

BROADENING HORIZON



VISION BRINGS AERIAL CAPABILITY TO SMALL AGENCY

By Robert S. Hauck, Chief, Tomball (TX) Police Department

On my first day as a probationary police officer, my department was dispatched to a business alarm. As my training officer and I approached the location, he said, “Get us an airship.”

Filled with excitement and a bit of trepidation, I keyed the radio.

“13A41, requesting an airship for a roof check,” I said, sure the pilot and tactical flight officer could tell I was a rookie. But it didn’t matter; I was a fellow officer requesting their assistance.

At first, I could only hear the sound of the Bell JetRanger (Air 12) as it neared, and then suddenly, there it was, spotlight ablaze. The aircrew checked the roof and surrounding area, asked us if they could be of any further assistance and flew off to patrol the City of Angels.

AIR SUPPORT STICKS WITH YOU

Twenty-three years later, I still remember walking back to our black and white,

awestruck by the fact that all I did was ask for assistance and air support was there. This became such a commonplace event during my next 20 years with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) that I began to take for granted the safety benefits air support had provided me throughout my career. Whether engaged in a vehicle pursuit, crowd control mission, suspect perimeter, damage assessment, aerial surveillance or tactical operation, the LAPD Air Support Division had always been there for ground officers and the citizens of Los Angeles.

In June 2008, I retired from LAPD and moved to Texas, where I currently serve as chief of police in the City of Tomball, a middle-class, rural suburban community situated in northwest Harris County near Houston. When I joined the Tomball Police Department, it was no surprise we didn’t have an air support unit. Historically, airborne law enforcement operations have been limited to major cities, due primarily

to costs—a fully outfitted law enforcement helicopter costs nearly \$3 million to acquire and another \$500-\$700 an hour to operate.

This has been the traditional law enforcement aviation model for many years, and communities across the country have been deprived the benefits of increased officer/public safety because the law enforcement community has failed to search aggressively for safe, low-cost and practical alternatives. Some smaller agencies have been able to make do thanks to the gracious efforts of large agency partners (in my case, the Harris County Sheriff’s Office, Texas Department of Public Safety, Houston Police Department and Customs and Border Protection) who are often willing to help. However, this is typically limited to critical incidents and unusual occurrences.

Due to my experiences in a large department, I maintained the traditionalist view and never believed a unit of 60

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employees like Tomball's could operate an aviation unit. However, I knew what my officers and community members were missing. I also knew the naysayers who believed a small department like ours didn't need air support were wrong.

CHANGING THE CULTURE

My frustration lingered until May 2010, when I participated in a conference that included a presentation on the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) Law Enforcement Aviation Technology Program. During the presentation, I learned about DOJ's research and evaluation of light sport aircraft, as well as the efficacy, affordability and frequency of utilization of various aviation technologies by smaller and predominately rural law enforcement agencies across the U.S.

At that moment, I realized the possibility existed to bring the benefits of airborne law enforcement to the citizens of Tomball, and I was committed to giving them what

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they deserved, as long as it could be done in a safe, low-cost and practical manner.

But where would I begin? The answer came during my initial discussions with

Mike O'Shea, program manager of the Aviation Technology Program. I described my experiences in both Los Angeles and Tomball and talked about my wholehearted support for airborne law enforcement as a consumer of aviation resources. He expounded on the mission, operations and support efforts of the Aviation Technology Program and encouraged me to make a proposal to the Technical Working Group (steering committee). In June 2010, I attended a working group meeting, and we were accepted into the program.

The city council authorized funding for Tomball's first year aircraft acquisition and operations. I selected a sergeant to be the officer-in-charge of our program, and we began working with DOJ staff to identify the most promising aircraft for purchase and evaluation. The department's staff had already begun research and testing on the various gyroplane platforms and, based on their findings and an outstanding safety record, low-cost (acquisition and opera-



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tion) and practical operations capabilities/performance, we chose the German-built Auto-Gyro MTOSport.

POWER IN NUMBERS

I was unwilling to purchase the aircraft until I was fully convinced Tomball had all logistical, personnel, administration, safety and operational issues addressed. With the realization that properly developing and maintaining an aviation unit is a full-time job and we were planning to do it on a part-time basis, I knew I needed help.

I turned to our partners at the Harris County (TX) Sheriff’s Office (HCSO), the third largest sheriff’s department in the nation, which operates a full-time aviation unit out of David Wayne Hooks Airport (two miles outside Tomball).

The HCSO Air Support Unit has always been a great partner for Tomball, but the department is part of the traditional airborne law enforcement establishment, and its officers were skeptical when I broached the subject of starting a small aerial unit.

To overcome the skepticism, I spent several months convincing the officers it could work, including taking a trip with the HCSO chief pilot (who has thousands of hours in jets, helicopters and fixed-wing

aircraft) to visit the DOJ facility in Maryland so he could meet with the department’s aviation experts, inspect an MTOSport, and fly it. He was pleased with the engineering and craftsmanship of the aircraft, comfortable with the information he received from the DOJ experts and impressed by the flight characteristics and performance.

CLOSING THE DEAL

With my comfort-level where it needed to be and a memorandum of agreement with HCSO in place, we purchased our

MTOSport and took delivery on March 15, 2011. The following week, our two pilot designees and I received a week of flight training with a factory pilot, and the HCSO chief pilot received his gyro-certified flight instructor certification.

On March 25, we flew day one of a two-day mission providing air support during a large community festival that brings thousands of people into our community. The situational awareness benefits provided to the unified command team were exceptional, and I am convinced that much of the credit for no burglaries from motor vehicles can be attributed to the aerial patrol platform.

Since taking delivery of the aircraft, we have focused primarily on flight and tactical flight officer training with HCSO, the Houston Police Department and Texas DPS. We have performed many daytime, visual flight rule mission types with great success, including:

- mutual aid for critical infrastructure patrols (e.g. Houston Ship Channel);
- community event patrol (e.g. MS 150 bike ride, 5K run, car shows);
- tactical incident support (e.g. robbery in progress, vehicle stops);
- aggressive driver patrols;
- crime prevention patrols;
- aerial photography.

We are still in the infancy stages of our aviation program, and the overall integration of light sport aircraft into law enforcement operations is also relatively new. Therefore, many unanswered questions remain. However, I believe that with the right people working together, using the right aircraft and conducting the right missions, we have an opportunity to change the face of law enforcement.



The neighboring Harris County Sheriff’s Office has been an invaluable partner in providing the necessary support to help the City of Tomball start its new aviation program in a thoughtful, comprehensive and safe manner.