

# WHAT THE TFO DOES

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**TFOs must work under extreme pressure in tight and confined aircraft environments. Why are they unsung heroes?**

Over the years, the TFO has been known as the observer, scout or a myriad of other less than descriptive (and sometimes derisive) names. Hardly reflecting the numerous duties and responsibilities of the position, these names indicate this position requires just looking out the aircraft window and helping the pilot. Today's TFO has a wide array of duties and responsibilities.

In routine and daily operations, the tactical flight officer is responsible for knowing daily crime reports, trends and conditions. The TFO usually must preflight and inspect any specific police or rescue mission equipment, including first aid equipment, automated external defibrillators, oxygen tanks, life rafts, etc. The TFO must have a comprehensive understanding of the aviation-specific side of the operation, even if he or she has no formal aviation training.

During a flight mission, the TFO's primary duty is to maintain flight safety. This means helping out with numerous flight duties, such as collision avoidance, radio management and looking at any other conditions that could affect flight safety. The TFO must also manage the emergency response radios. The modern law enforcement aircraft has amazing capabilities, and the radio packages are usually quite sophisticated. It is not unusual for the TFO to have to manage up to five frequencies at a time.

Finally, the TFO must manage the forward-looking infrared (FLIR), searchlights and aviation mapping computers. This position can become very workload-intensive, particularly during a fast-paced and dynamic assignment. For example, during a vehicle pursuit, the TFO is tasked with transmitting information on the pursuit, working the video camera and keeping an eye on flight safety. If electronic newsgathering (ENG) aircraft are on scene, the workload increases dramatically. Not only does the TFO have all of the above duties, he or she is constantly assisting the pilot in avoiding ENG aircraft. Under most circumstances, ENG aircraft give law enforcement aircraft a wide berth. However, there have been mid-air collisions between ENG aircraft while covering a scene. There are usually personnel on at least two or three frequencies asking the airborne law enforcement aircraft for information on the pursuit, and often the airborne crew is exchanging information amongst themselves via their intercoms.

Like their ground counterparts, TFOs must make decisions in seconds. During a recent vehicle pursuit in a major east coast city, a police helicopter was following a stolen vehicle along a highway. As they approached the city's major international airport, which was busy handling arrivals and departures, air traffic control needed to hold the police helicopter momentarily to avoid two landing airliners. As it became evident to the airborne law enforcement crew that there was some apprehension, confusion and doubt among the commercial airliners, the TFO decided, in the interest of safety, to terminate the pursuit. Total time to make the decision: five to 10 seconds.

Anytime there is interaction with ground officers, the TFO has a very high workload. During a foot pursuit, the TFO must attempt to follow the subject, direct ground officers and manage the radios. Sometimes the directing of ground units can get awkward, because the TFO is usually not a ranking officer or supervisor, and ground units might resent being told what to do by the TFO. The airborne law enforcement unit does have a unique perspective and sometimes can see gaps in the perimeter or other conditions that need attention and must request ground units to address these concerns.

The TFO must also learn the duties and responsibilities of the pilot, including reading aviation charts, understanding aircraft performance and, in some cases, knowing emergency flight training procedures.

Crew resource management (CRM) is always a priority for the TFO. CRM requires the officer to remember that all information and all crewmembers play a vital and integral role in the safety of flight. Crewmembers are encouraged – in fact they are mandated – to speak up if they have any concerns about flight safety.

TFOs must be team players with patrol experience and an excellent geographic understanding of the jurisdiction. The ability to work under extreme pressure in a tight and confined aircraft environment is crucial. Interpersonal skills are essential. It is not unusual for a high-ranking member of the department to interact with flight crews regarding an assignment or mission. Specialized experience, especially tactical work such as SWAT, can be beneficial. The understanding and insight on a developing tactical assignment can be of great advantage to the TFO when conducting command and control for such assignments.

An intangible skill TFOs must employ is an understanding and knowledge of his or her jurisdiction, which means not only the streets but also parks, schools, auto-dumping areas and potential trouble spots.

Yes, the pilots might get the accolades, but without the tactical flight officer, the airborne law enforcement unit becomes just another aircraft in the sky.

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