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Man gets nod for CIA work

By David Gerard
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JACKSON BAY — Robert Rousselot waited 51 years to get his just desserts.

Rousselot, 79, a former U.S. Marine Corps fighter pilot, received recognition Saturday from the Central Intelligence Agency for 13 years of service with an Asian air transport company that performed covert military operations. Rousselot was one of two men awarded by the federal agency for service with the company, Civil Air Transport/Air America.

"It was important to our national interests," Rousselot said. "I was convinced there were deep, dark things going on which the very core of the nation hinged."

Rousselot's wife, Ann, and son Wade went to Las Vegas last weekend to accept the award signed by CIA director George Tenet. Health reasons kept Robert Rousselot from making the trip to the CAT/Air America reunion and award ceremony.

Wade Rousselot said he talked with about 10 pilots who worked under his father and they were very complimentary.

"They said he's a man they could take orders from. When he told them what they were going to do, they didn't have any questions doing it," Wade Rousselot said.

Discharged from the Marines in 1946 following service in World War II in the Pacific, Robert Rousselot said he went to work as one of the original pilots for Civil

communist forces. The company evacuated thousands of Nationalists to Taiwan as the communists took over the mainland.

In 1950, the CIA purchased the transport company to use in the fight against the spread of communism in south-east Asia, but the purchase was not publicly known. Rousselot said Saturday's presentation was the first time the CIA openly acknowledged its CAT/Air America operations.

"It tickled me to death," Rousselot said. "They finally acknowledged that I had done a lot for them. ... They didn't send a check along with it though."

Rousselot said it was evident to friend and foe what the company was doing. He said CAT/Air America often had sections of military bases reserved for its planes and personnel. The company ran operations for the military, but pilots and personnel were never told what those operations were, Rousselot said, adding they relied on pieces of information they gathered here and there.

"They told us, 'You get caught, you're on your own,'" Rousselot said.

The work proved dangerous as the company made deliveries to both huge, paved runways in important cities and dirt fields that had been hacked out of the jungle. Rousselot said the planes he flew were shot up, but never shot down, and he returned from one

with 72 bullet holes in his plane.

"I was glad I didn't know it until I got back to the base. It (the company) was in a world all its own," Rousselot said. "We operated in Indochina, Central America, Indonesia, the Philippines. We helped start revolutions."

Rousselot said the company took part in such clandestine operations as dropping supplies to French troops trapped in 1954 in Indochina at the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu, which would eventually lead to American involvement in Vietnam. CAT/Air America also supplied pilots for the failed invasion of Cuba in the 1960s that was approved by President John F. Kennedy.

Award inscription

"Mr. Robert E. Rousselot distinguished himself as the Vice President of Operations for Civil Air Transport/Air America. His operational savvy, professionalism, aviation skills, and willingness to 'lead from the front' earned him the respect and admiration of his air crews and peers. Under Mr. Rousselot's leadership, CAT/AAM grew from a small collection of short-range, light-gauge transports to a world-spanning fleet capable of delivering anything, anytime, anywhere. The extraordinary leadership of Mr. Rousselot reflects great credit upon himself, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the United States of America, and will be duly noted by aviation historians for ages to come."

Rousselot said he saw a lot of mistakes made by American policy in southeast Asia during his time there, but "we had a lot of tremendously brave episodes. I don't ever want to blemish the heroism and efforts of the people working there."

More than 240

civilian CAT and Air America employees gave their lives in Asia between 1946 and 1975, according to a pamphlet published by the University of Texas at Dallas History of Aviation Collection.

Rousselot estimated CAT/Air America operated 30 aircraft and had about 800 employees. The company's tie to the CIA ended in 1976. One of its last missions was helping evacuate Americans and South Vietnamese when North Vietnam overran the country in 1975.

Rousselot, a native of Noel, Mo., left the company in 1963 and moved to rural Wagoner County to ranch. Rousselot said he was going to college to become a doctor when he was called into the service.

Robert E. Rousselot holds up his award.

Photo by David Gerard

