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U.S. Role: Gendarme or Mercenary?

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PHNOM PENH—The U.S. Air Force planes that daily touch down into this blockaded capital, well within the range of rebel rockets, bring in American ammunition from an American-manned base in Thailand. Yet the Air Force markings on the planes have been painted over. We are told that this is because the Air Force planes are on loan to a private company, Bird Air, which in turn is being paid by the Pentagon to bring supplies to Phnom Penh. The tanned, crew-cut pilots who fly the borrowed planes

are not Air Force pilots. They are "retired" Air Force pilots who now work for Bird Air. This somewhat complicated maneuver is designed to maintain America's "low profile" in Southeast Asia, for having civilian pilots do the job is supposed to make the American commitment to Cambodia less obvious.

With the news that another private company, the Vinnell Corp. of Alhambra, Calif., may begin hiring former Green Berets to fulfill a \$76.9 million contract to "modernize the Saudi Arabian National Guard, citizens may wonder if the

United States has foresworn the role of world policeman only to take up the cudgel as the world's mercenary.

Neither Vinnell nor Bird Air is expected to do any fighting, of course, and the use of civilian contracts as a surrogate for American military or paramilitary personnel is nothing new.

Air America was originally formed as a private company to perform duties not unlike those Bird Air now performs. In time, however, the fact that the CIA was involved in the Air America contract overshadowed the cover that a private contract was supposed

to provide. Air America became thought of as the air arm of the CIA, mainly because Air America was used extensively in the CIA's "secret war" in Laos.

When a coalition with the pro-Communist Pathet Lao was formed in Laos, the name "Air America" was too closely associated with the American paramilitary role there for the airline to stay. It was withdrawn, and today Bird Air runs two helicopters in Laos on a contract basis for the U.S. government.

Here in Cambodia, Air America's contract with the See MERCENARIES, A6, Col. 4

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MERCENARIES, From A1

U.S. government to provide a "logistics management assistance team" to advise the Cambodian air force on how to service its planes ran out Dec. 31.

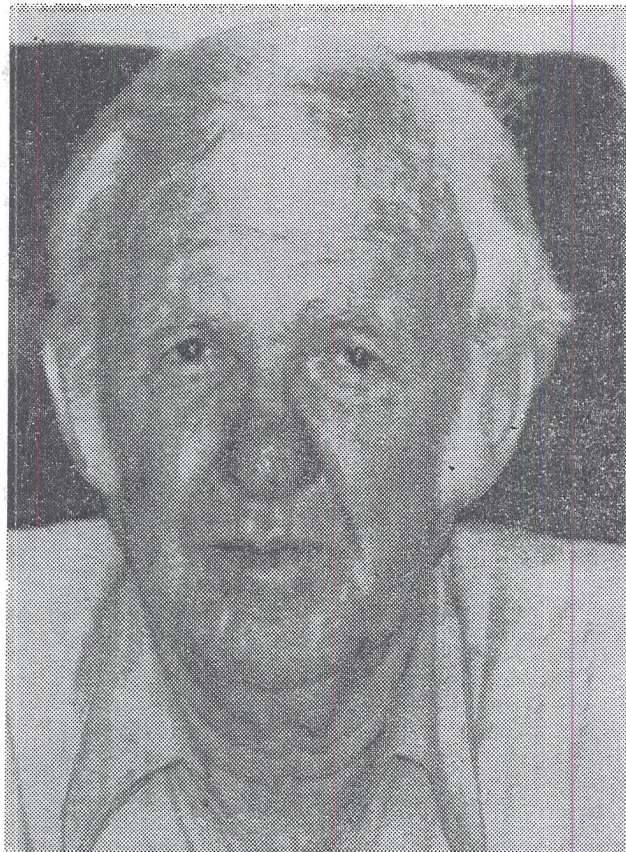
The contract was given instead to a new company called LMAT, Inc., the initials standing for Logistics Management Assistance Team. LMAT's president is listed on the contract as Gary Bisson of Washington, D.C.

The old Indochina hands will search the corners of Asia for a job first. Jim Shultz says that Bell Helicopter is hiring former Air America personnel to train the Iranian military, offering lucrative long-term contracts in Iran with special housing, movies, bowling alleys—the whole American bit. The oil-exporting countries may be the place for people in his line of work when Indochina packs up, Shultz said.

The Vinnell Corp., the same outfit that landed a \$77 million Pentagon contract to train Saudi Arabian national guardsmen, has a "technical assistance" team here as well. Vinnell doesn't hire Americans in Cambodia, using instead "TCN" personnel, which in the jargon here means third-country nationals. The practice of using third-country nationals as surrogates for American personnel is common in Indochina. Not only does it keep the Americans from being so obviously involved, "TCNs" are cheaper as well because they are not paid American salaries.

Koreans and Filipinos are usually preferred, because they are familiar with American equipment. In Cambodia Vinnell employs 50 people—38 Koreans, 8 Filipinos, 3 Frenchmen and an Italian, according to the team director, Roger Grison.

The change appears to have been little more than window dressing, for the



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William H. Bird's airline flies the Phnom Penh airlift.

personnel have remained the same. The old Air America director here, E.I. Grifis, became the director of LMAT, Inc., on the first of the year. His office at the U.S. embassy, care of the Military Equipment Delivery Team, remained the same. "It doesn't matter to me what they call it," said Jim Shultz, an LMAT employee and a 12-year veteran of Air America in Indochina. "As long as the checks come through just the same I don't care who signs them," he said. Air America still flies into Cambodia from Vietnam, where it still operates under the old name, and Continental Airlines, another veteran of the Laos and Vietnam cam-

paigns, has a contract with the U.S. government to fly between Bangkok and Phnom Penh three times a week.

The cutback has put a lot of the old Air America pilots and ground personnel out of work, however. Many have Indochinese wives and hate the idea of returning to America.

Vinnell has a contract with the American government for something in the region of \$800,000 a year, mainly to train Cambodians in the use and maintenance of American logistical equipment.

Vinnell employees keep track of American ammunition and teach Cambodians how to take care of it, for example. They also train

Cambodians how to take care of radio equipment, trucks, bulldozers and road graders. Grison, in an interview, stoutly maintained that Vinnell had never been involved in training Cambodians in how to use American weapons—just logistical equipment. A spot check of some of Vinnell's army training manuals did not disprove Grison's claim. The only manual the by-no-means-exhaustive check produced that might be construed as incriminating was a manual for the "starlight scope"—a sniper scope that is fitted to a rifle for night fighting. The other manuals dealt with logistical equipment.

Vinnell has a second contract with the Cambodian government for performing much the same services that it provides in its U.S. government contract. The purpose of the Cambodian government contract was to get around the Cooper-Church amendment, which puts a limit on the number of third-country nationals that can work for the U.S. government in Cambodia.

Grison, a 55-year-old Frenchman, formerly worked in Saigon, for Eiffel, the famous French engineering firm whose founder designed the Eiffel Tower. In the late 1960s he uncovered an embezzlement scandal whereby American and French employees of the company were stealing around \$5 million in U.S. aid funds. Grison cooperated with the Americans in prosecuting the case, but the French community in Saigon ostracized him, he said.

In 1972 he was offered a job by Vinnell to help build the petroleum-storage tanks that government troops are now trying to defend north of Phnom Penh. In August he was named Cambodia team leader.

But he says that even in Phnom Penh he has very few friends in the French community.

"All the French here think am in the CIA," he said.