

2-Hour Flight on Wild Side

Pilot Jousts With Police During Chase

By Jay Matthews
Washington Post Staff Writer

At first, the one guard at the Ft. Meade helicopter compound didn't think too much of it when one of his Hueys took off shortly after midnight yesterday. Training flights often came and went at night.

But seconds away at the Blob's Park, a popular German restaurant in Jessup, the 300 patrons took almost immediate notice of the helicopter. It was roaring a few feet above the roof of the one-story building, buzzing the restaurant and a barn and scattered houses nearby.

It may have been the second visit to Blob's Park that night for Robert K. Preston, the 20-year-old helicopter mechanic police say piloted the runaway aircraft. Maryland State Police say he was at the restaurant a couple hours earlier, asking after a woman and apparently upset he couldn't find her.

Before his two-hour odyssey ended in a final lurching landing on the south lawn of the White House, Preston reportedly flew by the executive mansion twice, flicked the radio aerial of a passing Anne Arundel police car with the helicopter's landing skids, chased one police helicopter across Baltimore-Washington International Airport and climaxed a 30-minute, 50-mile game of cat and mouse by almost ramming a second police helicopter near the tip of the Washington monument.

It wasn't until 12:56 a.m., long after the patrons at Blob's Park had returned to their beers, that an air traffic controller at National Airport spotted the stolen helicopter on his radar scope.

The District of Columbia police had

called four minutes before, asking about a helicopter flying downtown and seconds before a Federal Aviation Administration official in Baltimore had told the controller of the theft of the Ft. Meade helicopter.

At 12:59 the air traffic controller called D.C. police and asked them to intercept the helicopter with one of their own. But the blip on his screen, hovering in the prohibited downtown air space near the White House, now moved northeast out of Washington and the little D.C. police helicopter was not fast enough to keep up.

Twenty-five minutes later, after retracing its course back over Blob's Park, the runaway helicopter was spotted by a Maryland State Police official in an Anne Arundel County neighborhood just south of Baltimore-Washington International airport. Almost playfully, the aircraft was buzzing two or three county police cars, apparently aiming for the flashing blue strobe lights on their roofs. At one point the helicopter struck the radio aerial of one car with its skids, police reported.

A Maryland State Police helicopter from Baltimore appeared, then turned tail, zigzagging across the airport when the stolen helicopter turned and flew directly at it.

Maryland State Trooper Don L. Sewell and Cpl. Louis W. Saffran, in their swift, brand new Bell Jetranger helicopter, met the runaway Huey minutes later over Ft. Meade. "As soon as he saw I had him, his lights went out and

See CHASE, A2, Col. 1 OVER

COPTER, From A1

security detachment or to say how many guns were used or whether things would have been different if Mr. Nixon or his family had been there.

The President and his elder daughter, Tricia Cox, were in Key Biscayne, Fla. Mrs. Nixon and their younger daughter, Julie Eisenhower, were in Indianapolis where Mrs. Eisenhower is recuperating from surgery.

Preston, 20, a native of Panama City, Fla., was assigned to the 661st Transportation Company at Ft. Meade on Jan. 21 as a helicopter mechanic. Ft. Meade is about 25 miles northeast of Washington. Authorities there and at other military bases, Maryland State Police and civilian witnesses gave this account of the incident:

The post's Tipton Army Air Field has about 30 helicopters that are kept on the

flight line fueled and ready to take off.

There was one guard on duty about midnight when Preston, in fatigue uniform, started one of the olive drab UH1B "Huey" helicopters, the workhorse of the U.S. army in the Vietnam war, and took off. The guard noticed that the pilot did not warm up the engine, but sounded no alarm until it was discovered, at about 12:15 a.m., that no flight plan had been filed for that aircraft.

Preston had completed 157 hours of helicopter pilot training at Ft. Rucker, Ala., more than half the army's complete course, but was "washed out" in September when he failed to master instrument flying for the second time. He was also an experienced pilot of fixed-wing aircraft.

When his unauthorized flight was discovered, the duty officer at the air field called Capt. David P. Keating, the officer in charge of the base at the time, to inform him. At about the same time, state police called Keating to report an unidentified helicopter hovering over a corner of the base near the Baltimore-Washington Parkway.

According to Joseph J. Hedley, public information officer for Ft. Meade, Keating decided there was no need for military authorities to pursue the stolen helicopter because the state police were doing so.

Preston had reportedly visited a German restaurant known as Blob's Park near Ft. Meade a few hours before to look for a woman he knew and was upset when he did not find her there.

At the controls of the purloined helicopter, he now returned to Blob's Park, swooping in low and startling the big Saturday-night crowd. After landing briefly on a nearby parking lot, rotors going full blast, the helicopter then took off southward, on its first trip into the District of Columbia.

Federal Aviation Administration rules prohibit flying

over an area of downtown between the Kennedy Center and Capitol Hill. But the boundaries are not patrolled in any way, other than by radar surveillance, and no physical barrier prevents a pilot from entering the restricted area.

As Maryland State Trooper Louis Saffran, who was in a state police helicopter that followed Preston for the last part of his journey, said later, the pilot "could have driven right in the front door" of the White House if he had wanted to.

What Preston did do, after his first pass at the White House, was fly back up to the area of Blob's Park, where state police were waiting with a helicopter of their own to give chase. By that time an air traffic controller at National Airport had spotted the helicopter, as had the D.C. police, who gave chase in a helicopter of their own but were outdistanced by Preston's "Huey."

Around Maryland they went, Preston and the Maryland State Police, in an aerial cat-and-mouse game, down the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, along the Anacostia River, around the base of the Washington Monument, and back to the White House.

Saffran and Trooper Don L. Sewell, the other crewman in the state police helicopter, said they received no instructions from anyone on the ground during all this time.

They were prepared to put their helicopter between the "Huey" and the White House if necessary, Saffran and Sewell said, but suddenly the floodlights outside the White House went on and the aircraft they were pursuing swerved and went down, hit by shot gun fire from the ground.

Sewell landed the state police helicopter between the "Huey" and the White House, about 50 yards from the executive mansion, and Saffran jumped out and helped agents on the ground seize Preston.

The stolen helicopter

stayed on the south lawn of the White House, where it turned into a Sunday-morning tourist attraction, until it was flown back to Ft. Meade late yesterday morning and put into a locked hanger.

Preston was described by his commanding officer, Maj. John O. Northridge, as a "regular, quiet individual" with above-average intelligence, a description that tallied with accounts provided by others who knew him as a boy in Florida.

Preston, a clean-cut blond youth, whose family has broken up, was graduated in 1970 from Rutherford High School in Panama City, finishing 101st in a class of 347 with a grade average of 2.6 out of a possible 4. He had two years of Air Force ROTC in high school, but apparently took part in no extracurricular activities.

He learned to fly propeller-driven airplanes at a private flying school and then studied subjects related to aviation, such as meteorology, at Gulf Coast Community College. While there, he participated in an intercollegiate flying contest held at Middle Tennessee State University and finished in the top three, piloting a Cessna 150.

After Gulf Coast, Preston signed up for a three-year hitch in the Army, apparently with the specific intention of adding helicopter flying to his airplane rating, but then failed the course at Ft. Rucker.

"Our records show he was a good man from airport to airport, he could get where he had to go," a Ft. Rucker information officer said, "but on the instruments, it just wasn't there."

Collaborating in the coverage of the helicopter incident were the following Washington Post staff writers: B. D. Colen, Leon Dash, William A. Elsen, Larry Fox, Bill Gold, Linda Newton Jones, Charles A. Krause, Jay Mathews, Adam Shaw, J. Y. Smith, and Martin Weil.