

The Weather

Today—Mostly sunny, high in the 40s, low in the 30s. Chance of precipitation is near zero through tonight. Tuesday—Partly cloudy, high around 60. Temp. range: Today, 56-70; Yesterday, 50-32. Details, C3.

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Stolen Helicopter Lands in

By Thomas Lippman
Washington Post Staff Writer

A young soldier who flunked out of Army flight school last September commandeered a helicopter at Ft. Meade early yesterday, led police on a wild airborne chase around Maryland and the District of Columbia, and landed in a blaze of gunfire on the south lawn of the White House two hours later.

Neither President Nixon nor any member of his family was in the White House at the time, and no one was injured except the soldier, PFC Robert Kenneth Preston, who suffered superficial pellet wounds from the shotguns of the Executive Protective Service officers who were waiting for him when the helicopter came down.

But the ease with which the aircraft penetrated the supposedly restricted air space over the White House raised serious questions among law enforcement officials,

who said that Preston could have flown right into the building undetected if he had not attracted so much attention by his bizarre antics along the way.

Preston was wrestled to the ground when his helicopter landed about 2 a.m. by agents of the EPS and by two Maryland State Police officers who had been pursuing him in a state police helicopter on a 50-mile odyssey through Prince Georges and Anne Arundel counties and over the heart of Washington.

He was unarmed, as was the helicopter, authorities said. After treatment for his wounds at Walter Reed Army Hospital, Preston was booked by D.C. police on a charge of "unlawful entry" of the White House and taken to Walter Reed's psychiatric facility at Forest Glen for mental observation.

Peter Esker, a hospital spokesman, said Preston "is currently in a closed ward for psychiatric evaluation and

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Gunfire at White House

he is under guard" of the Executive Protective Service. He said he did not know how long the mental observation would take.

It was unclear last night what had prompted Preston's strange journey, or what his motives were in going to the White House. What did seem clear was that his take-off from Ft. Meade, though unauthorized, caused no alarm at the time and that only because Preston buzzed a trailer park and a restaurant, and flew an erratic course over Washington did he attract enough attention to ensure that anyone would be waiting for him when he arrived.

In fact, the stolen helicopter had already hovered over the White House briefly once before, at about 1 a.m., without attempting to land, and that was the first time White House protection officials knew of its existence, according to Secret Service spokesman Jack Warner.

