Secret soldier
Search Co-ordinates: 13°34′53″N, 100°06′57″E

This month’s virtual excursion takes us south of Bangkok, Thailand, a nation well-covered by global mapping software. Among the local shapely temptations are various airframes discarded after the Vietnam War. The Curtiss C-46 Commando, however, has a much longer association with the region.

As the CW-20, the Commando evolved from the fabric-covered Condor in 1936; it first flew in March 1940 in competition with the DC-3. Its metal fuselage, larger than the DC-3’s, was ideal for sleeper accommodation and it was the first airliner to offer significant underfloor storage. Many served in 1942 flying over the “Hump” (Himalayas) from India to the Chinese Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek.

This example, a C-46, built at Buffalo in 1945, first served with Seaboard & Western before running into a ditch in Rome in July 1951. Repaired, it hauled cargo round the Caribbean from Miami until it became one of eight issued to Continental Air Services of Vientiane, Laos, as part of the USA’s “Agence for International Development”. These low-visibility operations saw it posted missing in March 1975 on route from Hong Kong, although in May it reportedly “escaped” to Bangkok. This may explain its presence outside this restaurant in Chonburi, bearing both Thai and Cambodian identities (SW PMF and HS-SKD).

Although a few C-46s survive in Alaska, Canada and Latin America, they may also be found in many Asian countries. The Tokorozawa Museum in Tokyo has one of many Japanese examples (35°7′49″N, 139°47′21″E) and the Korean War Memorial in Seoul has one next to a B-52 (37°9′56″N, 126°9′8″E). The only flyable Commando is with the Commemorative Air Force in Riverside, California, USA (33°56′9″N, 117°4′9″W).