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SHOPLIFTING

Sticky fingers risk fines, loss of privileges and jail

Story by Rona S. Hirsch, staff writer

Illustrations by Ricky Melton

Sitting in front of a bank of monitors inside a quiet room at Fort Meade's Post Exchange, Corisha Halfore studies the images displayed on each screen.

Using state of the art equipment, Halfore zooms in on a teen picking up a CD and can follow him through the store with the sophisticated surveillance system.

Halfore will later step out on the floor to check out suspicious shoppers. Dressed in jeans, Halfore easily blends seamlessly with customers who are unaware that the young woman is looking over their shoulder. But before Halfore stakes out shoppers with sticky fingers, she swaps stories with her colleagues about the shoplifting schemes they have thwarted over the years.

That includes the teen that put \$1,300 worth of electronic games into a shopping cart that he pushed out of the PX, and the teen that hid video games in a suitcase, paid for the luggage, then wheeled the suitcase out the door.

There is the retired major's wife who switched price tags, the woman who walked out in a new pair of shoes after hiding her old pair among the linens; and the military spouse who hid merchandise under the seat in her baby's stroller.

The security personnel admit they are dumfounded by the brazen offenses, particularly when committed by service members. "I am surprised that active duty steals," said James Fitts, a former PX detective. "I want to say, 'What are you doing? You just wrecked your career for a \$50 game.'"

Despite the risks, shoplifting at the PX can be as pervasive as at any department store.

But whether offenders are service members, military retirees or civilians, they face stiff penalties that can include fines, loss of privileges and jail time.

"Shoplifting is a part of business unfortunately, and it's something we deal with," said Betty O'Brien, general manager of the Fort Meade Consolidated Exchange who has managed at least 10 post exchanges over the past 30 years. "When a shoplifter steals it's not just from a business, it's from fellow Soldiers and retirees. Profits go to Morale, Recreation and Welfare on post. So, they're hurting the Soldiers and family members. But unfortunately, I don't see a decline."

For the fiscal year of February, 2003 through Jan. 31, 2004, 110 shoplifters at Fort Meade were caught with merchandise valued at about \$7,890. Employee thefts were valued at an additional \$1,819.

"That's a drop in the bucket," said Theresa McDonald, loss prevention manager for Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland and Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. McDonald, who temporarily, will be loss prevention manager for Fort Meade, Aberdeen Proving Ground and Fort Meade, said that figure does not include the \$14,289 in

merchandise that thieves got away with it. Nor do the figures take into account other costs.

"For every dollar we lose, multiply that by \$20—that is how much of a loss we're talking about," McDonald said. "For every dollar lost, that we didn't catch, we would have to sell \$20 just to break even if you add in other costs for the item such as shipping."

The price for shoplifting extends beyond the value of the merchandise. According to an Army & Air Force Exchange Service newsletter, "Military exchanges spend millions of dollars each year to foil shoplifters, including measures to deter and detect thefts."

To help recover losses and administrative costs directly relating to shoplifting, offenders must pay a flat fee of \$200 to AAFES under the Civil Recovery Act, passed in 2002.

The PX at Fort Meade has the most elaborate surveillance system in the region because it is the largest. "Rest assured we are there to make sure shoplifting is prevented," O'Brien said. "Requirements for security are based on the layout of the facility."

At each installation, said O'Brien, there are "targeted hotspots", merchandise that is pilfered more frequently, such as cosmetics, CDs and small electronics. "Hot spots are watched more closely," O'Brien said.

While teens generally commit most of the offenses, shoplifting is a common occurrence even without juveniles on post, said McDonald.

"At Andrews, we have a lot of retirees and active-duty spouses," she said. "We bust people and they have a lot of money on them. They think it's no big deal. They don't realize these are federal installations. It's not like going to a 7-Eleven and stealing a candy bar."

The most common offense at AAFES establishments, said McDonald, is price ticket switching. "They think, 'I'm paying something.' But that is out and out theft," she said. Shoplifting on post occurs mostly at the PX, said Sgt. 1st Class Charles Gloden of the Provost Marshal's Office at the Directorate of Public Safety here.

According to PMO statistics on shoplifting during the last quarter: "For ages 8-55, 20 people were picked up—dependents, military and civilians. About 90 percent were male."

This year, the majority of stolen items have been electronics such as CD and DVD players; CDs, DVDs and videogames; candy; perfume; costume jewelry; and shoes. Fort Meade Post Exchange's safety and security assistance personnel guard the PX and PXtra, Shoppettes, Military Clothes Sales, Car Care Center and Burger King.

But don't look for hulking security guards in uniform. The security personnel dress like average shoppers. "We operate incognito," said Mike, a PX detective who requested anonymity. "We like to blend in with the customers."

Shoplifting typically spikes in the summer and from Thanksgiving through New Year's, particularly at Christmas time. "There are a lot of people here shopping and they think they can't be seen," Halfore said.

Dozens of cameras cover every area of the PX, inside and outside. Security personnel also walk the floors, checking out suspicious shoppers. Civilians, Sailors and Soldiers, retirees, active-duty officers and military spouses have all been caught red-handed. "What amazes me is that high-ranking people steal," Halfore said.

A shoplifter is not stopped by security personnel until the offender walks out of the PX with the unpaid and often concealed merchandise, past cashiers and into the lobby.

"They have to pass that last chance, that point of no return," said Capt. Marci Thomas, one of four criminal prosecutors at Fort Meade's Staff Judge Advocate office.