Tony Johnson, a metropolitan police detective who

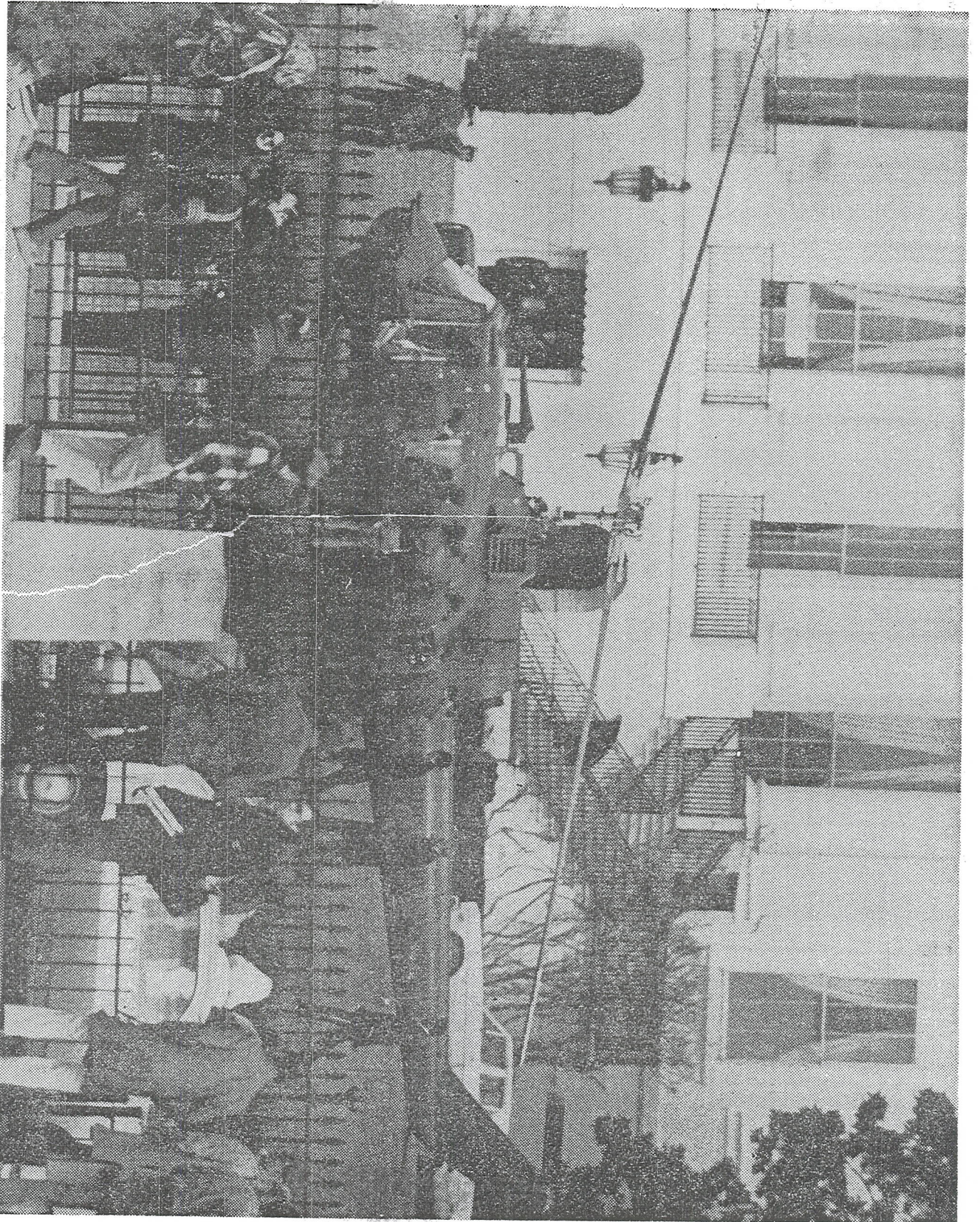
questioned Preston after his arrest, said the soldier told him he actually landed the helicopter at the White House on his first pass and stayed on the ground approximately one minute without being apprehended.

According to Johnson, Preston said he did not intend to harm anyone in the White House but was "just goofing off" and "buzzing everything that was popular." He said he knew it was forbidden to fly over the White House, Johnson said, and came back the second time to turn himself in for having done so.

Warner said there is a contingency plan for dealing with an air attack on the White House, but refused to discuss its details or to say whether it was activated yesterday morning.

He also refused to discuss the size of the White House

See COPTER, A2, Col. 5 (OVER)



Stolen military helicopter surrounded by guards on the White House lawn provides an unexpected tourist attraction.

By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post



By Jim Williams for The Washington Post

Robert Kenneth Preston, smiling, is escorted from police station after capture.



United Press International

Officials look over helicopter after its landing at White House. Holes from bullets fired by guards can be seen.

CHASE, From A1

he went back down on the deck," said Sewell, describing the low 50 to 74-foot altitude the stolen aircraft flew at to try to avoid detection by radar or other aircraft.

The Huey began to fly south again, skimming over the Baltimore - Washington Parkway, nimbly avoiding occasional high-tension wires. "He was a hell of a pilot," said Sewell, who followed a half-mile back and 700 feet up to serve as a beacon for air controllers who could not fix on the low-flying runaway.

Both troopers carried loaded revolvers they could fire out the aircraft window, "but if you hit him," Sewell said, "the chopper would be uncontrolled. You wouldn't know what it was going to do."

At the South Capitol Street bridge, the runaway turned his lights back on, "as if to say, 'Here I am,'" Sewell said. Then, as the

Huey climbed up near the top of the Washington Monument, Sewell saw something that all helicopter pilots fear—the red light on the Huey's nose diving directly at him.

