

# University Recognizes Academic Importance Of Police Aviation

*By Andy Dobis, Arizona Department of Public Safety*

**In March 2009, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University began offering an undergraduate course designed solely for students interested in the profession of airborne law enforcement.**

The days of the “wild and wooly” street cop clamoring aboard a derelict, patched-together tail dragger are surely long gone, and the profession of policing from the air has grown tremendously. The melding of two professions, law enforcement and aviation, has resulted in a proven and effective means of enhancing public safety. What has changed over the years so that police pilots and tactical flight officers are now members of a profession instead of just “doing the job of a police pilot”?

It could be argued successfully that the profession of airborne law enforcement grew from the dedication and selfless acts of those that flew before us – the pilots and crews who proved to the brass, politicians, public and, most importantly, street cops that police aviation was not only a valuable asset, but an invaluable one.

So our profession of police aviation is now understood (until the budget needs cutting), and we think we know where we fit in the grand scheme of things. So now what – rest on the good work of the founders of our profession?

One way to build upon our founders’ good work is to further our profession’s education. Think of the bedrock, traditional professions. They all share one item: education. So it is fitting, as airborne law enforcement continues building upon its credibility as a profession, that the world’s largest, fully-accredited university specializing in aviation and aerospace, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, lends its might towards the endeavor.

Growing the knowledge base of the community to understand the mission of aviation law enforcement is certainly a worthwhile goal. Opening the often-closed doors of a tight knit community such as law enforcement aviation can be a good thing, especially if opening those doors lets aspiring pilots know that the end of the pilot training trail does not have to always mean the right seat of a shiny new regional jet. And, gaining insight into the history of your own profession – the real history – can be an eye opening experience.

Embry-Riddle launched the Airborne Law Enforcement program as another way to give students a broad reach and full understanding of the various career fields available in the greater aviation/aerospace industry. The Airborne Law Enforcement course complements the university’s large selection of aviation related courses. Even students other than pilots will find an interest in Airborne Law Enforcement. For example, an engineering student may eventually work for a corporation that is developing a next generation sensor system for the military that could have future applications for airborne law enforcement. Having an understanding of the needs of law enforcement and the application of such sensors could be a benefit at the front end of a development or modification program.

## The Curriculum

The Airborne Law Enforcement course is a study of law enforcement aviation units at all levels: local, county, state, federal and international. Operational, legal, safety, administrative, managerial and historical issues all are studied. The course puts emphasis on subjects such as the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 (18 U.S.C. 1385) and how it relates to the U.S. military and civilian law enforcement interactions. The course covers the history of law enforcement aviation, including the impact of the post-Vietnam war era on law enforcement aviation. The practice of law enforcement aviation units conducting air rescue and air medical missions, the various mediums airborne cameras utilize to conduct surveillance and search missions, the different types and models of aircraft operated and different missions conducted, along with the pros and cons of fixed-wing versus rotary wing aircraft, all are studied. The attributes of sworn pilots versus civilian pilots are explored, with students forming opinions on the pros and cons of each.

To enhance the course and to ensure the classroom work is backed up by real world experience, guest speakers are strongly encouraged. This gives the students a chance to interact with the local police pilots on a level that neither party would generally encounter. Depending on the location of the Embry-Riddle campus offering the class, a static display of an aircraft may be offered.

From a safety standpoint, students critically examine programs, culture, laws and actual accidents to discover the chain of events that cause unsafe situations that lead to accidents. Students explore what programs are put into place to lessen the chance of an accident as the profession seeks to reach the Holy Grail of aviation safety: zero accidents.

Current events, namely the economy and how budget cuts (or the threat of cuts) affect aviation units, equipment procurement, staffing, operations, maintenance, safety and the personal stresses that such cuts can take on crews also are studied. Best practices to insulate the air support organization from future cuts, such as stockpiling of maintenance parts and forward-thinking public relation events to constantly ensure the public of an air unit’s importance for public safety, are explored.

In short, the Airborne Law Enforcement program is an overview of the profession. It is a three credit hour, one semester course and does not pretend to be the end all to enhancing our profession through education. Actually, it's just the opposite. Airborne Law Enforcement is just the start of the academic world recognizing our career field as a profession.

*If you are involved with a professional airborne police organization and have a graduate degree, you may qualify to teach Airborne Law Enforcement. With more than 130 worldwide campuses, there is probably an Embry-Riddle location near you.*

*For more information and to discuss your qualifications, contact Dr. Gary Witt, director of academics, at the Phoenix Sky Harbor campus via phone at 602-275-5533 or [gary.witt@erau.edu](mailto:gary.witt@erau.edu). For general information about the Airborne Law Enforcement course, contact Andy Dobis, ALEA member, Arizona Department of Public Safety officer/pilot and instructor at (602)275-5533 or [dobis297@erau.edu](mailto:dobis297@erau.edu).*