

Supporting The Front Line

Ontario Aircrews Go Where Others Can't

By Sergeant Dan Mulligan, *Ontario Provincial Police Aviation Services*

Mission Statement – To provide effective aviation-based support through a commitment to safety, excellence and efficiency in the delivery of law enforcement services throughout the Province of Ontario.

The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) Air Services Section is at a crossroads. But the crossroads isn't physical, like deciding which way to go on one of the unit's many search and rescue (SAR) missions. The unit currently is making decisions that will affect its very future.

OPP is currently faced with an aging (yet consistently reliable) helicopter stable to which it has recently added thermal imaging technology. The unit is anticipating arrival of night vision goggles (NVGs) within the near future. The additions have resulted in a need to address an ever-expanding operational mission profile to assist with the section's primary commitment to the support of OPP's front line personnel.

Aviation requirements reasonably anticipated within the next 10-20 years (based on past experiences and expected future demand) are currently the subject of ongoing research to determine what rotary and fixed-wing assets will be needed by OPP in the future. The unit's past successes and current operational demands seem to support the need for increased lift capabilities, as well as an additional helicopter to service a greater percentage of the unit's expansive territory. OPP has also identified the need for an additional fixed-wing aircraft that is capable of transporting a 13-member tactical team, support personnel and their associated equipment and be able to operate from remote gravel runways.

Historical Basis

To put some form of perspective on the province's sheer size, a drive across Ontario is equivalent to the distance from Toronto (CN) to Orlando (FL). OPP's policing service area's population fluctuates from a winter low of approximately 2.3 million to a summer high of 3.6 million. The aviation service responds to an average of 150 search scenarios annually.

OPP is also legislatively mandated to make its aircraft available to all other police services and government agencies within the Province of Ontario on a priority basis.

OPP has operated aircraft since 1974 and currently maintains a fleet of four. The fleet consists of a Pilatus PC12/45 operating from a base in Thunder Bay, two Eurocopter S355F2R TwinStar helicopters operating from bases in Sudbury and Orillia, and a newly purchased Cessna T206 dedicated to the organization's new Highway Safety Division.

The unit's aircrew consists of seven fixed-wing pilots and five rotary wing pilots. The unit commander is dual rated and acts as a relief pilot whenever needed. Tactical flight officers, well-trained resources borrowed from within local, uniformed ranks, are utilized on a part-time basis.

All OPP aircraft are equipped with a dual sensor camera with digital downlink capabilities. This combination of technology has proven to be beneficial from an officer safety and a command and control perspective. Initially, it was difficult to justify the technology. However, now that real field experience has been gained, it is mandated by senior management that all OPP aircraft have the equipment. OPP aircraft are also outfitted with satellite tracking devices. Although the decision to procure the technology was predicated on enhancing pilot/passenger safety, it has also proven to be a valuable asset management tool.

For 34 years, OPP's Air Services Section has enjoyed the professional expertise and attention to detail provided by both past and present civilian aircraft maintenance engineers on staff, presently a total of three men. The majority of work on rotary-wing aircraft is conducted in-house, while both fixed-wing aircraft receive contracted maintenance with oversight via the section's director of maintenance.

OPP's aircraft primarily operate within Ontario, although the Pilatus may be tasked to missions anywhere within North America. Additional aircraft are leased on an as-needed basis. The OPP fleet accrues approximately 2,500 to 3,000 hours of flight time annually, with a complement of 12 pilots. OPP is responsible for providing a professional SAR response within a geographical area encompassing 993,000 square kilometers (596,000 square miles) and waterways of approximately 174,000 square kilometers (104,00 square miles).

Mission Profile

Aviation Services' aircraft typically perform, but are not limited to, the following tasks:

- SAR (approximately 50% of all helicopter missions are of a search and rescue nature)
- surveillance (electronic, video, thermal imaging, visual)
- drug eradication (visual, thermal imaging)
- support of specialized units (K-9, tactical, emergency response, divers, etc.)
- public demonstrations
- transportation of personnel (routine transport, remote location transport)
- prisoner escorts
- photography (video, still, FLIR, Wescam, Gyrocam)
- high speed pursuits
- search and containment of escapees
- major events (Communication and Observation Platform)
- regional traffic/crime initiatives and evidence searches

Night calls for service to the helicopter unit continue to increase annually. This is largely due to current demographics, which identify an aging population that results in increases in SAR responses to victims of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

The recent acquisition and installation of the forward-looking infrared/thermal imaging systems technology (procured via federal funding from Canada's National Search and Rescue Secretariat) has created an increased demand/expectation for a night response from OPP's helicopter unit. The currently pending procurement of night vision technology will allow the aviation section to address this increased demand for service

while ensuring a high level of personnel safety. Unit personnel growth directly associated with an increased demand for night response is anticipated, and future training requirements are being formulated.

Outdoor marijuana grow eradication efforts province-wide result in the need for the unit to charter a third helicopter dedicated to these enforcement efforts in conjunction with OPP's Drug Enforcement Section personnel. While the initiative is somewhat limited by the province's northern climate, the grow season traditionally commences at the end of May, and harvest season begins in late September through early October following the first couple of frosty nights.

OPP, therefore, will concentrate its aerial detection effort from mid-August until the first week of October. Sizeable plots bearing the hallmark of organized crime become the main target of these flights. These larger criminal investments are now presenting significant personnel safety issues, as these larger crops are increasingly dangerous to deal with. Armed guards and various booby traps are becoming more commonplace. Within the past few seasons, "Pot Pirates" have been taking to the skies themselves, seeking out illicit crops sown by other criminal organizations.

While it weighs its mission requirements to determine a future direction, the OPP air unit continues its commitment to not only the more than 8,300 dedicated men and women of the force, but also the many fine residents and annual visitors to the beautiful province of Ontario.

OPP Aviation Services Members

Unit Commander

S/Sgt. John Crate

TFO/Flight Coordinator

Sgt. Darren Keast

Chief Engineer/Director of Maintenance

Peter Malloch

Air Maintenance Engineer

Mike Linklater

Rotary-Wing Pilots

Sgt. Brian Paul

Sgt. Scott Ross

Sgt. Dan Mulligan

Sgt. Steve Vrbanic

Fixed-Wing Pilots

Sgt. Gord Leslie

Sgt. Dwayne Bolen

Sgt. Dan Cameron

Sgt. Gord Magee

A/Sgt. Hans Shirmer

Const. Scott Rome
Const. Wade Arnold

Tactical Flight Officers

Sgt. Daryl Grenville
Const. Jeff MacEachern
Const. Shawn Conner
Const. Al Kuzenko
Const. Brian Speakman