

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND

How an Aviation Pioneer Helped Launch a Surf Community's Aerial Patrols

By Sgt. Ray Villescas, Huntington Beach (CA) Police Department Air Support Unit

The summer of 1968 marked the beginning of a new dimension to law enforcement in the City of Huntington Beach, CA. Sergeant Bob Morrison had submitted a report for the consideration of the purchase of a Hughes Model 300 helicopter to be used by the police department as an added service to the citizens of the city.

The report addressed concerns for the economic feasibility and crime reduction capabilities of such a program in Huntington Beach, a seaside city in Orange County in southern California known for its 8.5-mile beach on the Pacific Ocean, mild climate and excellent surfing. The report also addressed the benefits and versatility of helicopters compared to the conventional patrol car.

Morrison was successful in getting the program accepted by police administrators and city officials. His persistence made the Huntington Beach Police Department the first agency in Orange County to initiate a helicopter patrol program and the fifth such unit in the U.S. Forty years later, the versatility of the helicopter is still the strongest benefit of the airborne law enforcement program in Huntington Beach. It has also undergone significant improvements and recently was selected by the Airborne Law Enforcement Association as one of five agencies to receive a free safety management system evaluation.

A Historical Unit

On Jan. 22, 1969, the first training flight in a city-owned helicopter took place in Huntington Beach. Morrison and his civilian flight instructor, John Crawford, conducted the flight training at the nearby Long Beach Airport. During one training flight, they were summoned back to Huntington Beach to search for a missing five-year-old boy. After five minutes of flying over the area, Morrison saw the missing boy. The first official patrol shift was flown on June 5, 1969, by Morrison and Officer Jim Lail.

The recession of the early 1970s took its toll on the newly formed Huntington Beach Air Support Unit. The long hours being flown by two helicopters created the need for a third aircraft. A budget request for another helicopter was denied, but the purchase of a short takeoff and landing fixed-wing airplane was authorized. In August 1972, a used Maule 'Rocket' M-4 was purchased. Existing pilots were trained and certified as fixed-wing pilots. Morrison flew the first patrol over the city in the fixed-wing aircraft on May 9, 1974; however, the use of the fixed-wing was not as efficient as the helicopters and was ultimately eliminated from use.

In the early 1980s, efforts to update the aircraft used by the department received a boost when the U.S. Army released several hundred surplus helicopters to qualifying agencies. The department was authorized to purchase four Bell 47-G3B helicopters for \$350 each. The aircraft were taken to Huntington Beach, rebuilt and put into service. By 1982, the Huntington Beach Police Department had four operational police-equipped helicopters, with the Hughes model 269B replaced by the Bell 47s.

On Nov. 26, 1984, the department was authorized to purchase a used McDonnell Douglas 500E helicopter equipped with a "quiet" four-bladed tail rotor. The department became the first law enforcement agency in the world to use this reduced-noise system and dubbed the aircraft "the Quiet Knight." By 1987, the unit had again upgraded its entire fleet and had three of the quiet ships in service. In 1992, the first NOTAR MD520N was placed in service. These aircraft were the latest version in quiet helicopter technology, designed to be 30 percent quieter than the previous tail rotor models.

Currently, the department operates three MD520N series turbine-powered helicopters. Each aircraft is equipped with multi-channel communication equipment, spotlights, FLIR cameras, moving map navigation systems and gyro-stabilized binoculars. All three aircraft are configured to mirror each other in terms of instrument placement and special equipment installation.

A tradition of naming each helicopter began with the first MD520N. This aircraft was designated "Maverick" in honor of the former Mayor Jack Kelly, who played the role of Bart Maverick in a 1950s TV western series. This aircraft has since been retired. The next two aircraft were designated "Guardian" and "Sentinel" by local elementary school students in Huntington Beach. The newest aircraft in the fleet has been designated "Ten-Henry," in commemoration of the unit's 40th anniversary and in honor of its first aircraft's radio call sign. In the 1970s, the department divided the city into nine patrol areas. The helicopter's call-sign was "Ten-Henry" effectively designating the skies above Huntington Beach as the 10th patrol area. This call sign was later changed to "HB1" when Orange County Communications adopted the International Phonetic Alphabet. The call sign "HB1" is currently used today.

