

RANGERS FROM FORT LEWIS INJURED IN COPTER CRASH

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A sophisticated Air Force helicopter carrying Army Rangers on a low- altitude training mission crashed and burned on the Nellis Air Force Base range before dawn yesterday, injuring 21 people.

Military officials said the Air Force pilot of the helicopter was missing and presumed dead.

Seven of those on board were hospitalized, including four Army Rangers from Fort Lewis being treated for broken bones.

The Fort Lewis Rangers, who were not immediately identified, are members of the 2nd Battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment who have been assigned to Fort Lewis from their headquarters at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Fourteen of the 21 who were injured were treated and released from the base hospital.

The 38-passenger HH-53H Super Jolly helicopter, stationed at Hurlburt Field, Pensacola, Fla., crashed before dawn while involved in a joint Air Force-Army training mission. The aircraft carries sophisticated navigation gear and infrared radar and is designed to fly in any weather, at night, close to the ground.

The craft is considered the Air Force's primary long-range combat rescue, recovery and special operations helicopter, Nellis spokesman Lt. Col. John Kuminecz said.

It is the third crash involving the HH-53H, leaving the Air Force with only seven of the exotic craft.

One of the helicopters crashed Oct. 17, 1984, at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, killing six crew members. A second crashed near Pope Air Force Base, N.C., in November 1984. No one was killed in that crash.

Kuminecz declined to give details of where yesterday's crash occurred.

He declined to say whether the nighttime operation was secret in nature and would not disclose whether the craft crashed in mountain or desert terrain.

The Nellis AFB Bombing and Gunnery Range covers 3 million acres ranging from arid desert to mountainous areas.

The range includes Area 51, a top-secret government test area. Personnel used in the aborted rescue attempt of the Iranian hostages six years ago reportedly trained in the desert area.