

CALLING THE PURSUIT

CALM UNDER PRESSURE

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In the early days of airborne law enforcement, the crewmembers who sat next to the pilot were essentially passengers with a badge. They were often referred to as “spotters” or “observers,” and their duties were generally limited to looking outside and telling ground units what they saw.

For the most part, those titles have been replaced with tactical flight officer (TFO), a title that more accurately reflects the duties performed. Those duties are substantially more difficult than they were a few years ago. TFOs are tasked with operating very sophisticated equipment. They must work closely with pilots, monitor and operate multiple radios, operate and interpret thermal imagers and coordinate activities of ground units, such as vehicle pursuits.

An experienced, well-equipped aircrew can perform missions that would otherwise require many additional ground units. For example, during a vehicle pursuit, it is usually much safer and far easier for an aircrew to keep a fleeing suspect in sight than it is for a dozen ground units. An aircrew might not be able to physically apprehend a suspect, but they can certainly enhance the ability of ground units to do so.

And the role of the TFO in conducting such an airborne pursuit is critical. An aircrew can, and should, do much more than simply watch a pursuit. Good aircrew tactics and pursuit skills can minimize the dangers to officers and citizens and can significantly increase the likelihood of apprehending suspects. One of the most important things a TFO can do to enhance safety during a pursuit is use a calm voice when talking on the radio. This has a tremendous calming effect on other officers. If the pursuing officers believe that the pursuit is under control and that the suspect is not going to get away, they tend to drive slower and take fewer risks. They are able to concentrate more on their driving and less on keeping the suspect in sight. The end result is a safer pursuit.

A pursuit may last for two minutes or two hours. A suspect might stay in one neighborhood and never exceed 40 mph, or he/she might cross state lines and drive in excess of 100 mph. If the pursuit occurs in an area with which the aircrew is familiar, and if the pilot doesn't have to deal with congested airspace or inclement weather, the workload will be fairly predictable. Under those conditions, an experienced pilot should be able to assist the TFO by providing the names of approaching cross streets and traffic conditions ahead of the pursuit.

However, if the pilot is less experienced or must deal with other issues, he or she may not be able to assist the TFO at all. It is important to emphasize that pilots should not be providing TFOs with this information unless it is needed, and only then when it is safe and reasonable to do so.

Making the Right Calls

The TFO should be “calling the pursuit,” which means he/she should be providing ground units, supervisors and dispatchers with information about the pursuit. Pertinent information, like the pursuit's location, the vehicle's speed, how the suspect is driving and traffic conditions, is helpful. TFOs should not attempt to “clear intersections.” That is, they should not tell the pursuing officers that an intersection has no opposing traffic or hazards. It is not always possible for TFOs to see pedestrians or other vehicles that might be present.

When less experienced ground units get involved in pursuits, they often have difficulty relinquishing the duty of calling the pursuit. It is very important, however, that the TFO assume those duties as soon as possible, because it reduces the workload of ground units. Sometimes it might even be necessary for the TFO to get on the radio and tell the pursuing officers that the aircrew will call the pursuit and the ground units should concentrate on their driving.

It is not unusual for a pursuit to enter a neighboring city or an area that the aircrew is unfamiliar with. If neither crewmember knows the names of the streets, the TFO might be able to read street signs with binoculars, but the TFO should not use binoculars during the majority of the pursuit. There is too much peripheral information outside their field of view that can affect the safety of officers and citizens. If the aircraft is equipped with a moving map, the names of the streets can often be read right off the display. Workload permitting, the pilot may even be able to read them and provide them to the TFO. This frees up the TFO so he or she can pay more attention to the pursuit itself.

If the aircrew does not know the names of the streets in the area, the TFO should instruct the second ground unit in the pursuit to call out the name of the street but nothing more. The TFO should continue to provide everyone with the pursuit's location, its direction of travel, the vehicle's speed, traffic conditions, etc. Providing this information does more than just answer those questions; it reassures everyone that the pursuit is under control and that the suspect is not going to get away.

If the TFO stops providing that information simply because he or she does not know the names of the streets, the ground units will start calling the pursuit themselves. They will feel the need to drive faster and take additional risks to keep the suspect in sight. When TFOs are no longer calling the pursuit and are simply watching or recording it, the safety benefits of the helicopter are lost.

Editor's Note: Kevin Means is an ALEA past president and instructor. This article was excerpted from the his book, "Tactical Helicopter Missions," which can be purchased on ALEA's website. Log on to www.alea.org and look under the merchandise section for details.