

ALEOs Airborne Law Enforcement Officers

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In South Africa, ALEOs Replace TFOs

The South African Police Service Air Wing recently dispatched a BO105 helicopter to a call in the Johannesburg area in May to assist during an attempted cash-in-transit heist. In the vicinity of the heist, police spotted a car that had been placed on the wanted list for a spate of house robberies. At this stage, the unit's airborne law enforcement officer (ALEO, the equivalent to the U.S. TFO) moved to the rear of the helicopter and opened the left rear sliding door.

A chase ensued, with both the helicopter and ground response teams speeding after the wanted car. During the chase, the ALEO kept the police ground personnel on their toes. At one point, five robbers abandoned the car and split up. Some of the men hijacked another car and began spraying bullets at the police, both on the road and in the air.

The aircraft was hit three times. The bullets sliced through the helicopter's floor into the fuselage and onto the blades. The windscreen was hit, the fuel tank punctured and the radio shot. Shrapnel from the attack tore into the pilot's leg. The department's helicopter had been under fire before, with damage sustained to the aircraft. However, this was the first time an aircrew member was hit. The ALEO fired at those who dared to attack the helicopter crew.

In this situation, as in so many others for the Air Wing, the ALEO played an active role in ensuring the mission's successful completion. The Air Wing was established in 1985 to provide air support for law enforcement missions. The tasks of the unit include crime prevention, serious crime call outs, firearm and vehicle operations, cannabis eradication operations, and search and rescue missions, to name but a few.

There are 46 aircraft that operate from 12 Air Wing locations situated throughout the Republic of South Africa. The aircrew on these aircraft consists of two members: one is a commercially rated pilot and the other is an experienced police officer, the ALEO.

Training the ALEO

ALEOs must have a minimum of three years operational police experience before they will be considered for the selection process for the position. The ALEO selection process consists of a physical fitness evaluation and a psychometric evaluation. Once the candidates have successfully completed the evaluation phase, they commence with an intensive five-week training program taught by the Air Wing's own ALEO instructors. The ALEO syllabus is developed by the instructors and updated annually to keep up with new aircraft, equipment and technology that are integrated into the environment.

The training program for ALEOs at present consists of a three-week theory phase where the learners are taught all the theoretical aspects of the helicopters they will operate. The Air Wing's BK117 is mainly used for VIP and special task force operations, while its MD 500 is mostly used for cannabis spraying operations. Theory is therefore based on the three remaining aircraft used in daily operations: the BO 105 and AS350 B3 helicopters and PC-6 fixed-wing aircraft.

ALEO trainees are tested on the function and purpose of all equipment in the cockpit, ensuring that when needed, they can assist the pilot. It is expected that ALEO candidates complete their theoretical phase with an average score of 75 percent or more. Trainees who do not comply with these standards are removed from the program.

After the theoretical phase has been completed successfully, the ALEO trainees are exposed to two weeks of practical flying, where they are trained and evaluated on their skills in command and control, hoisting, cargo slinging and confined landings. The practical phase also includes evaluation on the use of the airborne camera and the searchlight during night operations. Non-flying tasks for the trainee ALEOs include the inspection of magnetic plugs, compressor washes, and the correct installation and removal of all relative equipment.

The Role of the ALEO

The role of ALEOs in the police service is extensive and includes preparing the aircraft for flight, operating equipment during flight and refueling during and after operations. The tasks the ALEO carries out during the pre-flight phase include ensuring that the aircraft has the correct equipment on board for the required tasks. If the aircraft is not correctly equipped, it is the responsibility of the ALEO to install the necessary equipment. It is, therefore, expected that ALEOs complete a practical evaluation on the installation and operation of all the equipment he or she will use during a typical career.

During flight, the ALEO coordinates the movement of vehicles and personnel at a crime scene, ensuring that maximum use is made of available resources. This coordination between the ALEO and ground personnel regularly results in arrests and recovery of stolen vehicles and/or property. Good communication skills between the ALEO and pilot during confined

landings or hoisting operations, as well as between the ALEO and ground personnel, is essential to ensure safe and effective operations.

The role of the ALEO can also include firing at aggressors during a pursuit, as the officer did during the May incident. After the ALEO deterred the criminals with his firearm during that incident, training and decades of flying experience guided the 47-year-old pilot in landing the damaged BO105 at a nearby hospital helipad. He was admitted for his injuries, and the ALEO was unharmed.

While the pilot and ALEO were forced to fly away, the ground police arrested four of the robbers and took one further wounded suspect into custody. The properly trained flight crew was able to limit the risks to police officers on the ground and prevent the escalation of a potentially dangerous situation to the public.