

Mounties Take to the Skies

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Air Services Wing

By Mark Brett

On a cold, snowy November day on a wind-swept British Columbia mountainside, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) rotary-wing pilot Corporal Dwayne Jennings' skill and dexterity at the controls of his helicopter were put to the ultimate test. Realizing two fellow officers and a police service dog on the ground below him were in danger of freezing to death if they didn't get immediate help, Jennings maneuvered the aircraft into position, and with only the front of the skids resting on the ground, plucked the three from the jaws of death.

After being isolated at an elevation of over 1,000 feet for nearly six hours and already suffering signs of hypothermia, the two men and the canine member were whisked away to safety. For his efforts in the face of personal danger, Jennings was awarded the Commissioner's Commendation for Bravery and the Treasury Board Award of Excellence. While not typical of the work done on a daily basis by the national police force air services wing, the rescue underscored the importance of employing men and women who can meet the varied challenges the unit encounters.

At the time of his rescue mission, Jennings was stationed at RCMP's Vancouver Air Section in the scenic Lower Mainland southwest corner of the province, bounded by the Pacific Ocean and the Coast Mountain range. In a region such as this, at any given time pilots can be flying urban support missions involving a vehicle chase or pitting their skills against some of the most treacherous conditions imaginable.

Born out of necessity over 70 years ago, the RCMP Air Services Wing has grown to become the envy of many non-military law enforcement agencies around the world. Boasting a fleet of nearly 40 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft and a roster of over 70 pilots and nearly 50 engineers, the success of RCMP's flight operations is due to its diversity, both in the sky and on the ground.

"As a national police force, this is something we cannot do without," said Chief Superintendent Jacques Desilets, the man in charge of RCMP Air Services at the force's Ottawa, Ontario, headquarters. "It is a tool that we must have to provide us with flexibility for police operations, to respond quickly to emerging situations no matter where they happen. I can't stress it enough. It is a very expensive tool, but it's a tool you can't eliminate. We couldn't operate the way we are without that support. In many cases, it is the only lifeline for our members and the public."

Desilets said the unit is especially important in the northern regions of the country, where often there are no roads linking the small, isolated communities and the rural RCMP detachments. "It's the last-minute stuff that we absolutely have to get to, where communities are expecting us to respond and not take hours on end to get there," he said. "Having that capability strategically located across the country is vital.

"We're the first responder everywhere in Canada except for Quebec and Ontario, and we need the flexibility to get into those hard-to-reach places and drop off resources such as the emergency response teams."

Some municipal police departments in Canada, including Calgary, Edmonton and several regional police forces around Toronto, and two provincial police forces, the Ontario Provincial Police and Surete du Quebec, have aircraft support services. But much of the country's aerial duties still fall to the Mounties.

"Many people are surprised by the size and scope of the RCMP Air Services operation," said Inspector Perry Edwards of the RCMP's E Division in Vancouver. "They think you're exaggerating when you tell them you have almost 40 aircraft. I suggest that they think of the FBI in uniform, plus being responsible for policing all but two states (provinces) and numerous towns and cities of varying sizes, as well. I know there are diverse police agencies in the U.S. as well, but I don't know of any with the broad mandate of the RCMP."

Although the numbers fluctuate, the RCMP fleet is usually made up of about 10 helicopters and 25 fixed-wing units, based in 19 locations across the country. The aircraft include 14 Pilatus PC-12s, eight Eurocopter AS350-B3 helicopters, two Eurocopter EC-120 helicopters, three Cessna Caravan 208s, two DH-6-300 Twin Otters, one DHC-2 Turbo Beaver, a number of smaller Cessna fixed-wing aircraft (182, 206 and 210) and a Piaggio Avanti P180.

RCMP had a long history of using Bell helicopters, but the force's rotary-wing fleet now consists entirely of Eurocopter products. Ironically, one of the newest additions to the fleet, the Turbo Beaver, is also one of the oldest aircraft RCMP has in service at nearly 40 years of age. It is aircraft like the Beaver, used by the force in the past but phased out in the 1990s, which helps the unit maintain proactive policing, even for Canada's most out of the way citizens.

"It is an aircraft that has been proven over four decades in rural Canada," Edwards said. "The idea is not just to get into these remote areas when things have gone terribly wrong, as in a murder or serious sexual assault, but to get in there on a regular basis. The First Nations people in particular want to be protected from victimization. They don't want to lose their kids to substance abuse or suicide. Many elders asked why the police didn't come to their communities before things went wrong; the return of the Beaver has restored that capability."

Vancouver base manager Staff Sergeant Rob Elliot agreed. "The Beaver and the Turbo Beaver made their mark in Canada back when Canada was still fairly undeveloped in its road structure in the north, and to a certain extent that lack of infrastructure continues in the north today," he said. "It is very important where you live for your police force to be able to respond to your needs, and we still have to meet the needs of the public even if there is no proven land vehicle that will help us do that."

RCMP's senior management made a decision in 1999 that in the future all new Air Services pilots would be hired as civilian members. The group believed that pilots should focus completely on flying their aircraft, leaving the police work to the officers being transported. Advance operational planning takes the potential risks into account. If there is a foreseen significant risk to the aircraft or crew, then the plan must be amended to mitigate that.

Because of the variety of aircraft used by RCMP, Elliot believes it is the ground support workers, especially the engineers, who are the true heroes. At the Vancouver base alone, five different types of aircraft, fixed-wing and rotary, require servicing at any given time. "We tend to focus on the pilots as the primary personnel, but it's very much a

team environment where, without your maintenance support, you just aren't going to be able to perform," said Elliot, a veteran pilot himself. "You're only as strong as your bench."

According to Edwards, RCMP maintains a good working relationship with the other Canadian law enforcement agencies that have limited aircraft service, such as the Ontario Provincial Police with two helicopters and a fixed-wing. "For example, Calgary, Edmonton and the Ontario police helicopter programs were very helpful to us in developing the Lower Mainland (British Columbia) 'Air 1' program, as urban helicopter patrol operations were relatively new to RCMP. We have also worked with the Ontario Provincial Police and Surete du Quebec on operational and training issues. A very good information exchange exists in the Canadian police aviation community, enhanced by our common memberships in the Airborne Law Enforcement Association."

On the horizon, Desilets envisions RCMP's Air Services playing an increasingly important role in supporting law enforcement in Canada. "We're trying to keep abreast of the various technologies, to maintain and improve the quality of service," he said. "More and more, the public expects us to be better equipped to respond in an even more expeditious manner to whatever calls are coming our way. In the end, I think that Air Services is well recognized for the work we provide and, as the organization grows, we will have to keep pace with that growth to provide the level of service expected of us."