

AIR 1

First On The Scene

By Staff Sergeant Alan Mack, *Durham Regional Police Service*

Durham, a regional municipality informally referred to as the Durham Region, is located east of Toronto in Ontario, CN. The region is approximately 2,500 square kilometers and is part of the Greater Toronto area. Chief Mike Ewles leads the Durham Regional Police Service (DRPS) in providing local policing to seven municipalities with a combined population of more than 600,000.

DRPS is one of two municipal police services in Ontario to have a helicopter as part of its crime-fighting arsenal. The DRPS Air Support Unit started in June 1999 as a six-month pilot project in conjunction with the York Regional Police Service.

The pilot project was successful, and the DRPS took over the lease, becoming the first single municipal police service in Ontario to operate a full-time air support unit. The unit has the distinction of the call sign "Air 1."

When the air unit began, Air 1 was employed as a crime-fighting tool, and the anticipated benefits of having an airborne observation platform were clear. The helicopter became essential for many different missions. After a few years of proven effectiveness, the job of apprehending suspects, finding millions of dollars worth of illicit drugs and locating missing persons was the norm for Air 1. Ground officers quickly became dependent on the aircraft to assist them in their day-to-day activities.

In 2003, DRPS purchased a new Bell Jet Ranger, a two-bladed, turbine-powered helicopter with a conventional two-bladed tail rotor. It has a normal cruise of about 180 kilometers/hour. With pilot and one observer, it can fly up to four hours, or just over 400 miles. The helicopter can carry two additional passengers. The police-specialized equipment on board includes:

- Wescam L3 M12 DS200 Thermal Camera
- 30 million candle power Nightsun
- Mobile data terminal laptop computer for communications and mapping
- Hard drive and DVD burner for preserving video evidence

Suspect apprehension pursuits are a serious challenge for any police service. Public safety is always the prime consideration. Vehicle pursuits pose considerable danger to the public, police and suspect. In a DRPS pursuit, Air 1 provides surveillance of the fleeing suspect, offering continuous updates of the vehicle location. The need for ground units to follow directly behind the suspect is eliminated. When the suspect's vehicle arrives at its destination, police ground units are dispatched to that location, and the suspect is taken into custody. Air 1 has reduced the number of pursuits involving ground units and, therefore, reduced the potential for personal injury to the public, police and suspects.

Air 1 may be operational at any time day or night, but normally flies a schedule conducive to the regional crime trends. A pilot and tactical flight officer (TFO) are always on call in case of an emergency.

Air 1 averages 800 to 1,000 hours of flight time per year. The aircraft responds to an average of 1,500 calls for service annually and is the first unit on scene about 50 percent of the time, resulting in an increased number of arrests as fleeing suspects are tracked until ground units arrive.

The DRPS Air Support Unit is under the supervision of Staff Sergeant Alan Mack and consists of two full-time TFOs (Constable Anthony Bowers and Constable Jamie Broadstock), two part-time TFOs (Constable Leigh Scutt and Constable Shaun Gaudet), and two civilian pilots (Chief Pilot Bruce Buck and Pilot Greg Hulme), who are members of the unit through contractual agreements with National Helicopters.

DRPS Shows IR Success

The Durham Regional Police Service (DRPS) Air Support Unit serves a variety of different purposes, but it is especially effective when operating its infrared camera under the cover of night. Following are a few examples of successful IR use by the unit.

One cold night an alleged armed suspect was being chased on foot through backyards. The TFO was following him on the infrared (IR) camera and directing ground units. As the suspect jumped a fence, the TFO observed the suspect (through the IR camera) throw something away. The item emitted a slight heat signature in the cold air. When the suspect was apprehended, he was without a weapon. The TFO directed ground officers back to the area beyond the fence, and a handgun was located.

Air 1 was dispatched to the scene of a street stabbing where the suspects had fled on foot. Air 1 arrived as officers were setting up a perimeter and about to start ground searches. About 15 minutes had passed, and it appeared that the suspects had made their escape. Air 1's crew expanded its search beyond the set perimeter and, from its vantage point, was able to search a larger area more quickly than the ground units. The aircrew (using the IR camera) observed what they first thought to be dogs in a backyard, running from one side of the yard to the other. With closer observation, the TFO realized the dogs had only two legs. Officers were directed to the location and, under cover of darkness, moved in. When they were in good position, the aircrew directed the Nightsun at the suspects, who immediately saw officers with guns drawn.

One summer night a suspect had led a scene and, after an exhaustive search, ground units were about to leave. Air 1 arrived on scene, and the crew was asked to take a final look through backyards. Using the IR camera, the TFO noticed a small spot of warmth in a driveway. The heat signature was so small, the TFO would not normally have considered that it might be a person. But closer examination revealed that the heat was at the edge of a parked trailer. The K-9 unit was directed to the location and discovered it was the suspect poking his head out to see if the coast was clear. (It wasn't.)

Air 1's crews have located millions of dollars in marijuana over the last eight years. Most of this had previously gone unnoticed in the Durham Region, as plants cultivated in cornfields are rarely seen from the roads. The largest find by the air unit was about five acres (50,000 plants) with an estimated street value of \$30 million. Another large grow was located (9,000 plants) with a value of \$9 million. The number of illegal grows has greatly diminished over the years in the Durham Region due to Air 1, although

there are still some out there, and the bad guys are being more creative at trying to hide them.