



TFO INTELLIGENCE:

CONTROLLING TACTICAL OPERATIONS FROM ABOVE

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I recently delivered a new airplane to an Air Bear Tactical client that provides intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) training to the U.S. military. We outfitted the single engine turbine as a flying classroom, allowing students an inflight dual experience with a powerful 15-inch class sensor system.

As we proceeded through the acceptance procedures, I couldn't help thinking about how I got started in this business more than 35 years ago. We've come a long way, with modernized equipment allowing rapid improvement in airborne tactics and proving airborne law enforcement's worth.

Understanding TFOs

I started out, like many in the industry, as a tactical flight officer. The term used at the



time was “observer” or a host of less-flattering monikers like “baggage with a badge.” My agency was the California Highway Patrol (CHP), which operates a large fleet of helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft.

I was assigned as a fixed-wing pilot and also operated as a TFO in CHP’s helicopter program when needed. Over the next 24 years and 14,000 hours in the air, I witnessed the dramatic transformation of the role the TFO played.

Technology ultimately changes all professions, and in airborne law enforcement it has vastly improved our ability to gather tactical information from above and disseminate it in real time. The key to success in today’s air surveillance world is a well-trained TFO, equipped with the proper tools to see and react.

I have been fortunate to have worked with some of the best TFOs in the business. Good TFOs exhibit a variety of common traits, stemming from similar skillsets and backgrounds, which should be considered when recruiting new talent.

Following are a few takeaways from my career working as a TFO and observing some of the best in the business.

- **Aviation experience is helpful but not a requirement.** TFOs must be good with technology, showing computer, communications and electronics savvy. They must be experienced and specialized assignments, such as SWAT and K-9, should be given high priority due to their excellent officer safety training. Look for those who have gone the extra mile to make a difference; that’s typically the type of person who will excel as a TFO.
- **Use a probationary period to evaluate how the officers learn.** TFOs must exhibit situational awareness, which is another way of saying they must see the big picture. Good

TFOs know their city well from years of ground patrol. Good navigation skills and the ability to interpret geographical points from the air and relate them to the pilot and ground units are must-have traits.

- **Multi-tasking is a basic tenet.** With modern ISR technology, the TFO has a more complex job operating the camera than the pilot flying the platform to which it’s attached. TFOs need excellent communication skills, as they must provide direction to the pilot and ground units simultaneously. The art of bringing “crime into the cockpit” (controlling, containing and capturing a suspect) is largely up to the TFO.
- **Train for and deploy tactics proven to bring results.** Focus on providing at least the same level of training to a new TFO that you would provide a new pilot. The overall effectiveness of your program will require a transparent evaluation of how you actively hunt crime from above and communicate. The most effective aircrews chalking up the best stats are those who form a cohesive team.
- **Employ new tactics.** Toward the end of my career, I had the privilege of being at the forefront of the transformation of the CHP fixed-wing program. We learned the key to success is focusing on being what the military ISR community calls an “unblinking eye in the sky.” This is an operational goal, but it’s about acknowledging that solid intelligence from above is only possible when the airborne platform and personnel are in a position to see and act in real time.
- **If you’re not in the air, you’re not there.** You must be airborne, ready

to immediately engage, to have a realistic chance to make a difference in a tactical event. Patrolling from an altitude that is beyond audible or visual range is a tactical advantage. With camera systems designed to gather intelligence from miles away, it is no longer necessary to be on-scene at a low altitude. Assets sitting on the ramp do not chalk up arrest stats.

Joining TFOs & Technology

The unit to which Air Bear Tactical most recently delivered an aircraft is experienced in airborne law enforcement fixed-wing operations. However, the unit is still utilizing binoculars and paper maps and is limited to daylight operations. The agency’s new platform will allow a significant increase in its patrol footprint and effectiveness, but it isn’t all about the technology. The unit must focus on bringing its TFOs up-to-speed and establishing effective crew coordination to be effective and successful on its first real-world mission.

When you park a well-trained crew over a city with the right technology and tactics, the intelligence from above has a near immediate and positive impact. Ground units realize how effective airborne surveillance is as their partner, and you’ll quickly see stats climbing. 🏆

