

He's a rebel without a pause

From Canada to Vietnam Fred Williams has been a maverick

By JOHN STEWART
Times staff writer

"It's a situation you wouldn't put in a comic book," says Fred Williams, talking about the time he arranged for a road to be bombed in Vietnam.

Williams' whole career is something you wouldn't put in a comic book because no one would believe it.

Williams has served in Vietnam for the World Health Organization, has built Eskimo settlements in the Arctic for the Canadian government, built air bases across Canada for the defence department, invited an underwing loading system for aircraft during the Second World War, constructed sugar refineries in the West Indies, taught at Conestoga Community College, and found time to run his own consulting engineering business for 16 years.

For the last four years, he was the waterfront manager of the Credit Valley Conservation Authority. His contract with the authority ended last week.

Through all of his engineering exploits, Williams has been a rebel, and has frequently been treated as an outcast because he never became a professional engineer.

Williams was sent by the Canadian government to build three hospitals in Vietnam in 1972. "We need somebody with your peculiar talents to get this thing going," they told me when they sent me out," recalls Williams.

He was sent to An Yang province near Saigon. Shortly after he arrived, the American supply of stone for construction was cut off. The Koreans took control of the stone and were using it daily to repair roads bombed by the Viet Cong.

Frustrated by inactivity, Williams headed into Viet Cong territory. He was picked up by the Viet Cong and spent several hours, using sign language, trying to convince them they should bomb a strategic bridge on the Bosack River — a key Korean transportation route for their stone barges.

After being left on the highway by the Viet Cong, Williams walked back to his base. Two days later, his supervisor walked in with the happy news that the bridge on the Bosack had been bombed and the Koreans were willing to sell their sudden surplus of stone.

The Hamilton native tells the story with some pride. It is a classic example of getting the job done, no matter how unorthodox the method, and Williams is someone who will get the job done at all costs.

"A government employee once told me that whenever he saw my name on any project, he knew there was going to be trouble," says the father of three.

Williams learned valuable lessons in all aspects of the construction business as a teenager working for his father's

contracting firm. He went to McMaster University in an arts program, but quit in the middle of the Depression. When the war broke out, his construction background proved valuable to the Air Force and he built airstrips and towns from "Mudfields" across the country.

After a nervous breakdown and a one-year recuperation, Williams walked into a Toronto consulting engineering firm and applied for a job. Williams was handed some construction specifications and asked if he could produce similar work. Williams said he'd have no trouble, since they were his.

He was hired and became general manager for seven years with a bevy of engineers working for him. "You could say I topped the field I wasn't qualified to be in," says Williams.

In 1954, he formed his own consulting engineering company. He did a lot of work in the Arctic, including inventing a system of above-ground plastic piping. It was patented by the government.

Williams was recruited to instruct in writing engineering reports at Kitchener's Conestoga College. His "unorthodox" methods, which included an opening afternoon field trip to the local pub, proved popular with students but unpopular with fellow faculty.

At 65, Williams says he can't afford to retire. He's still looking for interesting, offbeat work.