

Bird Air: The Mysterious Airlift to Cambodia

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

Periodically a teletype machine in the Oakland offices of Bird & Sons, Inc., springs to life with a signal from the riverside construction compound outside Bangkok that is serving as office headquarters for the emergency American airlift to Cambodia.

The machine types out a name. The Oakland office of Bird & Sons in the Leamington Hotel contacts the man, informs him he has been recommended for a job by Bangkok and tells him to submit a résumé. The résumé is forwarded to Bangkok for action. The Oakland office rarely sees the recruits.

This guarded procedure, according to a man who was an official of the company, is how some of the Air Force veterans have been recruited for the vital airlift, a curious blend of official American military action and private enterprise by a company associated in the past with Asian operations of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The procedure is indicative of the little-known operations of Bird Air, the company's aviation division, and its 59-year-old president, William H. Bird, a silver-haired contractor who by his own declaration made "a fortune" building runways and operating charter aircraft during the Vietnam war.

Contract Worth \$2.6-Million

Last September, four months before the contract was officially approved and while the Air Force was still running the airlift, Bird Air began supplying C-130 Air Force Penh and other isolated Cambodian Government enclaves. The contract, now worth more than \$2.6-million, calls for Bird Air to fly 30 planeloads of supplies—about 750 tons—into Cambodia daily from U Taphao air base in Thailand.

Supplies were also being ferried in from Saigon by three other private carriers using their own planes—Flying Tiger Line, Trans International and Airways International.

The effort has become controversial, with charges by critics—some of whom have filed suit in Federal Court to block American aid to Cambodia—that the civilian crews are being improperly used to evade restrictions on United States military aid for Cambodia.

Questions have also been raised about the circumstances under which Bird Air won the contract—Mr. Bird said the company found out about it in advance and was ready with an offer before anyone else—and the company's relationship with the military and the C.I.A.

There are also some bizarre aspects to the story of Bird Air. Considerable confusion has resulted, for example, from the fact that in addition to the William H. Bird of Bird Air there is also in Bangkok a Willis H. Bird who was a former United States civilian air intelligence agent and who was indicted in 1962 on charges of seeking to defraud the United States Government on construction contracts in Laos. The two Mr. Birds are not known to be connected in any way.

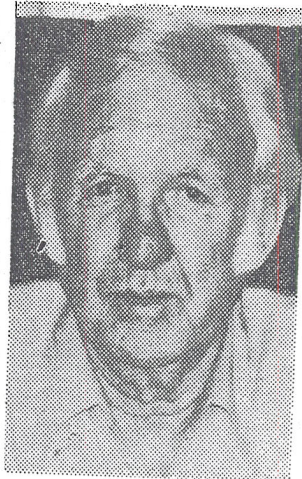
Willis H. Bird has not returned to the United States to stand trial.

C.I.A. Link Denied

In a number of recent published interviews, William H. Bird has denied that he or his company have any connection with the C.I.A.

"I think that everybody wants to pin it," he told Steve Talbot, a reporter for *Internews*, a California-based international news service, last month. Nevertheless, Mr. Bird added, his company only held a negotiated contract with the Air Force. "It in no way could be called a C.I.A. operation," he said.

However, Mr. Bird's enterprises have included construction projects and, air charter operations in areas of Laos where the C.I.A. long exercised a controlling influence. Moreover, in 1965, Mr. Bird sold his charter company and 22 planes to Continental Air Services, which, like the entirely C.I.A.-run airline, Air America, fer-



Associated Press

William H. Bird

ried supplies to the C.I.A.-financed Meo tribesmen. The sale price was put by a Bird Air officer at \$4-million. The deal allowed Mr. Bird to resume business five years later.

The officer—who is the only present company officer in addition to Mr. Bird and his wife but who still asked that his name not be printed—also acknowledged that Bird Air helicopters were often chartered in the early 1960's in Laos by USAID, widely known as a C.I.A.-cover, although the officer professed to be unaware of this.

Asked if Bird Air had had any "contact" with the C.I.A. in Laos, the same officer said, "That's a strange question. I really don't know how to answer. We met people, it's possible some were C.I.A. I don't know."

He added: "If the C.I.A. was involved it wouldn't have made any difference. We had our orders to deliver."

The officer also disclosed that Bird Air, on at least three occasions, dismissed pilots and other employees rumored to be involved in or close to the flourishing Laotian opium trade which has also been tied to the C.I.A. However, asked whether Bird Air itself has trafficked in opium, he replied, "That's a damn lie!"

The officers of Bird Air now are Mr. Bird, president and chief executive; his wife, Ruth Mary, executive vice president and treasurer; and R. L. Althouse, vice president. Another vice president, Arthur M. DeRonde, left the company March 15 to work for Bechtel Corporation in the Far East.

Founding of the Company

According to information collected through research and interviews by correspondents of *The New York Times*, Bird & Sons was founded in Oakland in 1956 by Scott Bird, father of William and his brother, Scott Jr. Scott Sr. died three years ago. Scott Jr. is not involved in the company—the stock is held entirely by William Bird and his wife.

Mr. Bird, an amiable, burly six-footer with silver hair and sideburns framing a sun-reddened face, was born in Seattle. After finishing school at the University of Washington, he said, he started out as a contractor building gun emplacements and anti-aircraft batteries along the Panama Canal during and after World War II. "You better not say gun emplacements," he told an interviewer. "Makes me sound like a warmonger."

After the war, the family founded a construction firm in the Philippines, called Philippine Rock Products Inc. The family sold its interest in the company, which still exists, in 1968.

