

SFC 8-30-74

Penalty for White House Aerial Caper

Ft. Meade, Md.

The young Army private who landed a stolen helicopter on the White House lawn was sentenced by a military court yesterday to six months at hard labor and given a \$2400 fine.

The eight-man military jury in fact sentenced 20-year-old Robert K. Preston to one year at hard labor.

But the judge ruled Preston's pretrial confinement, most of it in maximum security, constitutes a form of punishment and must be subtracted from the court-martial sentence.

The \$2400 fine will be paid by the forfeiture of \$200 pay each month for one year. Preston's military attorney said he would appeal the sentence.

Jury foreman Paul Makowski said the panel had decided against expelling Preston from the service to avoid putting an added blemish on his record. "The boy does have potential," Makowski said. "We felt it might inhibit his rehabilitation."

Preston had pleaded guilty to charges stemming from the February 17 incident and faced a maximum sentence of 2½ years at hard labor plus a dishonorable discharge. He also is awaiting sentencing on related charges in a local civilian court.

The panel of four officers and four enlisted men took six hours to arrive at a punishment for Preston, who admitted stealing the helicopter from the Ft. Meade airfield, buzzing both the Washington Monument and the U.S. capitol and twice landing on the south lawn of the White House.

"I meant no harm," Preston had told the jury, saying he only wanted "to get attention to the problem I had." Taking the stand in his own behalf, Preston claimed that the Army had unjustly extended his tour of duty after flunking him out of flight school.

The 13 defense witnesses who preceded Preston to the stand described him as a skilled pilot and an outstanding soldier whose first love was flying.

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