dundee, Scotland and moved to California at age five. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force as a navigation cadet and transferred to the U.S. Army Air Forces after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. He was a B-24 navigation instructor and after the war obtained an architecture degree from the University of Texas. He joined the American Institute of Architects and specialized in aviation-related construction projects.

Before joining the volunteer group at UTD, he helped establish the Frontiers of Flight Museum at Love Field. For more than a decade, he helped organize the HAC's vast collection of periodicals and materials. Noted for his precise record-keeping, he used his own computer to organize the hundreds of aviation magazines that were later bound in hard cover.

Cam's first wife, Mary B. McGill, died in 1998. He is survived by his wife Mary Hanson McGill of Dallas; two daughters, both of Dallas; a son, George McGill of Carrollton, Texas; 3 stepsons; a sister; 19 grandchildren; and 6 great grandchildren.

His friendly smile and quiet demeanor characterized his dedication to preserve aviation's heritage. His work will immeasurably benefit future researchers.

Doolittle Raiders to Meet in Northeast

Jimmy Doolittle's surviving Tokyo Raiders will hold their next reunion in Mystic CT, April 15-18, 2005. This will be the first time they will have held their annual meeting in a northeastern state.

There are 17 Raiders remaining of the original 80 who took part in their historic mission on April 18, 1942. Three men died on the day of the raid; five were interned by the Russians after landing in Soviet territory; eight were captured by the Japanese. Of those eight, three were executed by a Japanese firing squad and one died of malnutrition.

Four Raiders became German POWs later in the war.
Air America as Seen from
Outside the Company

By Dr. Joe Leeker

Many Air America Association members have asked me how I became so interested in Air America, especially considering my field is French and Italian literature. I would like to explain how that developed directly to you. The Air America veterans who have been so gracious to me and my wife Betty. Also, it may be of interest to at least some of you how your employer was perceived by an outsider. Here French literature is actually helpful. The French author Jean Paul Sartre said there are always two very different points of view: the way a person sees himself and the way he is seen by others. The following is my view.

Dreams of an exotic vacation

My own interest in civil aviation goes back to when I was a boy of 14 or 15. I was born in Düsseldorf in former West Germany, and my home town had one of three or four international airports in Germany at that time. So I often went to the airport to watch the airliners take off and land, and I remember how I always went home after two specific airliners had taken off at noon, a Pan American 707 to New York and an Air Canada DC-8 to Montreal. I wasn't aware of it at the time, but now I think airplanes symbolized for me dreams of an exotic vacation.

Somewhere I felt that knowing everything about those airliners could bring me closer to those vacation destinations—at least in my imagination. After discovering the surveys of airlines published every year by the magazine Flight, I tried to compile fleet lists of all airlines, and especially American companies. So I wrote to the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1966, '68, and '69 and ordered copies of the FAA's U.S. Civil Aircraft Register.

By comparing the details given by Flight with what I could find in the official aircraft register, I first came across a company that looked very strange to me—a company that according to Flight flew Helio Couriers and Beech Volpants in the Far East. I thought it could be a "Third Level Operator" like so many others in the United States. But then I felt very disappointed when I could not find any of the C-123’s, Helio Couriers, or UH-34’s mentioned by Flight on my FAA Register. So I said to myself either those reports in Flight were wrong, or there is some mystery about that strange company called "Air America," and not being able to find out anything, I finally gave up.

The fascination of the magical name

A new attitude toward Air America was made possible in the late sixties and the early seventies. At the time I was a student of French, Italian, and Latin in Cologne, and I had come into contact with other aviation enthusiasts. So I subscribed to several aviation publications such as Air-Britain Digest and Aviation Letter, and I bought a lot of publications such as the Civil Aircraft Register of South East Asia. These publications were mainly based on personal observations. At that time my main interest had shifted to the Twin Otter, and I tried to compile a production history of that aircraft; that is, I tried to find out what happened to every Twin Otter ever built. Luckily there was a person at De Havilland Canada's plant in Downsview, Ontario who had similar interests, so we could exchange information. He sent me details he knew from contracts, and I sent him details that had been published in those periodicals such as details about aircraft that had been observed around the world, from time to time even including reports from such exotic airports as Saigon, Bangkok, Hong Kong, or even Vientiane. At the same time I bothered civil aviation authorities around the world with my letters asking for details such as manufacturers' serial numbers or registration dates of specific Twin Otters, and in many cases I was fortunate enough to receive an answer. This is why in the acknowledgement file of my first edition you will find the name of Prince Tiao Sisouvannaphong, Director of Civil Aviation of Laos, who in the early seventies sent me details about the Twin Otters flown by Continental Air Services.

As for Air America, it was still largely a mystery to me, but those enthusiasts' publications mentioned above told me that it had something to do with the CIA. However, nobody knew that it formerly had been part of Civil Air Transport (CAT, Inc.) that had simply been renamed. As there had been another cargo airline called Air America that had flown two or three C-46s in the Caribbean area in the early fifties, most aviation enthusiasts thought that that Caribbean cargo operator was identical with your company. That is why publications of the seventies often state that Air America was founded in 1959. Nobody knew that in the same year the CIA had really taken over CAT. Only Bill Leary's excellent book published in 1984 made clear to a larger public that Air America sprang from CAT, was renamed, and the CIA was its owner.