The white tiles in the PX leading to the lobby, said Mike, is the "line of demarcation", not the parking lot.

Security personnel will stop the suspect and "invite" the suspect back to the office. "We won't stop anyone if we are unsure," Mike said.

If they observe one shopper stealing, while another acts as lookout or is there to block the shoplifter from view, security will detain each of them. One will be cited with shoplifting and the others will be charged as accomplices.

Once security personnel spot shoplifting, they contact the Military Police "to review evidence and determine if they were shoplifting," O'Brien said.

Juveniles, active-duty personnel and civilians are all handled differently. All are detained at the exchange and then taken to the DPS. "The security personnel have no authority to arrest them," Gloden said. "The MPs do all the searching."

The MPs will review the surveillance tape with the security team. "Security guards play the biggest role," Gloden said. "They do an awesome job. They filter everything out. They don't waste our time; they don't call us down here for nothing."

If the shoplifter is younger than age 7, security personnel will stop the child, tell the parent about the offense and let them pay for the item. But if the shoplifter is age 7 and older, security personnel will call the MPs. "Parents are allowed to look at the tape with the MPs," Mike said. "They say, 'My kid didn't do anything. I'm going to sue.' Then they see the tape and say, 'Oh, my God. I'm sorry.'"

Reactions to being stopped vary. "Most of the kids cry," Halfore said.

But a military retiree who stole \$200 worth of video games ran Fitts down with his car as he escaped. "He pushed me away, ran ahead, got in his car and ran me over," Fitts said. In addition to the \$200 civil recovery fee, shoplifters also must pay for the stolen merchandise if it cannot be returned or must be sold at a discount. "A girl ate a 99-cent honey bun and we charged her \$200.99," Halfore said.

The PX will register the value of the item. "So we know the value for the court hearing, whether it's a \$3 earring or \$47 video game," Thomas said.

Once stopped, offenders often offer to pay for the stolen item. "They will pull out a wallet and hundreds of dollars, and say, 'I'll pay for it now.' But we can't do that," Gloden said.

After the arrest, shoplifters lose their identification card and will be issued a new card with restrictions. The offender will be barred from the PX for six months. "Repeat offenders can be banned from the post," Gloden said.

The MPs will transport suspects age 18 and older to the DPS where they will be processed. Shoplifters may be taken away in handcuffs. "It's embarrassing, especially if it's an employee," Mike said.

But handcuffing is at the discretion of the arresting officer. "They look at the age, if the suspect is combative," Gloden said.

But a juvenile, age 17 and under, generally will not be handcuffed. "Juveniles have a lot more rights than adults," Gloden said.

The MPs will contact the juvenile's parent or legal guardian to transport the child to the DPS. If the MP does drive the juvenile, it must be in an unmarked vehicle.

If the offender is in the military, the DPS will notify the service member's chain of command and record the arrest in the police blotter, which is reviewed daily by the installation commander. The company commander also will be notified if a military family member is arrested. "The Soldier sponsors the family," Gloden said.

If a group of juveniles are detained, each will be interviewed separately. "We deal with one at a time," Gloden said. "So there is no contact with each other until they are released."

A juvenile is cited under 18 United States Code, Section 641. Juveniles must go before the Juvenile Misconduct Review Board on post.

The case also will go on the MP blotter. "That is because the child's parent, a Soldier, is the sponsor of the child," said Jennifer Gazdowicz, a SJA paralegal and a former installation MP. "So anything that a child does affects the whole family. I have seen families forced to move off the installation because of the child."

The DPS may not begin any paperwork on the juvenile offender unless the parent or legal guardian is present. Social work services on post are also notified.

Civilians are fingerprinted, but juveniles and service members are not.

Civilians are also cited under 18 United States Code, Section 641. It's usually a misdemeanor, less than \$1,000, while a felony is more than \$1,000. The U.S. Code is a federal offense.

Civilian shoplifters are prosecuted by one of four criminal prosecutors at the Judge Advocate General Corps, who also serve as special assistant U.S. attorneys.

"So if an individual goes to the PX and decides to bypass the cash register, we will prosecute them under federal code because Fort Meade is under federal jurisdiction," Thomas said.

After the civilian is released from the DPS, the individual must appear before a judge at the Federal District Court in Baltimore. All SJA trial counsel here prosecute these cases as special assistant U.S. attorneys.

Punishment may include a maximum \$100,000 fine; a \$25 special assessment required for court fees; and/or one year in prison. The judge determines the sentence.

The case either goes to trial or into plea negotiation. If the case goes to trial, the prosecution may play the surveillance tapes in the courtroom. "The videotapes are very convincing," Thomas said. "They can zoom in and really get a picture of somebody's eyes shifting from left to right, looking to see if anyone is watching. You can almost see how calculated it was."

Military personnel are cited under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Article 121, larceny and wrongful appropriation, then released to their chain of command. The commander will speak with JAG about punishment. "Since we deal with these cases a lot, we can gauge what punishments are appropriate," Thomas said. "They face a whole buffet of possibilities."

Depending on the offense, the company commander can send it up to the next command level to impose a greater level of punishment.

That may include reduction in rank, correctional custody within the unit, limiting privileges, forfeiture of pay, extra duty, a reprimand that is placed in the service member's file, loss of security clearance and recommendation of court martial, which can result in discharge.

But regardless of the shoplifter's age or status, said Gazdowicz, they all seem to think alike.

"They just don't think that anybody is watching," she said. "Everybody thinks they can get away with it."