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American Pilots Protest

Say Cambodian Military Commandeer Their Planes

By Elizabeth Becker

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PHNOM PENH—American commercial pilots have asked the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh to forbid the Cambodian military from commandeering their private American-registered planes for military missions, but the embassy refused the request.

"I went to the embassy a few days ago to ask about this because I thought the embassy had to protect its citizens," said Carl Shipman, a 50-year-old American-licensed pilot for Heng Meas commercial airlines, "but the air attache told us the ambassador could not interfere in Cambodian government affairs."

Shipman had refused to transport Khmer Republic troops to Kompong Cham and the military subsequently threatened to cut off all aviation gasoline to his company if he did not comply. Since aviation gasoline is provided by American aid and its distribution controlled by the American embassy, Shipman felt the embassy could forbid the Cambodians from commandeering his plane.

"The attache said he would write a letter to the air force asking them not to take American registered planes to Kompong Cham, but we need more protection than that," said Shipman.

Shipman is worried about the risk involved in flying military missions to endangered areas and the illegality of his participation in a foreign war. Other American pilots have been threatened and sometimes forced to fly military missions and two have complained, along with Shipman.

"Active participation in this war effort jeopardizes our American citizenship," Skip Bryant, another pilot, said.

"I was forced to fly troops to Kampot and I know that on the back of my passport it says I can lose my citizenship by serving in the armed forces of another country," Bryant said.

The pilots feel the embassy is not guarding their rights as American citizens and they don't believe the embassy is powerless.

"The Americans change the rules of their poker game daily," said Shipman.

One recent change is a mandatory utilization report for aviation gasoline issued by the U.S. embassy to all private airline companies. Each day these companies must make a report to the embassy stating the amount of aviation gas used, the type and tonnage of cargo shipped, the destination of the cargo, and the names of passengers aboard.

Well-informed diplomatic sources say the embassy hopes to control in-country airshipment of essential supplies between Phnom Penh and the provinces.

The United States apparently hopes to cut down inflation by supervising domestic cargo flights and thereby limiting the role of middlemen.

Shipman knows about these new measures, but he says things have not changed.

"The Cambodian government still commandeers any airline to do what they say," he said.

The Cambodian air force has planes to get in and out of tight places but the military often uses its cargo planes for paying passengers, Shipman said, adding, "then they put the squeeze on us to bring the troops in."

"I know none of us was dragged here in the first place, but I have flown for AID in Africa and the agency (CIA) in Laos, and I have never had trouble like this before.

His private company owns only one plane, like many of the more than 30 airline companies suddenly started operating this year when all inland roads were cut by the Khmer Rouge. Most companies run on a very small budget, transporting essential goods in and out of Phnom Penh, taking up the duties once performed by fleets of trucks.

Bryant and Shipman said they both demand cash before they fly.

"The Americans needs us to run this country," said Bryant, "but they won't give us protection from the military."

Shipman arrived in Cambodia last April and Bryant

has lived here for more than three years. Both say they cooperate with military when they fly out to the provinces, but the military rarely returns these favors.

"We carry whatever they like when we have the extra room," said Shipman. "Wounded soldiers, wives with their sugar to sell in Phnom Penh—we have to do it in these situations. But they don't give us reliable information on enemy positions and then they commandeer the airplanes."

The pilots plan to make renewed complaints to the embassy until they receive assurance that they will not be coerced into flying military missions.

"We are an embittered lot; we've worked in an around the government and know what the Americans can do. We aren't on high salaries like Air America. We're paid less than U.S. mercenaries in China in 1948," said Shipman. "I think flying military missions is illegal and I don't want to be shot up for nothing."

U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia is John Gunther Dean; confirmed by Senate 13 Mar 74; profile NYT 14 Mar 74, this file.

Profile also in WXP 27 Mar 74.