

The following narrative, by Vice Admiral Ilg, summarizes his experience in evading capture when shot down over Laos. It is a testimonial to Air America's effectiveness in search and rescue activities.



Raymond Paul Ilg
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Retired)

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On June 3, 1965, during the initial phases of the Vietnam War, I was shot down in Northern Laos while on a mission trying to interdict the supply lines to Hanoi. I was a Navy Lieutenant, one week shy of my 27th birthday and two months into combat flying from the aircraft carrier, USS Midway. I found myself on the ground 300 miles from the carrier.

Enemy ground troops surrounded the area, and although they did not know my exact position were firing into the air to make me move and expose my location. No one knew whether I had survived the crash, because I was unable to contact my wingman before he was required to head back to the carrier due to low fuel. I was only able to make radio contact with an Air Force reconnaissance aircraft 8 hours after I was shot down.

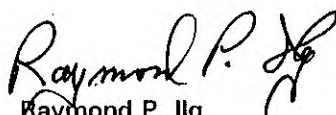
I knew I had to travel in a southerly direction to reach a distant safe area. I needed to transit the enemy bivouac area during the first night, and as I was doing so, in the middle of the night, I realized why the anti-aircraft guns were there. This was a truck park area that had complete cover (tree foliage) that allowed supply trucks to park in daylight without fear of discovery by aircraft.

Air America aircrew were on the scene in propeller-driven aircraft (including HELOs) at first light on the morning after I was shot down, thanks to the information that the reconnaissance aircraft had passed to them. With little regard for their own personal safety, Air America aircrew repeatedly attacked the anti-aircraft positions that had shot me down and that were protecting the truck park. One of the Air America aircraft was shot down. Air America rescued that pilot but were still unable to rescue me at that time, due to the heavy enemy fire.

While the attacks were progressing, the overhead Air America coordinator advised me by radio which direction to move to get to an area safe enough for a rescue attempt. That attempt was finally successful 48 hours after I had been shot down.

If it had not been for the Air America team effort to secure my rescue from enemy territory, my next thirty years in the Navy and rise to Vice Admiral would not have been possible. Unfortunately, at that time, the U.S. Government could not and would not, for political reasons, recognize this courageous organization who risked their lives for their country and their countrymen.

Air America, with its selfless philosophy and rescue of countless air crew members, are unsung heroes who deserve to be memorialized by a commemorative stamp that recognizes their valiant efforts.


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