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Copter Crash Probed

Army Studies Fatal Accident Of Nixon Craft

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KEY BISCAVNE, Fla., May 27—The Army began an investigation today into the crash Saturday night of a presidential fleet helicopter that killed a Secret Service agent when it plummeted into the Atlantic Ocean off Grand Cay island in the British Bahamas.

Six other agents and a three-man Army helicopter 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 and were rescued after spending 15 to 20 minutes in the water.

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

The twin-engine, Sikorsky VH-3A Army helicopter was "very similar or identical" to helicopters President Nixon and his family use all the time and the crashed craft has been used by the First Family, according to deputy White House press secretary Gerald L. 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 radioed SOS before the helicopter suddenly dropped out of the overcast, pitch-black sky into the water.

The Secret Service identified the dead man as J. Clifford Dietrich, 25, of Woodbridge, Va., a Secret Service agent for just over three years. He is survived by his wife, Janet, and two children. The Dade County, Fla., medical examiner said Dietrich died from asphyxiation due to drowning.

Chief White House photographer Ollie Atkins said he was standing on the alternate helipad at Grand Cay — an

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unlit, sandy scrub brush area with a single blinking strobe light that helicopters are supposed to land on — and saw the aircraft circle overhead for what appeared to be "a routine approach from the Northwest."

Then, moments later, he said, "I heard a very short hissing noise that lasted maybe two seconds and (the engine) shut off. Then I realized there'd been an accident."

Atkins said he radioed for help to the White House communications outpost at Walker Cay, another island six miles away, but "the tower said it was garbled and couldn't read me." He said he repeated the message and then emergency units were notified.

The photographer said two rubber boats—one from a Coast Guard cutter—and a number of small outboard motor boats were dispatched to the crash site.

Robert Abplanalp, the millionaire industrialist who loaned Mr. and Mrs. Nixon \$625,000 to help them buy their San Clemente, Calif., Western White House retreat and in whose house the Nixon family was staying at Grand Cay, was in one of the motor rescue boats, Atkins said.

Two minutes elapsed before the first cries for help were heard from offshore, Atkins said, and it was 15 to 20 minutes before the first rescue craft reached the submerged helicopter. He said a dangerous coral reef is hidden under the surface at the crash site.

The Secret Service's bunkhouse on Grand Cay was turned into an emergency medical center, Atkins said. The helicopter crew members and the six Secret Service agents were variously suffering from shock, inhalation of fuel fumes, fuel burns, and cuts and bruises, according to several sources.

The nine survivors were then flown to the Homestead Air Force Base hospital, 30 miles south of Miami, where they spent the night before being released this morning.

Navy divers recovered Dietrich's body from the helicopter, the White House said.

The White House credited the helicopter's pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Ronald C. Bean, 37, of Dale City, Va., with helping the six Secret Service agents and the two other Army crew members out of the helicopter hatch and to the surface where they waited for help.

The other two Army crew members, both from Fort Belvoir, Va., were identified as Chief Warrant Officer Frederick W. Evans, 33, the co-pilot, and Sgt. William R. Robinson, 32, a crewman. The Secret Service identified the six surviving agents as Charles W. Rochner, 31; Michael E. Cleary, 26; William H. Brawley, 34; Stephen J. Petro, 30; Robert R. Stewart Jr., 26; and James Keiter, 30.

The helicopter was making the 155-mile trip from Key Biscayne to Grand Cay for a routine change in the Secret Service guard around the Abplanalp house which sits on a bluff on the green, mile-long island. The time of the accident was 10:10 p.m. Washington time, the White House said.

Mr. Nixon was informed of the accident shortly after it occurred, the White House said. He expressed "deep sadness and sympathy for the family of agent Dietrich," Warren said, and ordered a Defense Department investigation of the crash.

The presidential fleet of helicopters, according to the White House, consists of 10 of the Sikorsky helicopters (seven Marine Corps and three Army) and six VH-1 (Huey) helicopters (three Marine and three Army). The normal complement for the President's visits to Key Biscayne is two Sikorsky helicopters and one Huey.

The two military branches rotate servicing the Nixon trips to Key Biscayne, the White House said.

The Army helicopter that crashed had undergone its periodic maintenance overhaul within the last year, Warren said. After a specific flight time, 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 this afternoon via 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 on Memorial Day.

Dietrich joined the Secret Service on May 4, 1970, in the New Haven, Conn., field office and was transferred to the Washington bureau on April 1 this year.

He was born in Port Chester, N.Y., but spent much of his life in Greenwich, Conn., the White House said. He was graduated from Nichols College in Dudley, Mass., in 1969.