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With the mobile pod slung below, the huge "Flying Crane" is airborne (above), transporting a command post to base camp for maintenance from the 1st Air Cav's forward position. At Au Khe, the mission is accomplished (below). The "Crane" can also lift a fully-equipped hospital

U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Charles Clincher

The Bird That Acts Like a Mule

Special to Stars & Stripes

"WE HAVE a bunch of wounded men out here," the sergeant shouted. "Send for the hospital!"

"You mean send them to the hospital, don't you Sarge?" a radio operator answered.

"No, dammit! I said send FOR the hospital! The flying crane, private! The flying crane!"

In minutes after the sergeant had made his message clear, a completely equipped operating room in a self-contained pod was airborne and winging toward the front lines in Vietnam where seriously wounded American troops lay on the verge of death.

Bringing the hospital to the patient is one of the newest life-saving techniques developed in the Vietnam war and an operation that would never have been possible without the "flying crane" of which the sergeant spoke.

The CH-54 "Flying Crane" helicopters of the 478th Aviation Co. here can lift up to 18,000 pounds.

The great spraddled legs of the monstrous flying machine cradle a giant hospital pod next to the belly of the chopper and it flies away as easily as a wasp carrying materials for a nest.

The 1st Cav. Div. here has one pod equipped as an operating room and two equipped as Division Tactical Operations Centers. When the division has to move its forward command post, the chopper easily does the job.

When the chopper sets down with a hospital or command post, all that remains is to install a generator, start it, turn on the lights, and get on with the job of running the war and saving lives.

Recently, the VC had an American force pinned down in a dense jungle area. The only solution was to get a 155mm artillery piece on a nearby mountain top for a fire base to clear the area—an impossible feat in the terrain.

Impossible in other wars, but the piece was mounted between the legs of the Flying Crane and within an hour the weapon was routing the enemy.

Like the old Army mule, the CH-54 is probably the ugliest thing in the military inventory.

And just as valuable.