

These Jolly Green Giants 'harvest' people, not peas

By ED VOGEL
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A "Jolly Green Giant" who saved the lives of 26 Utah persons now flies through the vast mountainous terrain of New Mexico.

This "Giant" doesn't peddle vegetables, though — it's an 88-foot-long, \$3 million search and rescue helicopter which has been added to the flying squadron at Kirtland AF Base.

TEN OF THE HH-53C "Giants" have been assigned to Kirtland since January. They come from Hill AF Base near Ogden, Utah.

Capt. Donald Backlund called his helicopter "a machine" and "a plane" as he piloted a crew of press guests on a trip from Kirtland to Socorro and then north through the Manzanos and Sandias to Terrerro, east of Santa Fe.

This three and one-half hour journey cost the Air Force \$2,500 as Backlund estimated the Giant's operating costs at \$700 per hour.

But the life-saving record of the helicopter — which can carry 42,000 pounds and fly 195 mph — may make the cost worthwhile.

TAKE "PJ," or parachute jumper James Gillis, a 22-year-old from Miami, Fla. He's been credited with saving four lives.

Two were American sailors he lifted off a ship in the Philippines and rushed to a hospital.

The others were civilians injured in isolated parts of the Philippines.

"I volunteered to be a PJ because it sounded like fun," Gillis, a bachelor, said.

TO LEARN his skills, Gillis trained for six weeks as a mechanic, made 30 jumps and climbed mountains.

Most of the time, however, he doesn't have to jump from a helicopter.

But he may take a hoist

called a penetrator down through trees and canyons.

"We only jump out of the HC-130 plane," Sgt. Gillis explained. This plane, together with the Giant, has revolutionized search operations.

THE HC-130 possesses directional equipment, first used on the Apollo space flights, which homes in on a 4 frequency emitted from crashed planes.

Planes now are required to carry radio devices which automatically send off signals in a crash.

A Kansas couple, down in a light plane near Grants, was saved by a Kirtland HC-130 crew who followed a radio signal and guided ground searches to the scene.

"I have never treated anybody who died," Gillis said of his record. "But I've seen three or four who were dead when we got there."

He plans to leave the Air Force at the end of his enlistment and enter college. Gillis may take paramedic courses.

CAPT. BACKLUND'S Green Giant even carries camera devices to carry out night searches.

Such devices helped another helicopter recover a plane near Winslow, Ariz., which crashed April 16 in a 4:30 a.m. snowstorm.

Gillis said that usually the HC-130, a quick plane, finds the downed aircraft, and then the Giant comes in to make the rescue.

Pilot Backlund, a 26-year-old from Kenosha, Wis., and his copilot, Lt. Philip Pacini, 26, St. Louis, are instructors for the Giant's 1550th Aircrew Training and Test Wing.

BOTH ARE Air Force Academy graduates and were decorated for saving Marines sent in to rescue Mayaguez sailors from the Cambodians in 1974.

Backlund, named Military Airlift Command "Junior

Officer of the Year," was credited with rescuing 20 sailors and a five-man helicopter crew.

Up to 38 soldiers may be carried on a HH-53C Giant, powered by twin 3,200 horsepower engines.

The Giant isn't like the common helicopter.

Instead of a big fish bowl window, there's only a window the size of the one in your car for the pilot.

And the crew looks out of windows about the size of those in passenger planes.

FROM THESE windows the exceedingly dry mesas and canyons along the Rio Grande were visible.

Little water flows down the river at Socorro, but plenty of irrigation water was flowing into bright green fields.

Yet little grass was growing between the trees in the mountains.

Throughout the journey, particularly in the east-side of the Manzanos, straight and very crooked trails led over passes.

Backlund said animals probably created the twisted trails, while humans carved out the others.

"WE USED TO fly by a herd of elk in Utah which were not bothered by the noise," Backlund said.

However, the 'copters no longer fly close to Tijeras because residents complained about the noise.

Dozens of little cabins dot the mountains, most apparently abandoned.

Both pilots, new to the state, talked about making expeditions after gold.

And they mentioned how good hero sandwiches would be for lunch as the copter nearly reached the 10,000-foot level.

That's the level the government requires aircraft to begin using oxygen.

At least one reporter wondered if he could keep his breakfast down while the pilots planned on eating hero sandwiches for lunch.