

Army Probe Into Crash Of a Nixon Helicopter

Key Biscayne

The Army began an investigation yesterday into the Saturday night crash of a presidential fleet helicopter that killed a Secret Service agent when the copter plummeted into the Atlantic ocean off Grand Cay in the British Bahamas.

As far as is known, it is the first time a presidential aircraft has crashed.

Six other agents and the three-man Army crew saved themselves by climbing onto the bottom of the copter, which overturned after it splashed into 20 feet of water a half mile south of the

island, the White House said. The nine suffered minor injuries but were rescued after spending 15 to 20 minutes in the water.

The twin-engine Sikorsky MH-3A Army helicopter was "very similar or identical" to helicopters President Nixon and his family use all the time, and the crashed craft itself has been used by the first family, according to deputy White House press secretary Gerald F. Warren.

The crashed helicopter was a backup aircraft on the President's current trip to Florida, but had been the prime aircraft in the past.

There was no immediate

explanation for the accident, the White House said, nor reportedly was there any radio SOS just before the chopper suddenly dropped out of the overcast, pitch-black sky and into the water.

The Secret Service identified the dead agent as J. Clifford Dietrich, 25, of Woodbridge, Va., who had served as an agent for more than three years. He is survived by his wife, Janet, and two children. The Dade county, Fla., medical examiner said Dietrich drowned.

The Army helicopter that crashed had undergone its periodic maintenance overhaul within the past year, Warren said. After a certain number of hours of flying, the helicopters are taken apart, rebuilt and flight-tested before being put into service again.

The President and Mrs. Nixon, Julie and David Eisenhower, and Tricia and Edward Cox returned safely to Key Biscayne yesterday afternoon via another helicopter. The President later worked in his study, talked with staff members by telephone and met with press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House announced.

The presidential family is expected to stay in Florida until late afternoon or evening today, Memorial Day.

Washington Post Service