

# Forrest Bird, creator of the revolutionary 'resuscitator,' puts Palm Springs on the map

**Tracy Conrad**

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

"In what is being hailed by medical men throughout the country as one of the greatest inventions in modern respiratory medicine, Forrest Bird this week came up with a new oxygen breathing assister-controller, which has been tested and can ventilate 'anything from a mouse to a horse.'"

"The new invention, especially designed to do two functions, can breathe for a very small baby and can be set for automatic ventilation for any persons, regardless of the mixture of gas and air prescribed."

The Desert Sun in 1958 trumpeted the great new invention of the Bird Assister-Controller Mark III and the Bird Resuscitator -Mark VII ventilators. (There were actually four total prototypes built and tested throughout Southern California.) The news was particularly germane because Forrest Bird lived in, and "put Palm Springs on the map" by locating his laboratory and manufacturing facility in the desert. Local boy makes good! Read all about it!

Bird's very first ventilator prototype was cobbled together from shortcake tins and a doorknob. By 1958, many iterations later, his Bird Universal Medical Respirator, housed in a recognizable green metal box, was in commercial manufacture.

Bird, throughout the development process, spent many months working with leading doctors in the state and going into operating rooms to check and double check the engineering of the unit. Mark VII units, known affectionately as the "Bird," were rapidly in use in hospitals, universities and clinics across the nation and the world. It was small, inexpensive and revolutionized treatment, "and its use on polio victims has all but done away with the iron lung."

The iron lung was an unwieldy, impossibly uncomfortable contraption in which the entire patient was placed sans the head. There were wards in every hospital with hundreds of iron lung patients warehoused in rows, suffering respiratory paralysis because of the polio epidemic in the middle of the 20th century. The only treatment was mechanical support for breathing with an iron lung. One of Bird's models, dubbed the "baby Bird," made the iron lung obsolete. Bird, himself, acknowledged the baby Bird, "It's the world's best-known respirator and is in almost every hospital in the



**President Barack Obama presents the National Medal of Technology and Innovation to Dr. Forrest M. Bird, of Percussionaire Corp. in Idaho, in the East Room of the White House in Washington on Oct. 7, 2009. Bird, an inventor whose medical respirators breathed life into millions of patients around the world, died Aug. 2, 2015. He was 94. GERALD HERBERT/AP**

world. It's the Model-T Ford of respirators—easy to maintain and repair."

Bird's father had been a WWI combat aviator and introduced his son Forrest to flying and to Orville Wright. Immediately enthralled, Forrest performed his first solo flight at age 14 and earned advanced certifications by the time he was 16. He enlisted with the United States Army Air Corp a week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. He entered active duty as a technical air training officer due to his advanced qualifications. This rank and the gave him the oppor-

tunity to pilot almost every aircraft in service during the war, including early jets and helicopters,

The newest models of aircraft were capable of exceeding altitudes at which humans can breathe, even with 100% oxygen supplementation. Bird discovered that an oxygen regulator in a crashed German bomber he was ferrying back to the U.S. for study that seemed to contain a pressure breathing circuit. He took the oxygen regulator home, studied it, and made it more

**See BIRD, Page 20A**



**Bird Corporation circa 1995.** PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Bird

Continued from Page 19A

functional. It became the standard design for high-altitude oxygen regulators for most military aircraft for decades after.

His interest led him to study medicine, not to practice, but “to understand the human body and its stress in flight.” He eventually earned a doctorate in aeronautical engineering and became expert in physiology and medical physics. His highly efficient respirators and ventilators were adopted as the standard of care for decades. By the end of the 1960s, Bird was still manufacturing more than 80 percent of all the respirators and related equipment in the country.

Bird Oxygen Breathing Equipment Inc. was founded in 1953 and headquartered adjacent to the Palm Springs airport. It was the first major industry to establish facilities at the airport. That proximity was perfect for Bird, making his ability to be aloft in a plane, only a short hop from the office or his home at 212 Cerritos. Bird was often up in the wild blue yonder. He once flew with Howard Hughes, whom he praised as an excellent pilot.

Many experienced pilots, including Hughes suffered crashes in those days. On a September morning in 1967, Forrest Bird himself, also crashed. He was piloting a twin-engine 12-passenger Lockheed Lodestar with his friend and leading electronics engineer at the company, Larry Martin.

As Bird took off from the Palm Springs airport, the right engine of the aircraft caught fire. The control tower could see the flames and radioed the plane, now some 300 feet in the air, to land. Out of runway and already and trying to avoid the houses off its end, Bird headed for the golf course of the San Jacinto Country Club. He put the plane down near the intersection of North Farrell Drive and Verona Road, demolishing it. The Palm Springs Fire Department met them there and quickly extinguished the blaze.

Bird and Martin walked away with lacerations and their lives.

His company was an integral part of the community. Longtime Palm Springs resident Gladys Helms worked for Bird Oxygen at the airport and would often meet the neighborhood drunks in the morning and let them breath some oxygen to remove the alcohol smell.

In 1978 Bird Oxygen Breathing equipment was reconfigured and combined with Bird Space Technology into Bird Corporation owned entirely debt-free by Forrest Bird. When he merged Bird into 3M corporation, he made yet another fortune.

Eventually, Bird moved to Idaho, opening a museum, restoring all sorts of aircraft, and creating a compound where he could continue working on his myriad inventions. He lived there until his death at age 94 in 2015. The compound is in Sagle, close to the Canadian border.

Having lived for so many years in Palm Springs, his move away to the north is exactly opposite of so many “snowbirds” do today.