Message from Dr. Erik D. Carlson

The above open letter to the Air America Association membership explains Dr. Joe Leeker's interest and passion for Air America. Dr. Leeker spent 10 years researching the history of each Air America aircraft in the CAT/Air America Archive. The result of his painstaking research is an online E-Book, The Aircraft of Air America, an operational history of the CIA's secret airline in Southeast Asia. It is truly a remarkable work and now is in its 2nd edition. Thank you, Joe, for all of your contributions to the CAT/Air America Archive. Dr. Leeker's E-Book is available at http://www.utdallas.edu/library/special/aviation/AirAmerica/index.html
Not only was the origin of Air America covered in a veil of mystery until 1984, but the precise nature of the link between Air America and the CIA was also unknown. Mystery always forces the imagination to create myths to fill the gaps. This fundamental rule of literary history can also be observed in how the name Air America was embellished in the eyes of aviation enthusiasts. Once rumors claimed Air America flew missions for the CIA - and those rumors have spread since the early seventies - everything that looked mysterious in the war in Vietnam was attributed by aviation enthusiasts to that object of fascination, Air America. That is why in certain publications that were based mainly on reports dating from the seventies and eighties, every strange looking aircraft observed in Southeast Asia during the sixties and seventies was said to be an Air America aircraft or one involved in an Air America operation. I had no problem with that idea, because before I visited the Air America Archives for the first time in 1996 I thought the same thing. For example, in March 1991 I took a scenic helicopter flight out of Van Nuys, California. While sitting next to the pilot, a guy of maybe 25, I started a conversation with him. When he heard that I was interested in aviation history he pointed out a white Hercules sitting on the tarmac and said: “That aircraft belongs to the CIA.” So I innocently responded: “Air America?” and he innocently replied: “yes.” Neither of us was aware that Air America had closed its doors fifteen years earlier, but to both our minds that company with the magical name still existed.

In the meantime, professional duties forced me to cut back on my aviation hobby. Most things had been put into big boxes in our storage room awaiting disposal or something else. Then in January 1994 German television showed a movie called “Air America.” Although the plot and the characters did not convince me, fascination with that magical name, Air America, was much too strong to make me believe that those characters or the drug story could be true; still the movie revived my interest in Air America. Later I learned that most of my friends who had seen the movie felt the same way. One of them who had heard I was interested in Air America asked me: “So a company named Air America really did exist? I thought it was all fiction.” His second question was: “Was it really run by the CIA?” Nobody believed the drug story or was interested in it. The positive effect produced by the movie was not the silly plot or unrealistic characters; it was the impact of the aircraft and the picturesque landscape scenes. I am not the only person who was fascinated by what seemed to be real Air America aircraft in a dream landscape. In the early nineties I was in contact with a man from New Zealand who asked me to help him with the reconstruction of a former Continental Porter he had bought from the Royal Thai Air Force. From some holes in the bottom he was convinced he had bought the Pilatus Porter mentioned in the beginning of the movie, when a bullet is said to have come through the bottom of the aircraft shooting off the big toe of the main character. As far as I know, the aircraft is ready to fly by now, and I own one or two screws in it.

My own reaction to the movie was to look for the book by Christopher Robbins on which it was based. The day before our civil marriage, my future wife, Betty, told me: “Enjoy your last evening as a bachelor,” but instead of drinking with my friends, I went to the storage room, took out all my old aviation notes and tried to compile a fleet list of Air America; those two or three pages written on February 24, 1994 were the birth of my research into Air America. Over the next couple of years Robbins’ book accompanied me on all my trips - I think I read it three or four times. In August the same year we took our honeymoon trip to Hawaii, and during our last inter-island flight the day before returning to Germany, we discovered an advertisement from a local helicopter company run by a man who said he had been an Air America pilot. So we decided the next time we were in Hawaii we would fly with him and ask him to give me an interview. That occasion came two years later in March 1996, when Preston S. Myers, owner of Safari Helicopters of Kauai, gave me an interview. He was the one who told me that I should contact the Air America Archives in Dallas. So as soon as I got back to Germany I wrote to Richardson and Larry Sall answered: “Just come here and you’ll see that we have a lot of material about Air America.” So I bought an airline ticket, and while most people who went to the United States in the summer of ’96 probably wanted to see the Olympic Games, I was attracted to Dallas by the fascination exerted on me by the magical name of Air America.

Admiring your sacrifice

When I first went to the Archives I did not know what would await me. But Larry had not promised more that he could provide. During my first call home after my first day in the Archives I told Betty: “I am overwhelmed by the material they have collected here and I have to come back.” As Betty is a very patient and understanding wife, she agreed with my idea, and in 1997, 1998, 1999, and 200: she accompanied me on one-week trips to the Archives. She was the best assistant I could have imagined, because while I went through the boxes looking for material I could use, Betty made thousands of photocopies that we brought home or had sent to Germany. From the very beginning, all the people who worked at the Air America Archives were always very helpful to us, and we became close friends. In the meantime, Larry Sall has been a guest in our home in Germany three times, the last time in March 2004.

What changed over the years was my attitude towards Air America. In the beginning I had just been fascinated by the magical name of Air America. But the more I knew of your activities, the more I was seized by admiration - admiration for your heroic deeds and especially admiration for your sacrifice. As you know, I am employed at a German university, and universities may be a world of ambition, but you will rarely find people there who are willing to risk their own lives to save others. Yet that was precisely what I found documented by the material preserved at the Air America Archives. Two things especially transformed my earlier feelings from a fascination with the aura of mystery to a deep admiration for your sacrifice for human values. First I found the reports about the evacuation of Saigon and second, the dramatic accident reports in the Air America Archives. In the television program made by Monte Markham Ed Dearborn says: “I bought every book they ever wrote about Chennault; he was my hero; I wanted to be a Flying Tiger.” To a certain extent that also characterizes my attitude towards Air America and the people who flew for it - except that I would never have had the courage to fly like that.