

# FIVE TRAITS that Make a Good TFO

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What makes a good tactical flight officer (TFO)? There is a wide range of opinions on this topic, and it really depends on what tasks an aviation unit is asking of its TFOs. Because different units have varying mission priorities, it is difficult to place all TFOs into one category, but I do believe that all TFOs must possess certain traits or skills in order to do the job successfully.

Choosing the right person for this challenging job is an incredible challenge in and of itself. Unit managers and command staff struggle with this across North America. The crystal ball has yet to be located to complete the task of TFO selection, so we must look around the industry and see what works and what does not work.

One of the obvious problems in the selection of TFOs is that many managers making the selection do not have a thorough understanding of exactly what the job entails. Some think that all you need is an outstanding street cop to place into an aircraft, and he or she will be perfect. If only it were that easy, and if only that were true. Some of the best street cops in the country are completely inept at the job of TFO. Many traits of the street cop translate well to the cockpit, but there is so much more involved when you enter the cockpit of a law enforcement aircraft.

The TFO of 2009 must have a great deal of skill in many areas. However, based on my own experience and conversations with other experienced police aviators, the following five traits were selected as the most important traits shared by good TFOs.

## **1 COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

This should be number one on everyone's list, because this is what makes or breaks a good TFO. It is a broad topic of discussion and includes many aspects of communication, but I will try to hit the highlights.

A clear, calm voice is a good place to start. A TFO is going to broadcast very important information over the radio and needs to not only be heard, but also understood. If officers on the ground are constantly asking a TFO to repeat what he or she just said, the TFO must project his or her voice and be heard.

Command presence also should be included when talking about communication. There will be times when every TFO must take charge of a situation. Not all cops have the command presence needed to lead others into a tactical situation, but TFOs must. The nature of the job will place aircrews into critical situations where a strong leader will provide direction to keep others safe. The TFO is often that leader, and a good TFO is invaluable for those scenarios.

Unit managers and command staff must recognize that it is not if, but when, a tactical flight officer will be over a life or death situation and be the difference in the ultimate outcome. For that reason alone, it is imperative that the correct individual is inside the cockpit calling the shots.

Being calm, clear and concise and having command presence will not only help a TFO be effective, it also will keep officers on the ground safe.

## **2 KNOWLEDGE OF TACTICS**

Having a sound tactical background is a vital trait for all TFOs. As important as communication is, the words being said must be based on sound tactics. In other words, it is not just how you say it, but what you say.

Sound tactics come from experience on the street. A brand new street cop would struggle coordinating tactics from above for obvious reasons. That is just one reason why having a minimum amount of patrol time should be required before an officer can apply for a TFO position.

Providing tactical insight is what aircrews do over almost every call. A confident tactician is a great asset on the ground and in the air. This is a trait that should be a priority when selecting TFOs. The ground officers they will support deserve a sound tactical thinker up above.

## **3 MULTI-TASKING**

This is a trait that is difficult to observe until the person is in the TFO seat doing the job. All pilots possess varying abilities to multi-task because the aircraft and job demand it. The TFO job is no different. Think of all of the things we ask our TFOs to do at the same time they are operating complex mission equipment. The best TFOs I have had the pleasure of working with or observing from the back seat are excellent multi-taskers.

This is one of those traits that is difficult to teach. Experience in the cockpit environment will automatically increase multi-tasking ability, but not always to an acceptable level. Teaching the basics and discussing multi-tasking early in a TFO's training will help, but they either have it or they don't.

#### **4 NAVIGATION SKILLS**

From my personal experience training new TFOs and from speaking with hundreds of aircrews over the years, it is clear that this area can make or break a TFO candidate. If a new TFO can not navigate to a call, he or she will never be able to use any other skills to complete the mission.

Navigation is a big part of every mission in which law enforcement aviation is involved. Every TFO must be instructed in navigation techniques that do not involve technology. Computers can fail and lock up, so the TFO must possess map skills that include being able to correlate what they are looking at in the map book to what they are looking at outside the cockpit. Anyone can learn to look up a call and pinpoint it in a map book. The trick is learning how to see that map outside of the cockpit. The fact is that many very intelligent street cops cannot do this no matter how much you train them.

Sense of direction is part of navigation, and I believe this is something we are born with. You can teach officers different techniques that will assist them in knowing which way a suspect is running as the helicopter is rapidly orbiting, but many fine officers have found that they get the direction wrong most of the time in these scenarios. Other officers with less street experience and the exact same instruction get the direction correct 99 percent of the time. Why? Natural sense of direction may be the answer. Some officers do not have this ability, and this trait is vital for the air operations we are asked to perform.

#### **5 INTEGRITY**

This was not on my original list, but it came from an experienced law enforcement aviator. After he explained why it was in his top five, I had no choice but to add it.

Integrity is a trait all law enforcement officers must possess. It is the trait that provides us credibility and the trust of our superiors and the public we serve. As aircrews, we are over numerous incidents supporting the officers on the ground, and we are trusted to do the right thing. It can be difficult at times, but doing what is right must be a TFO's guide when making decisions.

Integrity also comes into play inside the cockpit. A TFO is an equal part of a crew, and any decision a pilot makes—good or bad—can and will affect the TFO. Having the integrity to stand up and be counted if something is not right is the correct and safe thing to do. A TFO is being given a very expensive piece of equipment flying over a populated area in a very risky profession. He or she must not abuse that privilege or allow others to abuse it. A TFO is part of a small elite team of law enforcement aviators, and some of the decisions he or she makes can affect all of us.

Many other traits and skills could have made this list, and I hope that you discuss within your units more traits that you think are important. This is an important topic that many times is overlooked. Selecting the right person for any position in law enforcement is vital, but it is even more critical for the job of TFO.

TFOs have the most challenging job in law enforcement and must be carefully selected to do that job. The TFO job is not for everyone, but those that make it through the training have a rewarding position that helps keep the public and the officers they support safe every time they get airborne. We are very fortunate to have that responsibility.

Editor's Note: Jack H. Schonely has been working on the front lines of law enforcement in a wide variety of field assignments for over 27 years. He is an ALEA member and instructor of ALEA's Tactical Flight Officer's Course. Schonely is also the author of the book "Apprehending Fleeing Suspects: Suspect Tactics and Perimeter Containment," which can be purchased at [www.alea.org](http://www.alea.org) or by writing [jack@officertactics.com](mailto:jack@officertactics.com).