

Firm Hastily Chosen as Shah's Charter Reportedly Had Past Ties to the CIA

3/25/80
By Michael Getler

Washington Post Staff Writer

The president of the U.S. charter airline that flew the former shah of Iran from Panama to Cairo Sunday says that he got the request, second-hand from another charter company and that he doesn't know who made the original request for air transportation.

Ward Eason, president of Evergreen International Airlines, said in a telephone interview yesterday that the middleman in the arrangement—the other charter company—asked not to be identified and that he was respecting the request.

The question of who initiated the request could be significant for two reasons. First, it would indicate what, if any, private or governmental interests may have been involved in the shah's latest move. Second, the choice of Evergreen could become controversial—some television news reports yesterday said the airline was formerly part of a Central Intelligence Agency operation.

Eason and a CIA spokesman yesterday both said the agency has no connection to the CIA, though Eason and a CIA spokesman yesterday both said the agency has no connection to the CIA, though Eason said that "probably on some rare occasions they have been a customer of ours."

Eason, who has headed the firm since 1975, said he personally could not recall any such occasion, but he said there were indications that a helicopter charter line operated by the firm may have had some CIA business in the past.

Eason and CIA officials both reported that the firm purchased some flight facilities in Arizona from the CIA in the mid-1970s when the agency, under pressure, put some private holdings up for sale. The CIA holdings were called Inter-Mountain Aviation before they were sold.

The militants holding the American hostages in Tehran have sought to exploit every alleged link between the shah and the CIA. CIA sources said the choice of Evergreen, even though

there is no current connection, caught them flat-footed. Whoever arranged the flight probably didn't know of even the slim earlier association and probably had no reason to ask about any connection, they said.

Evergreen, headquartered in Newberg, Ore., has a fleet of 19 big jet transports and a reputation in the industry, of being able to handle unusual requirements quickly, Eason said.

He said the other charter outfit that contacted him had a good reputation, but its smaller planes were not adequate for the job. Eason said Evergreen was not given much information initially, and wasn't sure at the outset what the mission was. But the firm was able to "put two and two together" when the destination became clear, he said.

He said one of Evergreen's jets was dispatched from Detroit within four hours of getting the request. The four-engine DC8 landed in Panama early Sunday morning, he said, and left with the ex-shah aboard a few hours later.