

# Edmonton Air Services: A Grassroots Community Effort

**By Sergeant Rick Milne, Edmonton Police Service Air-1**

The first day of 2002 led to a defining night for the Edmonton Police Service's (EPS's) new patrol helicopter "Air-1."

Sergeant Chris Hayden, tactical flight officer (TFO), and Sergeant Rick Milne, pilot, had just finished managing the fourth vehicle pursuit of their airborne shift. All had been safely concluded with arrests. The two police crewmembers were ecstatic, as together with ground units, they had effectively accomplished what would have been impossible only months earlier.

The crew had less than five operational months under its belt of an initial one-year trial project, and it had been a night that demonstrated the incredible public safety and effectiveness a helicopter could bring to a Canadian city.

Patrol helicopters were still very new to Canada in general, and an external auditor was scrutinizing Air-1's performance. It was also being watched hopefully by thousands of citizens who had raised funds to support the idea of providing a safer community through airborne policing.

Much of the credit for raising public awareness went to a local radio station editorialist, Bob Layton, who had strongly questioned why Edmonton had no police helicopter, and to Ed Bean, a business leader who offered to match money raised by citizen donations up to \$100,000. It became a partnership between a community group, "Spotlight on Safety," and the Edmonton Police Foundation, whose mandate was to tackle crime prevention issues outside of the normal police budget. Support from the public had been overwhelming.

EPS understood the operational advantages a patrol helicopter could bring to its capabilities, as it had been watching Calgary's HAWC 1 program since 1995 and attended the first of many ALEA conferences in 1996. EPS had also perhaps unknowingly laid the groundwork for the future of its aviation program in 1980, having developed some ongoing expertise through the operation of its own fixed-wing aircraft.

The chief of police in 2001, Bob Wasylyshen, was a strong advocate of airborne policing and agreed to contribute the necessary police personnel for both piloting and performing TFO duties. Air-1 launched officially in August 2001, with a few police decals over a wild corporate paint job and a police crew that had educated itself, developed strong SOPs, and understood risk management. The fledgling new unit was partnered with the service's nationally recognized canine unit, and the resulting collaboration and teamwork led to a new Canine/Flight Operations Section, which began racking up operational highlights on a weekly basis.

At the eight-month mark, the helicopter had responded to 1,168 calls and assisted in 191 vehicle stops. It was also instrumental in safely managing 22 police pursuits, all of which were terminated without death or injuries and led to multiple arrests. Air-1 was the first police presence on-scene at 40 percent of the calls it responded to, and the

auditors' independent surveys showed it enjoyed a 90 percent approval rating from the public.

The program continued to demonstrate significant achievements in pursuit management, public and officer safety and on-scene arrest rates. With financial assistance from a public lottery, over \$1.5 million was raised. A Eurocopter EC-120 was purchased in the fall of 2002, and the program transitioned into a permanent operation.

### **Mission, Machine & People**

In 2001, EPS wanted to "begin with the end in mind" and contemplated what helicopter would serve the community best for the long term. Canadian cities are significantly more noise sensitive than most U.S. cities, and the unit needed a quiet helicopter with capacity to carry the necessary equipment and personnel with reasonable endurance. EPS chose a used Eurocopter EC-120 equipped with a low-time MkII FLIR and a new Sx-16 Nightsun.

The low-time helicopter, which started out in 2001 with only 800 hours, now has over 8,000 flight hours. A close liaison with Eurocopter Canada has been instrumental in keeping Air-1 serviceable, and it has lost very few days to unscheduled maintenance. The helicopter is budgeted to fly 1,000 hours per year and has four full-time and four part-time crew members.

The majority of operations are VFR urban nighttime flying over a sprawling metro area of almost one million people. Weather is the greatest variable, and the helicopter flies in Canadian prairie temperatures between -30 to 30 Celsius. The crews normally operate at an altitude of 1,400 feet AGL at night but will descend to 800 feet AGL if absolutely required. Daytime altitudes are also above 800 feet AGL whenever possible.

