

Asset Management: Follow The Rules

By Jack H. Schonely, Los Angeles Police Department, Air Support Division

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“Get the job done.” “Accomplish the mission.” “Make it happen.” These are all phrases that we have heard over our careers. All of us are mission driven to a point, or we wouldn’t be in law enforcement. This drive can be a help and a hindrance. The second you enter the world of law enforcement aviation, you have to learn how to control that drive and make safety the priority. It can be very difficult at times because of the types of missions with which we are faced and the conditions in which those missions are performed.

An established safety management system (SMS) within your aviation unit provides rules, procedures, protocols and guidance to help you stay safe and accomplish the mission. Refusing or aborting some missions is difficult but must be done for the sake of safety. Safety of the crew, public, passengers and officers on the ground must be considered before and during every flight, no matter how critical the mission.

A few years ago, a commercial pilot with about 1,000 hours of flight time was called in to land at a heliport, top off the fuel tank and receive a mission. The tactical flight officer was a part-timer who had very limited experience. It was 0100 hours and the weather was marginal VFR. A supervisor, who was also a pilot, met the crew on the deck and advised them that K-9 was conducting a search at the termination of a pursuit, and the suspect was armed with a rifle. He told the crew to respond to the location to conduct a FLIR check of the perimeter. The perimeter location was approximately 60 miles east of the heliport in an area not normally patrolled by the officers.

The pilot understood the importance of the mission and was eager to assist the K-9 units. He also knew that the weather could be a significant factor because of the location and the route of travel required to get there. His concern was with the TFO’s ability to operate the FLIR, provide tactical insight to the ground officers and assist the pilot in marginal weather if required.

On a clear night where the pilot did not have to concentrate all of his efforts on marginal weather, wires, terrain, and other obstacles all in an unfamiliar location, he could probably adequately assist the TFO and complete the mission. This was not a clear night by any means. With an experienced TFO, the risks were manageable and the decision to go would have been an easy one.

This pilot questioned the supervisor about the choice of crew for the mission and voiced all of his concerns. The supervisor advised the pilot that he had no other TFO available and that the pilot could walk the TFO through the FLIR, as well as the tactical insight. It was clear that the supervisor believed that this crew could “get the job done safely.”

The pilot then learned that one of the most experienced TFOs in the division was sitting in the roll call room. He approached the TFO and asked if he would join him on the mission. The TFO jumped at the opportunity, even though he was about to end his shift. The pilot advised the supervisor of this TFO’s availability and that he would be a better choice for the mission. The supervisor refused the request, stating that the experienced

TFO was end-of-watch, and "we are not going to pay the overtime for a FLIR mission."

The pilot was not happy with that decision, but the supervisor had made it clear that the crew was chosen and the mission was a go. The pilot reluctantly flew through the marginal weather, arrived at the location as the suspect was being taken into custody, and returned to the heliport without incident. I know, not a very dramatic end to the story, but that is a good thing.

Because so many missions like this do not end up as incidents or accidents, many units do not even look at them to learn from any errors that were made. The idea that "it worked out fine, everybody is safe and that's all that matters" is a dangerous attitude in law enforcement aviation, because eventually mission decisions similar to this will end in tragedy. Then, the investigation will show that the accident could have and should have been avoided before the mission even started.

To this day, that pilot regrets not standing up and refusing the mission based on safety and crew selection. He caved in to the pressure of the mission and the supervisor. I know this for a fact because that pilot was I. I had said no to a mission before that flight and have said no since, but I caved in that night and as PIC I shouldn't have. The PIC has the final say. That experienced TFO should have been in that left seat, end of story.

Multiple Missions

Practicing safety first can be much more complicated when an aviation unit has multiple missions. An established SMS is even more important for these units. A great example of a multiple mission unit is the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department. That unit, like many of your units, is responsible for law enforcement, (pursuits, foot pursuits, perimeters), medevac, and search and rescue. It is not unusual to handle all three types of missions in a shift. A TFO can be over a pursuit in the morning and be attached to a hundred foot long-line in the afternoon rescuing a scuba diver in the ocean. These crews are ready for anything covering 1,604 square miles of Sonoma County.

Sonoma's call sign is Henry 1 and they are well known for their search and rescue ability. They work with a crew of three in a Bell 407: a pilot, tactical flight officer and a paramedic in back. The 407 is set up with full ALS medivac capability, a moving map, FLIR, Nightsun, an NVG compatible cockpit, and is easily configured for long-line rescue (50, 100 and 200 feet) and Bambi bucket firefighting.

How can a unit that has so many diverse missions get them done safely? Training, training, training, and a well established set of rules and SOPs that are closely followed. The unit's minimum standards are very clear for all positions, and a safety management system is vital for a unit like Sonoma County.

I recently spoke with Sgt. Eric Thomson who is in charge of Henry 1. By the way, he is also one of the unit's TFOs. We discussed some of the requirements for a new TFO before they sit in the left seat. All TFOs must complete a 40-hour search and rescue class, a rope rescue class, rescue oceans skills training, a six-month EMT class, firefighting training, medical equipment training, long-line training, TFO patrol tactics training, and attend a California Air Crew class. All of this training occurs before the TFO goes out on any mission. That is an important point. I asked Eric if, when a TFO was ready for a patrol mission but had not completed the other training, could he go out on a pursuit. The answer was no; they must be "fully trained." They must be ready to handle all of the missions that could arise. That is the rule for the unit, and it is

followed. I believe that the result of these guidelines is safety and professionalism, and that is an excellent goal for all of us.

The other crewmembers also have to complete significant training and are required to have substantial experience before joining the unit. The minimum requirements for a pilot to apply to the unit are 3,000 hours turbine, 1,000 hours on mountain flying, 300 hours precision long-line and 250 hours of night flight. They must also show that they are proficient after entering the unit. Again, these standards are there for good reason. The missions can be very complex and require a skilled pilot, particularly skilled at long-line operations. The TFO or the paramedic is at the end of that line, not a log or an air conditioning unit. The pilots of Henry 1 are outstanding at what they do, and they work very hard to stay sharp.

The experienced paramedics receive the same search and rescue, rope rescue and ocean skills training as the TFO. They regularly attend training days with the pilot and the TFO, even on law enforcement tactical issues. They are truly a member of the team and are oftentimes at the end of that long-line.

Thomson carefully manages the crews, particularly when one of the members is new. He makes sure that a newer TFO is scheduled with an experienced paramedic or visa versa. Although they are all trained and qualified, this is one more way that he can manage the risks of the mission.

One of the most important rules that are set in place for the crews of Henry 1 is that any one of the three crewmembers can cancel a mission at any time with no questions asked. Because of the variety of missions and conditions in which they fly, this is very important to the safety of the crew. Crew resource management is an important issue in this unit, and the go-no-go decision is not dependent on just a supervisor or a PIC.

Imagine an aviation unit like Sonoma County working without a safety management system that follows strict qualifications, training requirements and clear procedures. It is a high risk operation whose future could be jeopardy due to incidents and accidents were not for having an SMS. Henry 1 has found a way to manage risk effectively while accomplishing the mission, and SMS is the key.

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