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The Bottom Line

An Air Bear White Paper

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Statistical Facts within Airborne Law Enforcement

I love a good old fashioned statistical briefing about a police department's big picture. Recently, I had the pleasure of participating in a briefing provided by a progressive Chief of Police who was exploring the idea of starting an aviation special unit. I was invited to attend and provide input gained from my 30 years of aviation law enforcement experience. His power point presentation was outstanding, full of numbers, charts, and detailed statistics supporting the investment of purchasing a used turbine helicopter.

A statistic the Chief focused on was response time to major crimes in progress. His department had a four minute average response time to priority one calls, which was half the national average of 8 minutes for cities similar in population and number of sworn officers.

Based on his performance charts showing time-distance-speed calculations of the proposed helicopter, the numbers depicted a response time of two minutes. This was calculated from the center of the city to the regions generating the highest number of priority one calls. In his view, by cutting response time in half, the officers in the helicopter would be a force multiplier, thus increasing arrest of burglary and armed robbery suspects.

Additionally, he had statistics of accidents during police pursuits and demonstrated the reduction of potential liability if the air unit safely followed suspects from above, while directing the pursuit and capture. The Chief was definitely on the right track, as ending the need for ground units to chase suspects at high speed by relying on air units has proven to dramatically reduce the number of officer involved accidents.

I completely agreed with the Chief's theory on the value of a timely response. In my experience, I can say without reservation that how quickly you can get eyes on a crime in progress determines the value of information you bring into the cockpit and forward down to responding units.

While statistical facts are extremely valuable, I had to take exception to the conclusions drawn to effectively establish the new air unit. The Chief was spot on in regard to what a police helicopter could do to reduce response time to major calls and truly become a force multiplier for the department.

That is-if it's flying.



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At issue was the bottom line budget for direct operating costs for rotor wing operations. With his plan of staffing which worked out to 384 shifts per year, he would run out of budgeted flight time (300 hours) in 10 months if they flew **one hour** per shift. Therefore, the rotor wing asset would be relegated to a reactive response (“fireman response”) role, responding from the ramp instead of being airborne where it needs to be operating to be effective.

Statistics have proven that most law enforcement engagements are over in three minutes or less. The air asset must be in the air, on patrol and ready to respond to be a true asset to the department. The paradigm shift is clearly underway moving towards fielding fixed wing aircraft with highly capable sensors. These operate beyond visual and audible range and due to their dramatically lower costs of operation and maintainability, can remain on station hours longer. Helicopters definitely have their place and will remain staples of agency air units well into the future, however the tectonic shift towards fixed wing assets for patrol is clearly underway, driven by the exciting advancements in high resolution sensor equipment and the low operating costs associated with single engine aircraft.

Proof of this concept has been continually demonstrated by my old unit, Air-21 in the Sacramento, CA. area. Shortly after 9/11, military grade sensors became available to local air agencies. Fielding a high resolution camera, we developed the tactics which resulted in Air-21 being the most prolific air asset in the United States in regard to the number of felony arrest assists provided on an annual basis. Air-21 and the tactics developed have proven so successful that its arrest statistics are larger than many other agencies which operate entire fleets of rotor wing assets.

Air-21 has more assists per year by itself than a large metropolitan helicopter fleet does in its entirety (as reported in Air Beat recently). *Let's let that sink in for a moment.*

That, is a paradigm shift of tectonic proportions. Over the coming years, budget constraints and requirements for effective response will require more fixed wing assets be employed and rotor wing assets used for what they are most effective for. The math is very simple. If you can operate a fixed wing asset for 25% of the hourly cost (or less) than a rotor wing asset, for the same budget you can achieve four times the flight time. Let's let that sink in a moment as well.

Add to that the fact that high flying aircraft do not announce themselves by typically operating beyond visual and audible range, fixed wing operations have proven to be cost effective crime fighting force multipliers.



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With ever increasing pressure on operating budgets, air units will have to embrace more cost effective and less expensive technology to maintain or increase air support readiness. My point is most of the airborne law enforcement community is responding to a vast majority of priority calls from the airport they are based at. By the time they can get airborne and to the call, the engagement is typically over or the suspect is already well outside the established perimeter.

Fixed wing assets, in the air, on patrol are the wave of the future to provide effective support within a few moments notice. It's a simple task to slew the sensor to a specific location or address, which can be miles away. The air asset can be providing support within seconds of receiving the call. Airborne flight crew can indeed quickly respond to crimes in progress and pursuits, often arriving minutes before ground support. Obviously, operating from a hangar does not provide many of the advantages of being in the air, on patrol and ready to respond.

Agencies that claim a two-minute response time from a crew up on active patrol, also state that 15 minutes is required to arrive from a ground response. Agencies that only operate aircraft on a case-by-case basis can have an hour or more response time, and usually focus on search and rescue missions. The 2007 statistical special report from the Bureau of Justice (the last published) demonstrated this in absolute numbers of the 201 agencies then operating air support programs.

Pro-active air support requires the aircraft to be in the air. Fact-agencies that focus on airborne patrol have the highest arrest statistics. With the modern technologies available to airborne law enforcement, airplanes using advanced Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) equipment have proven to be a viable option to providing pro-active air support.

"One in custody – **THANKS AIR**" is a common transmission received by Air-21. The capability to bring the level of support Air-21 provides into your unit is available today by fielding the right platform, integrated with the right mission equipment and most importantly utilizing proven tactics which are being successfully employed, day in and day out.

That is our mission at Air Bear. Let us assist you in making your airborne units a valuable part of your smart policing initiatives.

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