EPS replaced the MkII several years ago with a new FLIR 8000, and a new paint job designed completely in-house by chief TFO Constable Jim Pennie brought Air-1 up to fleet standards for appearance. Last year, the Edmonton Police and Fire Department were able to collaborate on finances and purchase a microwave downlink for any major incidents. In April of this year, a high broadcast quality "MRC" digital downlink was installed and successfully tested.

EPS recognized early in the planning stages that safer handling of pursuits was a crucial outcome and since inception has maintained a strict policy: once the helicopter arrives on scene, ground units must terminate operations and stay well away so the suspect does not sense anyone chasing or following. Once the suspect abandons his or her vehicle, the helicopter directs ground officers to the location, and arrests are made. There's less chance of citizens, officers or suspects being injured or killed in any crash because speeds are reduced and suspects typically calm down, as do the police officers. The number of pursuits safely managed by EPS has steadily increased from 35 in 2004 to 52 in both 2006 and 2007.

Air-1's usual response time of less than three minutes to a call is a key contributing factor to ensuring officer and public safety. By getting to a scene quickly and relaying timely information to responding ground units, the helicopter has increased arrest counts from just over 150 in 2004 to 347 in 2007. If not on an active call, Air-1 crews conduct airborne patrols in high crime or problem areas and use intelligence-led policing to deploy for maximum effectiveness.

EPS is somewhat unique in Canada in that it uses its own officers as pilots for both fixed-wing and helicopter operations. When initial helicopter operations started in 2001, the unit was fortunate to have a few officers with helicopter pilot licenses, and one newer officer, Constable Vern Zelent, had more than 5,000 hours of industry experience, making him a natural choice for chief pilot. Currently, police members obtaining their own private pilot's licenses compete to be selected to enter a structured training and mentoring program, which certifies them to fly the service's Cessna 182 aircraft and may eventually lead to a commercial helicopter license and the privilege of flying Air-1.

Having EPS's own officers as pilots provides value because they have the experience to understand police procedures, and they know the city thoroughly and maintain credibility with ground officers. It also helps manage costs and ensure program stability; the unit has lost only one pilot due to a planned retirement.

## **The Present & Future**

Since 1996, the information, courses and contacts experienced through ALEA have been instrumental in making EPS's air program dynamic and effective. Edmonton was the second municipal agency in Canada to launch "patrol" type operations and enjoys a close working relationship with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Edmonton Air Section, including working out of the same hangar and assisting a variety of surrounding detachments during nighttime hours.

The EPS air unit recently was approached by Vancouver's regional helicopter program to assist with the training and selection of their new TFOs. The successful candidates came to Edmonton and flew shifts in Air-1, working calls and learning the tricks of the trade. In Canada, helping other agencies learn and having close collaboration through ALEA's Canadian Region will be critical to increasing the number of new agency programs, de-mystifying the process and providing safer communities across the country.

In August 2008, it will be seven full years since EPS ran the air unit's initial one-year trial. A proposal for a second EC-120, "Air-2," is currently in the approval process through the Edmonton Police Commission and will eventually go before municipal politicians. Calls for service have increased to over 2,800 per year, and a second aircraft would allow the unit to provide service seven nights per week, as well as cover maintenance downtime and slow the rapidly accumulating flight hours on Air-1.

Air-1 has provided more diverse benefits than the Edmonton community could have initially imagined, from rescuing children and lost hunters, to landing in a schoolyard to stop a teenage suicide, to providing airborne coverage during NHL hockey playoffs. The future will see continued development with metro-wide emergency preparedness and other emerging issues only beginning to reach Canada. While meeting all these challenges, the EPS air unit will continue to focus on the fundamentals of increasing public safety through effective pursuit management, increasing officer safety through quick response to calls as well as providing timely intelligence to our patrol and canine partners.