

GI's Plea in White House Copter Caper

Ft. Meade, Md.

A young Army private pleaded guilty yesterday to charges arising from a helicopter joy ride that ended on the White House lawn.

"I just wanted to get some attention . . . I just had the urge to fly," 20-year-old Robert K. Preston told the military judge as he related how he stole an unguarded Army helicopter from this military post and flew to nearby Washington.

He buzzed the Washington Monument and the Capitol and landed twice on the White House lawn before surrendering before dawn last February 17.

President Nixon was in Florida at the time.

Preston, of Panama City, Fla., said he was angry at the Army for flunking him out of flight school and depressed over troubles he was having with a girl friend.

His guilty plea to charges of wrongful appropriation and breach of the peace came as part of a pre-trial agreement worked out between the defense and the prosecution.

It carries a maximum sentence of two and one-half years hard labor plus a dishonorable discharge. A military jury now must decide his punishment.

The first witness called by the defense was Secret Service agent Donald J. Lawton, shortly after his surrender. Lawton said Preston seemed despondent, as if "life had just walked over him."

Lawton said Preston told him he was going to kill himself by crashing his helicopter into the White House but that he "chickened out."

The agent also said that White House security procedures have been changed as a result of Preston's escape.

Preston told the military judge, Colonel Kenneth Howard, that he was returning to his barracks from a local dance hall when he was overcome by the urge to fly. Preston said he drove to the

Ft. Meade air base, "just walked out, prepared the aircraft for flight, started it and took off."

"I was really surprised," Preston said. "I thought there would be somebody out there."

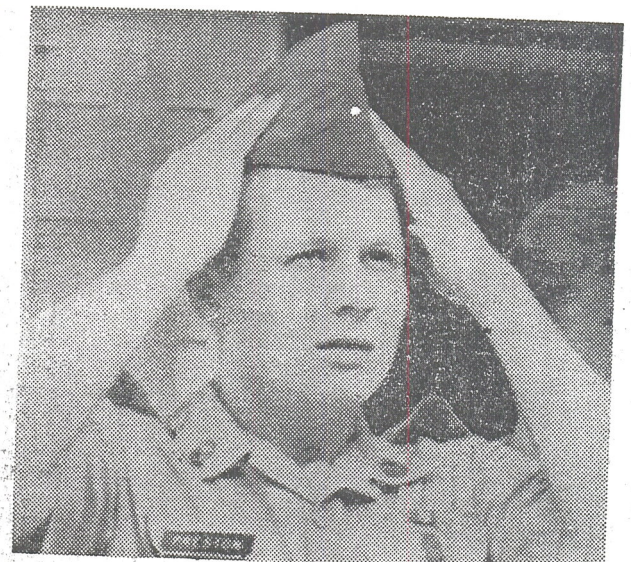
Once airborne Preston said he followed a turnpike about 15 miles south to the District of Columbia where he spotted the Washington Monument. He said he was drawn to the floodlit monument "like a moth to a candle flame."

After buzzing the monument, he flew to the Capitol where he found "a nice statue on the top" of the dome, Preston told the judge. Then he flew down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House which he identified as "a big black spot" in the middle of a sea of lights, Preston said.

Preston testified that when he landed on the south lawn "everybody just stood around looking." After 10 minutes, Preston said, he decided that "if they weren't going to do nothing I was going to leave."

He flew to a suburban doughnut shop where he planned to give himself up but could not find a place to land, Preston said.

Followed by aircraft above



AP Wirephoto

and police cars below, Preston said he decided to return to the White House and give himself up. As he came in for his second landing on the south lawn, Preston said, he was fired upon by White House guards but managed to set down safely.

Associated Press

PRIVATE ROBERT K. PRESTON
'I just had the urge to fly'