



End Nears for Last CH-54 Unit

By JOHN ROMER

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WASHINGTON — The last of the Army's CH-54 Skycrane units is scheduled to be "separated" from active duty in October.

That's when the 14th Avn Bn at Fort Sill, Okla., will case the colors of its 273d Trans Co. According to Lt. Col. Thomas M. Walker, battalion commander, all nine cranes belonging to the 273d will be assigned to the Alabama National Guard at Birmingham.

But, he said, about 80 percent of the 140-man unit will be reassigned and retrained at Sill.

The Cranes are scheduled to be in Alabama before the colors are cased. Alabama guard pilots were to fly six of the copters to Birmingham in August and the last three are scheduled to go in September.

Two other heavy lift helicopter units recently ceased operations. Another unit is scheduled to be deactivated in September.

The 355th Trans Co at Fort Eustis, Va., was the first to go out of business early this year. All 10 of its cranes were sent to the Connecticut guard.

In June, the 478th Trans Co at Fort Benning, Ga., went out of business.

According to the commander of the 34th Med Bn, the 478th's parent unit, the crane company was scheduled for deactivation in September. But, he said, the date was advanced because of the fuel crunch and a shortage of pilots elsewhere in the battalion.

A large portion of the enlisted men, the officer said, have been reassigned at Benning and more than half of the 25 pilots also have remained on post.

Cranes belonging to the 478th were sent to Kansas, Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama National Guard units.

Skycrane were retired from

active duty in Europe in 1976.

The 343d Avn Det, Fort Wainwright, Alaska, is the unit scheduled to cease operations in September, Army officials said. Helicopters in that unit have been earmarked for the Alaska guard's 207th Inf Gp. Officers and enlisted men in the detachment will be reassigned and retrained.

The Skycrane, which had been the Army's heavy lift helicopter and which was used extensively in Vietnam, is being replaced by improved CH-47 helicopters. There are said to be few missions for the aircraft during peacetime because it has no cargo compartment.