

BIG UNIT IN A SMALL TOWN

How Saskatoon Started Its Aviation Unit

By Sergeant Gary David, Saskatoon Police Service Air Support Unit

2:43:00 hrs:

Police officers in a marked patrol unit spot what they believe is a stolen H3 Hummer. As they activate their emergency lights, the stolen Hummer takes off at a high rate of speed onto the freeway access ramp.

02:43:10 hrs:

Ten seconds after the initial radio call, the Saskatoon Police Service Air Support Unit (ASU) has a visual on the truck and advises ground units. The ground units back off, and ASU tracks the stolen vehicle off the freeway and into a residential area. The unit's tactical flight officer coordinates deployment of the stop sticks (a tire deflation device) and containment of the area as the vehicle comes to a stop and three suspects flee on foot.

02:45:00 hrs:

Within minutes, the K9 Unit and patrol members have all three suspects in custody.

As many agencies know, an aircraft in the sky is invaluable in pursuit situations. The Saskatoon Police Service (SPS) and its Board of Police Commissioners realized how important this support was and took steps to establish a full time ASU in early 2007. It was a big step considering the size of the city (population 230,000) when on May 3, 2007, the first shift of the full-time ASU was flown.

The History

For several years prior to the unit's startup, SPS had been using a rented, fixed-wing aircraft for surveillance operations. The aircraft was piloted by one of the department's surveillance members with a commercial pilot's license.

During the fall of 2004, senior police personnel inquired about using a fixed-wing aircraft to support patrol operations. After some research into other agencies using such aircraft for patrol support and consultation with Transport Canada and local operators, a presentation was given to the Saskatoon Police Executive Team and then to the Board of Police Commissioners. The SPS received approval to conduct a three-month pilot project to test the effectiveness of a police aircraft in a small city.

Although the 2005 pilot project was seen as a success, the police service determined that another three-month project in 2006 was required prior to seeking funding for a full-time unit. With continued success in the pilot projects, the SPS ASU became a full-time patrol support service in May of 2007.

Throughout the two pilot projects, ASU demonstrated its ability to quickly respond to in-progress calls, such as break and enters, armed robberies and other street related crimes. ASU was also involved in several criminal pursuits and has proven invaluable in reducing the risk to the public and frontline patrol members. During the

three-month evaluation in 2006, ASU responded to hundreds of calls for service, was involved in over 150 arrests and was directly responsible for 53 arrests.

The two evaluation projects were conducted using a rented Cessna 172 with a mobile workstation (MWS), a set of stabilized binoculars borrowed from the surveillance team and a portable intercom modified to connect the portable police radio with the aircraft system.

The Equipment

Today, the unit is operating a 1998 Cessna 182S retained on a long-term lease. The aircraft is equipped with an MWS with GPS tracking and an NAT intercom system, which connects the aircraft radios with up to three police radios. Fraser-Volpe stabilized binoculars with day and night vision eyepieces and a video capture connection is the primary observation tool. The unit also has added a second audio panel to which the police radios are connected.

In May 2008, the aircraft was also equipped with a Gomolzig exhaust silencer system, which should resolve the noise complaints the unit currently receives. Residents of Saskatoon are not regularly exposed to the noise of helicopters and, therefore, don't have an appreciation for how quiet the airplane is in comparison. However, the unit takes all complaints seriously and attempts to respond to everyone that calls in with a concern. SPS has implemented a weekly call log on its website so the citizens of Saskatoon can see the types of calls ASU has responded to, the location of the call and the duration the aircraft was on scene.

Currently, the service is working with a local business with a hope of establishing a partnership that will result in the acquisition of an electro-optical/infrared unit.

The Force

Four permanent members – two sergeant/pilots and two TFOs – make up two teams on the SPS staff. In addition, the unit has two reserve TFOs assigned to other units that can come in for relief when needed.

Pilots in the unit must be members of SPS with a current commercial pilot's license. There is no minimum hour requirement, and an IFR rating is not mandatory. Pilots must complete an initial and annual pilot competency check to the standards of a Transport Canada Air Operator's Certificate.

SPS has a budget for 800 hours annually, which allows for at least four nights a week of air support. Approximately six hours a night are spent in the air. SPS is still a unit that is growing and learning, trying to acquire the skill and equipment that it needs to operate more effectively and work within the constraints of a medium-size city budget. Its eventual goal is to be in the air every day and night, providing big support even in the skies of a small town.