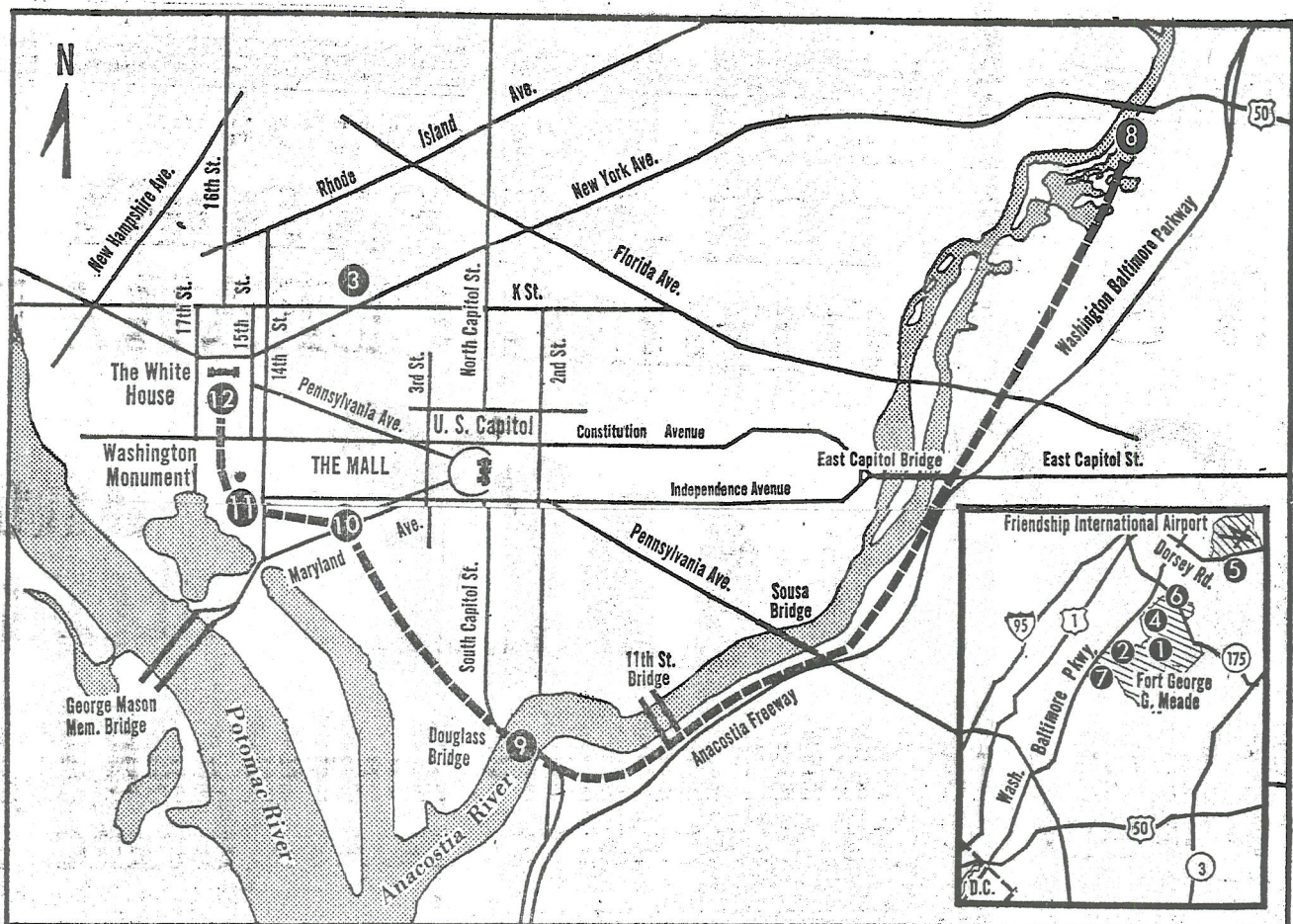
Sewell said he had resolved to put his craft be-

tween the White House and the runaway if need be—"the Bell Jetranger wasn't worth any amount compared to the President of the United States"—but up there he could and did swerve out of the way.

The runaway was now moving toward the darkened executive mansion. "I though," Saffron recalled, "where is everybody? Why are just we here?"

As if in answer, floodlights flashed on, something

hit the Huey, the aircraft thumped to the ground, and from every corner of the grounds uniformed figures rushed out, Saffron recalled, "like you threw a torch into an ant colony."



By Ken Burgess—The Washington Post