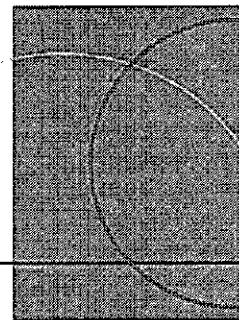


Helicopter Intrusion/Escape: Colorado Department of Corrections



On Friday morning, August 18, 1989, at about 9:15 a.m., a helicopter entered the main compound of the Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility (AVCF) near Ordway, Colorado, and landed on the ballfield of the prison's main recreation yard. Within seconds, two inmates entered the helicopter and it rose, turned, and flew out of sight. At approximately 6 p.m. that day, the two escapees and their two female accomplices were located driving in a rental truck toward Holdrege, Nebraska. A shootout with police ensued, after which both inmates and both women were taken into custody in Holdrege.

The AVCF is a modern, medium-security state prison that opened in 1987. At the time of the escape, AVCF staff had become used to seeing helicopters from two television station news operations flying near the facility, and both of those helicopters were similar in appearance to the jet helicopter that made the intrusion on August 18.

The helicopter appeared to have circled the facility prior to crossing the perimeter and entering the compound. Officers on the perimeter reported the helicopter as it crossed the perimeter of the facility but not before that. At the time the helicopter entered the compound, there were 15 to 20 inmates on the main recreation yard and five staff members outside the buildings

supervising inmates. When the helicopter landed on the ballfield, two inmates immediately entered the helicopter and two staff members ran toward it, getting quite close before it took off. The staff members who approached the helicopter were able to give descriptions of the male pilot and two female passengers.

The prison superintendent was in his office overlooking the recreation yard when the initial radio report indicated the helicopter entry to the facility. The superintendent gave immediate orders that if the helicopter lifted off, the perimeter officers were to stop or disable it with lethal force. He repeated this order two more times during the next minute, but no shots were fired. No armed posts at AVCF have sightlines or fields of fire to the ballfield. Given the helicopter's path of ascent and departure from the area, one of the two towers at best had a partially obstructed view. The position of the armed perimeter vehicle was also such that it was not able to fire at the helicopter, in part because of obstruction from the fence fabric. The other tower officer should have had a clear view of the helicopter once it rose over the ballfield and should have been able to fire several shots but did not. He was suspended pending investigation and subsequently discharged.

Staff estimates of the total time the helicopter took from initially crossing the perimeter of the facility to taking off from the ballfield and beginning to leave the institution ranged from 15 to 30 seconds. Estimates placed the helicopter's



[REDACTED]

speed when taking off from the ballfield and climbing at 40 to 50 miles per hour, accelerating to 90 to 100 miles per hour as it turned to leave the compound. Staff witnesses reported that it was also clear that the two inmates were waiting for the helicopter when it arrived, perhaps within 10 feet of the spot where it touched down. There were reports that the inmates wore distinctive bright clothing that could serve as a signal or beacon for the helicopter.

The facility called an emergency count within 5 minutes of the escape, at 9:20 a.m. The emergency count was completed at 9:32 a.m., and the identities of the two escapees were confirmed. Department headquarters and the Colorado State Patrol were both notified of the escape at approximately 9:30 a.m. The prison remained locked down (except for inmate kitchen help) until lunch hour. The incident was entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) system and state warrants were issued quickly. "Wanted" fliers with pictures were also disseminated.

The facility duty officer left the facility to participate in the search, although the facility's procedures in the event of an escape call for the duty officer to remain at the prison and complete a specific checklist of responsibilities. Most of these responsibilities were handled by the shift commander. Both prison investigators also left the facility to participate in the search, hampering the development of intelligence about the escapees. For example, the escapees' cell was secured immediately after the emergency count, but the cell was not searched until the investigators returned.

