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CH-54 (FLYING CRANE)
 FUNCTION: Transport of heavy equipment
 PAYLOAD: Four crew; 20,000 pounds load
 COST: \$2 million

UH-1 (HUEY IROQUOIS)
 FUNCTION: Troop transport, medevac
 PAYLOAD: Two crew; eleven passengers
 or 2,500 pounds cargo
 COST: \$250,000 to \$300,000

CH-47 (CHINOOK)
 FUNCTION: Troop and cargo transport
 PAYLOAD: 33 to 44 passengers, or 24
 injured troops, or 19,000 pounds cargo
 COST: \$1.5 million



boots and to swear that if ever—any time, any place—he needed anything . . . The pilot took off his helmet and pointed to a gaping hole in the Plexiglas a few inches away. 'Just say it was the Comancheros of the 101st Aviation,' he said. So please," concluded Buckley, "get the Comancheros of the 101st Aviation into the story."

Such heroics have made helicopter pilots the most decorated soldiers in Indochina. Lt. Col. Robert Molinelli, who last week wound up a tour of duty as commander of the Seventeenth Cavalry, 101st Airborne Division, is one of those officers who believe in leading from the front, and he flies a Loach on the roughest of raids. In the course of his career in Vietnam, Colonel Molinelli has won two Silver Stars, the Legion of Merit, eight Distinguished Flying Crosses, the Bronze Star, three Army Commendation Medals, two Purple Hearts, 62 Air Medals and seven South Vietnamese decorations. The U.S. Army in Vietnam is sometimes criticized for distributing medals too freely, but no one has challenged Molinelli's chestful.

Barrage: But all too often, even the most courageous and skilled pilots are thwarted by the enemy's devastating ground fire. "When they start opening up on you," complains one medevac pilot, "they often kill the very people you came to rescue. That's what happened to me yesterday. Two ARVN medics were carrying a badly wounded man to my ship when mortar shells started to land on us. They killed the wounded guy and hurt the medics badly. Four more people rushed out to help the medics, and they were hit, too. We ended up lifting six people out of there, but none of them were the ones we had come for. This happens all the time."

The hazards of flying into withering North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire are compounded by a serious communication problem. Officially, there are no American ground controllers inside Laos, and

the ARVN officers who call in American helicopters often have only the haziest knowledge of English. Gripes one American pilot: "They're apt to say, 'Okay, come in. No NVA inside my compound. Outside, don't know.' That's why we have to be careful. When we land, we're sitting ducks, even when we only spend five seconds actually on the ground."

The pilots are already beginning to adjust to the new conditions they are encountering in Laos. Some of them talk of an informal "180-Degree Club," which means simply turning back in the face of heavy ground fire. But the rules of the "club" prohibit cop-outs of this kind when choppers are on a rescue mission, as they are all too often these days. In those circumstances, all the pilots can do is to slug it out with the enemy batteries, which have shown a surprising ability to withstand the pounding handed out by Cobras, artillery and U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers. So far, just about the only useful tactic the Cobra pilots have been able to devise for dealing with dug-in North Vietnamese batteries is for two gunships to attack from different angles, one slightly after the other, so that the enemy cannot swing his guns around fast enough to shoot at both aircraft.

The difficulties encountered in the air over Laos are beginning to call into question some of the Army's basic assumptions about the future of helicopter warfare. As long as the helicopters were fighting an unconventional war in Vietnam, they compiled an almost unbroken record of success. The first "airmobile" outfit, the First Air Cavalry Division, was created in 1965 and deployed almost immediately to Vietnam, where it quickly won its spurs in the battle of the Ia Drang Valley. From the very first, the advantages of the helicopter in fighting guerrillas were readily apparent. They freed the Army from the "tyranny of terrain." Troops could be moved anywhere quickly. They arrived fresh and could be resupplied almost at will. Commanders could hover

over a battle like football scouts in the press box, radioing instructions to the ground. Perhaps most important from a morale point of view, the infantrymen knew that if they were wounded, a medevac chopper could quickly speed them to a field hospital.

A new dimension was soon added with the development of gunships, first converted Hueys and later specially designed Cobras—fast, mean-looking craft armed with machine guns, grenade launchers and rocket pods. Thus, for the first time since World War II, the Army was once again able to provide its own close combat air support, a role that the Air Force had more or less abandoned in its fixation with nuclear warfare. Altogether, the helicopter represented a quantum jump in mobility and firepower, and Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the Army's Chief of Staff and former American commander in Vietnam, has said that, without helicopters, the U.S. and Saigon would have needed another million men to cope with the Viet Cong.

Glamour: By now, the Army has more than 12,000 helicopters—4,000 of them in Vietnam—and about 25,000 qualified helicopter pilots. Many of the operational fliers are young warrant officers, who rank between commissioned officers and sergeants and who will spend their entire Army careers in aviation. "Right now," says one Army air cadet, "flying is the going thing in the Army." Indeed, commissioned officers who might once have opted for armor or paratroop experience are now flocking to choppers, and pilot's wings have superseded the parachutist's badge as the Army's prime status symbol. In the ultimate testimonial to the helicopter's arrival, Westmoreland—an old paratrooper—has learned to pilot a Huey. And so many other generals want to follow suit that the Army was recently compelled to ban the brass from learning to fly unless specifically ordered to do so.

As many Army men see it, the Laotian