

# **SCREENING, TESTING, INTERVIEWING & CHECKING: *Choosing the Right TFO Candidate***

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When an aviation unit is thinking of buying a new aircraft, there is an enormous amount of research that happens before the actual purchase is made. Unit managers research the new aircraft's operating and maintenance costs. Unit pilots fly the new aircraft several times to measure the aircraft's performance and handling. They speak to many other air units who have flown the new aircraft. A vast amount of time and resources goes into finding the right aircraft for the mission. Why don't we use the same well thought out process to hire the right people for the mission? Because people can make or break your unit just like a new aircraft can, finding the right candidate for the tactical flight officer (TFO) job is crucial. Following is a step-by-step outline of how to find a good TFO for your unit.

## **Where to Begin**

After talking with several unit managers, the San Diego (CA) Police Department (SDPD) learned most air units just hold an interview for their TFO openings. They usually pick the person who they liked the best or who gave the best interview. However, the more consideration made in hiring a qualified TFO candidate, the better off the air unit will be.

There are many fundamental skills required to be a safe and effective TFO. The TFO must be a calm, clear communicator, have good location and orientation skills, work efficiently with tactical equipment and have the ability to multitask. TFOs also should have good street cop senses.

Experienced street cops have a keen eye for spotting criminal activity and they have extensive knowledge of how criminals work. Oftentimes, just watching mannerisms of a person on a FLIR screen will tip off a good TFO that we've got our suspect. Likewise, good TFOs think like a criminal and ask themselves, "Where would I go if I was a gang member who just robbed a bank?" Lo and behold, the TFO checks a known "crip" house three blocks away and finds the suspect.

These hard chargers are cops who traditionally work busy patrol divisions, lead their squads in proactive stats, volunteer for special assignments and handle critical incidents exceptionally well. In addition, the new TFO must have good interpersonal skills and the ability to work in a small team environment.

A structured process of application, testing, interviewing and researching can help find the right TFO for the mission.

## **The Application Process**

Units receive many applications for the one or two TFO spots that are generally available in an airborne police unit. If we are looking for good, experienced street cops, our application process should automatically weed out anyone without the needed experience.

Each department is different, but the SDPD requires a minimum of four years patrol experience before an officer can apply for the unit. The more years of patrol experience an applicant has, the better. The average amount of patrol experience for our new TFOs is eight to 10 years.

While viewing a TFO application, pay close attention to the officer's career history. How many commands or special assignments has he or she worked? Again, more is better. Officers who have worked many commands have an easier time navigating in the city and know more hot spots in our neighborhoods. Any officers who have worked SWAT or proactive street units usually have more tactical knowledge and handle critical incidents very well.

Does the applicant have aviation experience? Although it is not necessary to have aviation experience to apply for a TFO position, it's always a big plus, especially if your unit is looking for future pilots down the road.

## **Pre-Qualify By Testing**

If your human resources department allows testing, it is highly recommended to have some sort of practical application test to gauge technical skills. Please remember only to test applicants on something they are allowed to practice. It is not reasonable to have them operate your FLIR 8500 and follow a mock pursuit.

For example, SDPD tests candidates in radio operation and radio comprehension. This is something they can practice everyday in their patrol car. We ask them to complete a five-minute radio functions test. A TFO trainer and an applicant sit in a police car while the trainer reads verbatim from an instructions sheet. The test asks the candidate to perform a series of basic radio operations using the police car radio, which are the same radios in the aircraft. The applicants who know their radios will complete the test easily and quickly.

During the radio comprehension test, audio is played from real aircrew tapes while the applicants take notes on kneeboard paper. We give them six or seven scenarios, and ask them four relatively easy questions after each scenario like a suspect vehicle's make. Make sure the questions are not tricky, or your HR department might throw out your test.

It is a good idea to have your train ers or unit members try the scenarios as a litmus test. If your trainers cannot get the answer right, it's probably a bad question.

## **Interviewing the Applicant**

Since you are trying to find an exceptional tactical officer with a good personality, your interview questions should be structured on these anchors. Asking a candidate to describe one of their community oriented policing projects tells you nothing of their tactical or interpersonal skills. Instead, give your applicants real life scenarios as if they were TFOs in your aircraft. Ask them how they would handle certain tactical scenarios as the TFO.

Those applicants who do their homework (talk with aircrews and go on ride alongs) and who have good tactical skills will give exceptional answers. Since personality and interpersonal skills play an important role, give them a scenario dealing with hypothetical, confrontational situations between your personnel and the TFO.