The search itself quickly became problematic. AVCF procedures called for the use of structured search teams for any escape. In this instance, the structured search teams were not used, perhaps because of the unusual nature of the escape. Six vehicles and 14 staff left the

institution on the search, and only half of those staff were designated search team members. The primary search commander and all three designated relief commanders joined this initial search. If the search had continued hours longer, no relief commander would have been available. Once the search vehicles were more than 30 miles north of Ordway, they lost all radio communication with the facility control center. Car-to-car communication was also difficult to impossible. Outside law enforcement agencies were able to provide some information to the institution about the status of the search vehicles, but the search commander had no information about vehicle positions or directions. Two search vehicles were participating without the knowledge of the search commander.

The AVCF armory officer was not in the facility at the time of the escape, so the shift commander assigned an alternate. It was subsequently discovered that several weapons had been taken from the armory without an armory officer present for proper weapons assignment and documentation.

Within 45 minutes of the escape, the facility discussed the situation with the Air National Guard commander, who immediately made helicopter training flights available to help with the search. The airborne surveillance from the Air National Guard and the Colorado State Patrol was extremely helpful with the search effort and with the coordination of communications.

At 9:46 that morning (31 minutes after the escape), a small local airport aviation company reported that a blue and white helicopter with two women and a male pilot aboard had landed at 8:40 a.m. and refueled. At 10:09 a.m., a county sheriff's office radioed that the helicopter was spotted on the ground some 35 miles north of the prison and that suspects had been seen running to a yellow rental truck. A press release was authorized at 10:24 a.m. At 10:40 a.m., the

helicopter and pilot were located near an abandoned farmhouse. A National Guard helicopter was dispatched and, 10 minutes later, the prison received information that the pilot had been tied up but was unharmed and that the two women and two inmates were armed. The prison determined that an older Volkswagen was registered to one of the inmates' wives, and at 11:40 a.m., the superintendent issued an all points bulletin for this car and its license plate. Prison officials speculated that the Volkswagen might be inside the rental van.

By midafternoon, the escape response at the prison was focusing on the planning of the escape and attempting to confirm the identities of the two women involved. At 2:30 p.m., the superintendent interviewed the two officers who had gotten within a few feet of the helicopter before it lifted off. One of them confirmed the identity of one of the female passengers as the wife of one of the two inmates. He recognized her from her visits to the prison.

As is often the case in such situations, there were a number of rumors, false starts, and misunderstandings. The sheriff of Arapahoe County, Colorado, had suggested at 10:30 a.m. that a female former deputy sheriff who had been fired from Arapahoe County for becoming involved with a jail inmate there might have been involved in the escape. The intelligence operation had been focusing on whether this former deputy sheriff might be the wife of one of the two inmates or might be involved in the escape using an alias. At 4:30 p.m. the sheriff's office advised the prison that the female ex-deputy sheriff and her attorney had appeared there to verify she was not involved in the escape.

When the police found the helicopter pilot, he was untied and claimed he had been able to cut the ropes using a pocket knife. The police initially were very skeptical. They reported to the prison that the pilot was likely a collaborator in

the escape, and brought him to the jail as a suspect. It was not until mid- to late afternoon that it became clear that the pilot was an innocent victim.

By late afternoon, information about the chartering of the helicopter had become more clear. The helicopter had been chartered out of the Centennial Airport, but the two women who chartered it were actually picked up at the nearby La Junta Airport. They got on the helicopter carrying large bags and presumably took weapons from the bags once the helicopter was in flight. Because Centennial and La Junta are not commercial airports, no metal detectors or other commercial aviation security precautions are in place. It was also learned that the charter originally had been arranged for 2 days earlier but had been canceled by the helicopter company because of bad weather. The charter company operator remembered that one of the women had become irate when the earlier charter was canceled and that both were upset when the Friday morning charter was running 10 to 15 minutes late.

At 6:15 p.m., one of the department administrators was advised that the evening television news had just reported a shootout in Holdrege, Nebraska. Calls to the Holdrege Police Department were initially frustrating, as the Colorado Department of Corrections (DOC) was advised that the Nebraska State Patrol was handling all information about the incident. The Colorado DOC was unable to get an immediate status report. By 7:30 that evening, the DOC had detailed information from the Nebraska State Patrol and had verified that both inmates and their female accomplices were in police custody.

The day after the escape, the prison confirmed information that one of the two women involved had been a criminal justice student at a Colorado college and had done volunteer work at another

