Smokejumpers and the CIA

National Smokejumper Association

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By the early 1950s, the smokejumper program was being noticed for the special skills and attributes of its members. Chief among these were the ability to drop into mountainous, isolated terrain and operate in similarly hostile environments. Veteran smokejumpers had been training members of the U.S. military in parachute tactics for nearly a decade when the Central Intelligence Agency came calling the spring of 1951. Members of the smokejumper community were tasked with training agents from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) at the Agency's facility near Nine Mile, Montana. Over time, a small cadre of smokejumpers was recruited by the CIA to assist in operations around the world. Since then, more than 100 smokejumpers have taken part in covert activities on behalf of the U.S. government.

Among the first operations involved a detachment of smokejumpers that went to Taiwan in 1951 to train Nationalist Chinese paratroopers and facilitate cargo drops to Nationalist forces in mainland China. After operations ceased in Taiwan, several smokejumpers moved on to Tibet where they assisted local forces in their fight against the Chinese occupation from 1957 to 1960. At least twelve smokejumpers were involved in Tibetan air operations which included drops of men and equipment. They also trained more than 200 resistance fighters at Camp Hale in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

The 1960s brought a new set of challenges for CIA’s smokejumpers as several were in charge of planned air operations during the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in April 1961. At the same time, smokejumpers were among the first U.S. operators in Southeast Asia, taking part in military operations in Laos during what became known as the “Secret War.” Smokejumper involvement throughout Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War lasted more than 15 years, and saw jumpers used as trainers, parachute dispatch officers, case officers, pilots and military group-leaders until after the fall of South Vietnam. Smokejumpers also took part in operations in Guatemala, the Congo and India.

At least eight smokejumpers were killed during their clandestine service operations around the world. Gene DeBruin, who parachuted from a damaged Air America C-46, was known to have been captured and held for at least three years. DeBruin remains among the Missing in Action (MIA) in Southeast Asia.
JACK CAHILL  Lima site 58 in 1965 L-R: Sgt. Sun and Capt. Deja (Thai mercenary forces working for CIA in Laos), smokejumper Jack Cahill. Kneeling is Edgar “Pop” Buell. After the death of his wife, Buell went to Laos as a volunteer with the International Voluntary Services, a Bible Belt edition of the Peace Corps. He became involved with the CIA due to his close working relationship with the Hmong people.

ED WEISSENBACK  Originally from New York, Weissenback played a year of football at Penn State before heading west to work as a logger and becoming a smokejumper in 1964. He spent 13 months in Vietnam with the Airborne and received the Purple Heart before returning to smokejumping in 1967. After recovering from a serious parachute injury, he left to work for Air America in 1970. The aircraft with Ed on board was shot down in northern Laos on December 27, 1971 by the Chinese.

JOHNNY KIRKLEY  Cave Junction, Oregon, smokejumper and track star from the University of Alabama. Kirkley worked as a “kicker” for Air America for five years. “Kickers” acted as spotters, judging wind speed and direction, as they ‘kicked’ cargo out the aircraft door to forces waiting below.

GENE DEBRUIN  DeBruin parachuted from a burning C-46 along with three Thai kickers and a Chinese radio operator on September 5, 1963. Two American pilots went down with the plane. In 1966, Gene and six others made the largest POW breakout escape of the Laotian Secret War.

BILLY HESTER  While working as a “kicker” for Air America, smokejumper Hester was killed on April 10, 1970 in the crash of a C-130.

GID NEWTON  Newton, an Air America kicker, died with five other crew members when their C-46 crashed on a cargo drop over Laos due to apparent weather problems on July 17, 1963.