In 1959, the construction business expanded to Thailand, where the family founded Thai Rock Products Co. Ltd., supplying mixed concrete and crushed rock to construction companies.

Bird family companies built 5,000 feet of the airstrip at Wattay Airport in Vientiane under a United States Navy contract. They also built aprons at two Thai airfields, as well as numerous highways in Thailand.

Mr. Bird said he started Bird Air as the aviation division of Bird & Sons in Laos in 1959 with one fixed-wing plane. Over the next six years, a company official said, Bird had a contract with USAID to furnish complete charter service—pilot, crew and fuel included—out of Vientiane.

and How It Grew

The Sale in 1965

In 1965, the charter service and its 22 planes were sold to Continental Air Services. Mr. Leamington Hotel in Oakland for explaining to a reporter: "I made a fortune over there and I'd like to do something for the people who fought the war."

Meanwhile, Mr. Bird invested in a shopping center complex in Phoenix and bought the Leamington Hotel in Oakland, for \$2-million. Shortly after the purchase, he entertained the wives and families of newly freed American P.O.W.'s there, explaining "I made a fortune over there and I'd like to do something for the people who fought the war."

The Leamington became the company's Oakland headquarters. In Bangkok, Bird & Sons and Bird Air operate out of the Thai Rock Products offices, a compound of two buildings and a truck-filled yard on the banks of the Chao Phraya River just outside the sprawling suburbs of the Thai capital.

A visitor there the other day found a quiet air-conditioned office with four Thai girl secretaries and, in the waiting room, copies of *Decision*, the Billy Graham Evangelical Association magazine, mixed with construction-industry journals.

Bird Air won its contract with the Air Force last September at a time when the United

States Government was coming under increasing criticism for using American military forces to supply Cambodian Government troops cut off from river-routes by rebel action.

Mr. Bird told an interviewer recently that the company found out about the possible contract in advance and so was in a position to round up the specialist crews before any other contractor. He did not say how the company learned of it, however.

The original contract of \$1.7-million called for Bird Air to furnish five six-man crews from September, 1974, through June, 1975. The Air Force was to supply the five C-130 cargo planes, all fuel, maintenance and even physical examinations and refresher physiological training.

Moreover, the contract specified that all employees of the contractor were to be considered civilians, in no way acting as representatives of the United States Government. Nor was the contractor to issue any news releases about events unless cleared with the Air Force. And the contractor, not the Government, was responsible in the cases of all damages and deaths.

An original contract was signed July 11, 1974, with an Air Force master sergeant, Warren H. Shouldis, signing for the United States Government. However, the contract was officially approved—by Col. R. B. Lovingfoss, director of procurement—only on Jan. 28, 1975, by which time Bird Air had been flying the Air Force planes for four months.

The contract was extended \$1.9-million to \$2.6-million in February to take in seven more crews.

Mr. Bird said recruitment of the current 73 crew members was done "mostly by word of mouth."

"You get a good captain and ask him if he knows someone who is really qualified," he said. "They have a good grapevine."

Mr. DeRonde, the former Bird & Sons vice president, described how some names would come through from Bangkok by teletype to the Leamington Hotel. "We tell him he is recommended by Bangkok and to send us a résumé," he said. "In most cases we never see the men."

Mr. Bird and other officers have maintained that the crew members hired are all ex-Air Force men and that none are currently service in the military, although some, they said, might be on active reserve.

The men are paid an average of \$3,000 a month. Bird Air is paid an average of \$450 a flight hour—or \$900 for the round trip between U. Tapao and Phnom Penh.

Mr. Bird said in an interview in the *Washington Post* last month that "I am only making 12 per cent on this one."

The use of civilian recruits to fly the emergency supply airlift has drawn the opposition of critics who contend the military is seeking to evade Congressional restrictions on its involvement by contracting with surrogates.

One such group of critics, the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York City, filed suit in Federal Court in Massachusetts a few weeks ago to block all such supply operations. Plaintiffs in the suit include a number of northeastern Representatives in Congress.

Mr. Bird himself appeared to acknowledge that the civilian supply effort was undertaken by the Government with an eye toward escaping strictures of the Aug. 14, 1973, cutoff of all United States combat activities in Cambodia.

Asked by Steve Talbot of *Internews* whether planes for the airlift were furnished by the Air Force, Mr. Bird replied:

"They are all Air Force C-130's. We only furnish the crews. They do all the maintenance. The purpose of this is that Congress has a limit on the number of people that can be in Cambodia at one time in support of the war effort. And in order to get around [that] and to keep the United States military personnel out of there, we furnish civilian crews for these aircraft." The Congressional limit is 200.

Estimate of Danger

Mr. Bird maintained that the crews did not face imminent danger of being shot down, only of being hit by fire while unloading at Pochentong Airport in Phnom Penh. Nevertheless, he said, "there's been a lot of discussion" about the dangers and consequently alert crews and helicopters were available on short notice for rescue missions, he said.

The Cambodian Air Force would have responsibility for such missions inside Cambodia, the Thai or United States Air Force in Thailand, Mr. Bird said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bird said, "I am rather proud of what we are doing." He added:

"I think we have a commitment and I am proud the United States is doing the airlift and helping to supply the people of Cambodia. I am a contractor and I finish the contract, good or bad. I hope we continue our commitment. If we can hold out until the rainy season, there can be a regrouping. I am not a military man so I don't know exactly what you do. I am a poor old contractor who just works his tail to the bone."