

January 7, 1990

## HE PARKED HIS CONSCIENCE IN THE HANGAR

By CHARLES SALZBERG; CHARLES SALZBERG, WHO IS AT WORK ON A DETECTIVE NOVEL, FREQUENTLY WRITES ABOUT TRUE CRIME.

LEAD:

TRAFFICKING

The Boom and Bust of the Air America Cocaine Ring.

By Berkeley Rice.

Illustrated. 303 pp. New York:

Charles Scribner's Sons. \$22.95.

Things began to unravel one March night in 1984, when Jim Cooper's twin-engine Piper Seneca, packed with more than 500 pounds of Colombian marijuana, made an unscheduled landing atop a Buick sedan that was lighting a secluded grass landing strip in rural Georgia. The driver of the car was killed, and although Mr. Cooper managed to elude both death and local lawmen, he was eventually tracked down by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Faced with a charge of felony murder, Mr. Cooper crooned in exchange for a suspended sentence, and the lyrics that tripped off his tongue led to the Government's toppling of the Air America drug smuggling ring, which during a four-year period had flown "nearly ten tons of pure cocaine into the U.S.," according to Berkeley Rice.

Perhaps more than anything else, Mr. Rice's "Trafficking" is a tale of unbridled greed. The author, who meticulously (sometimes too much so) chronicles the rise and fall of Air America, takes pains to set these smugglers apart from others of their ilk. Well educated and from good families they thrived on adventure. Though some of them might have possessed consciences, they conveniently parked them in the hangar when stacks of money were waved under their noses. After all, they reasoned, they were only a messenger service: drugs up, money down. Didn't actually have to hawk the stuff. Heaven forbid.

Based in the unlikely city of Scranton, Pa., Air America was the brainchild of Frederik (Rik) Luytjes Jr., a pilot and entrepreneurial overachiever from Huntington, L.I. The name chosen for his aircraft maintenance company was not without irony. "The original Air America," writes Mr. Rice, whose books include "The C-5A Scandal," "was created by the CIA in the 1960s as a front for its clandestine operations in Southeast Asia. It was used for missions ranging from flying supplies to remote mountain troops to smuggling opium for the warlords of northern Thailand."

Mr. Luytjes - who, through the judicious dispersal of drug booty, hobnobbed with politicians and Scranton social lions - often traded on the "'spook' airline" association. After all, the possibility that he was doing

the bidding of the Central Intelligence Agency might go a long way in explaining many of his mysterious flights.

What Air America could offer to South American drug dealers that any renegade pilot of fortune could not was the result of old-fashioned Yankee ingenuity and work ethic. "Compared to the usual American pilots the Colombians dealt with, Rik was a marvel of professionalism. He offered them the three things they needed most: competent pilots, top-quality planes, and, most important, reliable service. . . . He used to boast that Air America's pilots could guarantee their arrival times within three minutes. 'Nobody else can do that,' he claimed, 'not even Federal Express.' "

The money made by the conspirators was enormous, enough to shift the United States balance of trade. Mr. Luytjes and some of his pilots earned up to \$1.5 million per run, before expenses. But the more money they had, the more they spent. And the more they spent, the more they needed. And the more they needed, the greater the chance they would be caught. It was, in fact, avarice that did them in, not Jim Cooper or the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration.

Mr. Rice has done a workmanlike job of describing the cast of characters. He is particularly strong when detailing how the Government finally nailed Mr. Luytjes (who earned himself a 10-year prison term) and his band of merry smugglers by following the trail of cash. And if, after a while, one drug run seems very much like the next, it certainly is not the author's fault.

In the end, "Trafficking" leaves us with a sense of futility. An enormously successful smuggling ring grounded, and the influx of drugs hardly dented. It appears all the Government accomplished was to give other Rik Luytjeses the chance to fulfill their versions of the American dream. That it is a dream that can often vanish in a puff of white powder does not seem to matter. To some, the risk will always be worth it.