A Modern Unit

The Huntington Beach Police Department Air Support Unit of today is part of the traffic/aero bureau within the uniform (patrol) division. The traffic/aero lieutenant serves as the air support unit commander. When fully staffed, the unit consists of a sergeant, six officer/pilots, two helicopter mechanics and a part-time unit administrative clerk. Several of the officer/pilots are rated as certified flight instructors (rotorcraft) and are responsible for commercial pilot training within the unit. The helicopter mechanics maintain airframe, powerplant and inspection authorization ratings. The maintenance facility is rated as an FAA Certified Repair Station (Limited).

The primary mission of the Huntington Beach Police Air Support Unit is to fly in support of police, fire and marine safety operations. Those operations include, but are not limited to, patrol ground operations, surveillances, aerial photo/intelligence-gathering missions, observation support for police, fire and marine safety operations, SWAT operations and emergency/disaster surveying. Its primary goal is to provide a level of service that contributes to the overall success of the mission at hand. The unit understands that safety is critical to the successful outcome of any mission, so it strives to operate in as safe a manner as possible in all areas of aviation operations.

The Huntington Beach Police Department Air Support Unit currently operates from the Robert M. Morrison Heliport located within the City of Huntington Beach. The facility was dedicated to Morrison as a tribute to his vision, dedication and never-ending support of the airborne law enforcement community. Morrison served with the unit from 1968 to 1989. He was also a founding member of ALEA, serving as association president, a member of the board of directors and as a regional officer. After his passing in March 2008, a memorial service was held at the Huntington Beach Police Department air support facility to celebrate his life and contributions to airborne law enforcement.

Last year marked the 40-year anniversary of the Huntington Beach Police Department Air Support Unit. The unit has enjoyed the continuing support of the police department, the Huntington Beach City Council and the citizens of the community. But the words of Morrison perhaps describe it best.

"None of this could be possible without the dedication and determination of the officers and maintenance personnel who made it work," Morrison said. "Those who elected to strap themselves into a cramped, uncomfortable seat, put on a helmet or headset that has up to five radios tuned in and launch themselves into some of the busiest airspace in the U.S. have learned to live with the noise, vibrations, fatigue and polluted air in their non-air-conditioned office environment. These are the guys who experimented with, developed or pioneered new equipment until it worked...so they could better serve their fellow officers on the ground and further prove the benefit of aircraft utilization in law enforcement."

Editor's Note: The HBPD Air Support Unit would like to thank the Huntington Beach Police Officers Association for its contribution to this article, portions of which were derived from the "Justice For All" newsletter.

Side Bar:

HBDP Receives SMS Mentoring

The Huntington Beach Police Department Air Support Unit was selected to be the first of five law enforcement aviation units in the U.S. to participate in the International Helicopter Safety Team's (IHST) Safety Management System (SMS) mentoring program.

The mentoring program provides the aviation unit with the necessary tools to implement an SMS. The IHST then monitors the progress of the program and recommends any necessary adjustments in order to achieve the maximum benefit from the SMS program. This service is provided at no cost to the organization.

ALEA is working hand-in-hand with the FAA and the IHST to create an SMS program in the U.S. In approximately 2010, the FAA will require all aviation organizations in the U.S. to have an SMS program. When this occurs, we will have successful models for law enforcement aviation units of various sizes and missions to use as a guide.

We thank the Huntington Beach Police Department for their commitment to safety and professionalism and for helping other law enforcement organizations to implement a SMS.

Side Bar:

Surf City USA

Huntington Beach is a seaside city in Orange County in southern California. It is known for its 8.5 miles of beach on the Pacific Ocean, mild climate and excellent surfing. The waves are a unique natural effect caused by edge-diffraction of ocean swells by the island of Catalina and waves from distant hurricanes.