

Cambodia Airlift's Contact in Oakland

By Jack Viets

In a corner of a third floor office at the Leamington Hotel in downtown Oakland is a teletype machine with a direct link to Bangkok.

The cable call sign of the office is "Birdson" — and the machine is the only Oakland presence of a small airline that is creating headlines throughout the United



ARTHUR DE RONDE
Teletype machine nearby

States and the world.

"Our Bird Air division is controlled solely from Bangkok and Vientiane," said Arthur DeRonde a bit tersely yesterday.

"This is Bird and Sons Co. here — we provide administrative services for the Leamington Hotel, which we own, and our shopping center in Phoenix, Ariz.

Occasionally, however, the teletype machine in the corner will print out a name, he said, and a request that a man be contacted.

The Oakland office gets in touch with the man, said DeRonde. "and we tell him he is recommended by Bangkok, and to send us a resume."

When the man's resume is received, it is sent on to Bangkok, he said.

"Bangkok does everything. They even set the salaries — in most cases we never see the men."

Since October, he said, Bird Air in Thailand and Laos has been carrying out what DeRonde termed "a body contract" with the U.S. Air Force to airlift military supplies into Cambodia.

"We just furnish the bodies. They (the U.S. Air Force) call the shots. They tell Bird Air where to go and when to go."

The Air Force, he said, provides the big C-130 Hercules transports that Bird Air crews are flying into Cambodia and beleaguered Phnom Penh, the nation's capitol.

Bird Air, said DeRonde, is owned by William H. Bird, a 58-year-old adventurer who built airport runways and highways during the Vietnam war with his Thai Rock Products Co. and also ventured into the air cargo business.

He was a competitor of

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Air America, the CIA-operated airline known throughout Southeast Asia as the "government airline, and did so well that in 1967 he was bought out by Robert Six, the president of Continental Airlines.

The deal for Bird's 35 airplanes and his Southeast Asia air freight business included a "no competition" clause of five years' duration.

So Bird went into the shopping center venture in Phoenix — and bought the Leamington Hotel in Oakland for more than \$2 million in 1969.

"I've known Bill for more than 15 years," noted DeRonde. "I first met him out in Saigon, when I was in the construction business too."

"You never know what he's getting into next."

Bird got back into the airline business in Southeast Asia after his five-year no competition clause with Continental ran out, LeRonde said.

"He put a few planes into Vientiane and he won a copter contract in 1973 flying six jet helicopters up and down Laos for the U.S. Agency for International Development."

The year before, LeRonde said, he was hired by Bird for 90 days to try to pull the Leamington out of its doldrums.

He helped put together a winning bid package that made the Leamington the temporary quarters for draftees and later volunteers reporting to Oakland for military service and he is new president of Bird and Sons Co.

"It's an exciting, diversified business — and we're doing pretty well," he said.

Bird Air — and the teletype machine in the corner — will presumably be even busier in a few days.

The Pentagon disclosed Tuesday that it is adding \$1.9 million to Bird's existing \$1.7 million contract with the Air Force to double its flights into Cambodia from ten a day to 20 a day.

The Air Force will turn over seven more C-130 cargo planes to Bird Air, and Bird

Air will add 56 pilots, navigators and loadmasters — many of them former Air Force personnel — to its civilian air crews.