



WILLIAM H. BIRD
Runs supply flights

Bird talks about his 'Air Force'

By Richard Blystone
Associated Press

BANGKOK, Thailand — The head of the American airline flying war supplies to Cambodia said yesterday about half his crewmen were recruited from U.S. Air Force active reservists and most of the others were ex-Air Force men, many recently off active duty.

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman said, however, the airmen did not get reserve credit for their work in Indochina.

William H. Bird and his Oakland-based Bird Air cargo service, using C130 cargo planes furnished by the U.S. government, took over Cambodian supply flights last October from the U.S. Air Force, whose presence in Cambodia had been limited by law.

The Pentagon spokesman said she did not know which government agency supplied the planes, but it was not the Air Force. She said Bird Air

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—From Page 1 surge is only for 60 days."

was paid from U.S. military assistance funds.

The air supply runs into Phnom Penh have been increased in recent weeks because of an insurgent offensive that has cut off most land and water supply routes.

Bird said the flights required navigators and crews trained in high altitude parachute drop techniques, even though so far the Phnom Penh airport has remained open and the planes have been able to land their loads.

"One of the reasons we don't want people who are not current is the tremendous cost of training them," said Bird. "By going out on the original five crews and getting people who were current we saved the government over \$500,000 just in flight time during training."

"Presently we are combing the reserve units for people who would want to take civilian employment doing the work they are trained to do," said Bird.

They haven't been beating down the door, he admitted — even for up to \$3,000 a month — "because we cannot offer them a long-term contract. Presently this

Last year Bird's crews flew three or four missions carrying 45 to 60 tons a day into Phnom Penh. But as rebel pressure tightened around the city, the flights have risen to 10 to 13 daily with heavier loads totaling up to 325 tons a day.

Now the aim is for 15 crews flying 600 tons a day.

"We've been asked to have a capability between 23 and 30 sorties a day," said Bird. "We've been asked to consider continued activity beyond the 60 days and also increased round trips."

Bird, a genial, florid 59-year-old Seattle native, said there is no mystery about his firm nor any Central Intelligence Agency connection.

"We're rather proud of what we're doing. If we turned our back on them there would be no hope for the people under this seige," he said.

Bird said the principal activity of his firm, which started work in the Philippines in 1946, has been building roads and airstrips. But currently his other interests include the Leamington Hotel in Oakland, an air cargo operation in Singapore and five helicopters flying for the U.S. government in Laos.

It was while building Wat-tay airport in Vietiane, Laos, that Bird first got into the flying business, he said. It started with leasing the company's single plane to the U.S. Operations Mission and ended with a 22-aircraft fleet that he sold to Continental Air Lines in 1965.

How did he get the Cambodian airlift job?

"I was asked by the Air Force to give an unsolicited proposal to crew the C130s."

The planes, on loan from the Air Force with fuel and maintenance provided, are based at Utapao Air Base 116 miles south of Bangkok. Because of political sensitivity over the U.S. contingent of 25,000 men and 350 planes now in Thailand, the C130s have Cambodia-registered tail numbers and the crew status is that of visitors to Thailand coming in from Cambodia for the night.

Bird said the addition of artillery, vastly more accurate than rockets, to the siege of Phnom Penh last week "sets up an air of caution."

"We're working every way to cut down our ground time. Right now we're down to 12 minutes. We only shut off three engines. We leave one running so we don't require ground power to start."

Bird said he and his crews "all feel quite strongly about helping these people."

"Being a contractor, win or lose, when I sign a contract I have to live up to my commitments," he said. "I feel the United States has a commitment and that we should take the same attitude."