

Theft of Helicopter With Seeming Ease Explained by Army

FORT MEADE, Md., Feb. 17 (Reuters)—How could a young Army private take up an Army helicopter without permission and without being stopped?

Easily, it appears.

Army officials admitted today that there had been little to prevent Pfc. Robert K. Preston from making his midnight journey from this sprawling base northeast of Washington.

Fort Meade is an open post, which means traffic is free to come and go without interference over virtually all the base's 13,500 acres.

Thus, no guard impeded the private when he drove his car onto the Tipton airfield, which is a part of the Fort Meade complex.

Once Private Preston had parked his car, a guard noticed the vehicle in an unauthorized area and reported it. By that time, however, the soldier had the engines of a Huey helicopter churning and was lifting off without the chopper's lights on.

An operations dispatcher realized that something was amiss when he saw the helicopter rising without lights. After a quick check, he learned there was no flight plan for a helicopter to be leaving at that time.

By then, little could be done except for the base to notify the Maryland state police, which launched two choppers of their own to take chase, and Baltimore's Friendship International Airport, which tracked the craft for a time by radar.

Scores of helicopters are parked at Tipton Field and are, according to one Army specialist, fully fueled at all times. A number of Reserve and National Guard units train at Fort Meade.

Security was tightened a bit after Private Preston's midnight ride. The helicopter he stole was returned today and placed in a hangar.

"The hangar is ringed by guards," a spokesman said, adding that he had not permitted near the helicopter.

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