

Standing Out When It Counts

Text & photos by Mark Brett, Penticton Western News, Canada

Two female pilots for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police find it easy to stand out on the force, but not because of their gender.

As much as Constable Jodeen Cassidy likes to stay out of the limelight, in 2001, the Kamloops Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Air Services Section pilot became immersed in a matter that kept her phone ringing for months. Finding herself playing a role in a story that made headlines around the world, journalists would not leave her alone.

In late May of that year, Cassidy and an observer were searching for and located a sports car that had been missing for eight days. Incredibly, the 19-year-old driver was found injured, dehydrated and semiconscious, but he was still alive.

"It was really just common sense," Cassidy said. "I've driven that route a lot, and I thought, where do you get tired? So, we narrowed our search patterns and saw it, just a little bit of red through the trees down a steep embankment. We landed in a field just up the highway, and the observer went to check, not expecting him to be alive, but he was, just barely. That's what we get paid for, and it's a wonderful job when you can do that. It's hard to put a dollar value on it."

Kathy Stewart, who is the second of only two female helicopter pilots in the RCMP, described the find as representative of her friend's tenacity on the job and an overall reflection of the value of air service. "When you can make a difference in a life or death situation like that one, it makes it all worthwhile," she said.

It is also those successes that she said make it a little easier for pilots to drag themselves out of bed in the middle of the night to respond to an emergency, leaving the family to fly off to some remote section of the coverage area for an undetermined amount of time.

"We have a really good family life, but 'mom' is the totally unreliable one," said Stewart, who has two young boys. "But we just recognize that that's part of mom's career choice. I'm blessed with a really supportive husband who knows the demands of the industry. If he was to have a breakdown every time I was unexpectedly called away, we would not have the family life that we have."

Cassidy also has a young child at home, having waited a little later to start a family. She admits it sometimes can be tricky to do a good job at both all the time, but she looks at it as a learning experience that will only improve. From the time she leaves home to becoming airborne, she has about 20 minutes to make the transition from domestic to professional.

"I'm glad it's a 20-minute ride to work, because enroute to the hangar you can mentally prepare your fuel, gear, whether you need the basket on outside of the aircraft or a long line," she said. "It's not a leisurely drive."

While Cassidy and Stewart are the only female helicopter pilots for the RCMP, their skills in the sky easily transcend any perceived gender boundaries. Whether it's finding a missing teenager, adrenaline-pumping criminal pursuits or routine staff transport, it's all in a day's work for the pair.

The Air Services Branch of the RCMP is a critical piece of operational infrastructure, which supports police operations in every part of Canada.

Presently, 72 pilots and 43 aircraft maintenance engineers stationed at 19 bases constitute the unit. There are a total of eight women.

"I think if you have a competent set of hands, male or female, it doesn't make a difference and isn't really an issue," said Stewart, who is a civilian member of the national police force air section based in Edmonton. "When I first got my [commercial helicopter] license in the 1980s, there were 12 [women] who had them and only two of us were working, so it was a lot more of a fish bowl environment and a bit out of the ordinary, but I certainly don't think about it any more."

Cassidy, who pilots an AS350 B3 at the Kamloops RCMP Air Services Section, has been with the agency for 27 years and with the aviation section for seven years.

"I really don't think that it is that remarkable; there is still an element of surprise for some people, but I would say that 90 percent of the population has long gotten past the gender issue," she said. "In my policing career, I've never had an issue with my gender. Some others have, but I haven't."

Tony Danford, an RCMP helicopter engineer in Kamloops, knows first hand the skill level of his co-worker. "I've flown with her a few times, and she is very smooth and very professional. She does things by the book," he said. "She's very methodical with her approaches, she thinks things through. The gender thing does not enter into it at all. As far as I can see, gender is not even a question; it comes down to a person's ability. She's just a joy to work with."

Cassidy started her police career on the ground, working as a regular duty member for 17 years before leaving the RCMP for several years to earn her license and flying experience.

"Many years ago, I had the opportunity to see the police helicopter operate and thought that was a pretty good job that guy's got," she said, remembering when she first considered the career change. "It combined my flying interests - my father was a pilot, both helicopter and fixed-wing, so it's always been in my background - with policing." The problem was there was no guarantee she would even receive a job with RCMP, but it was a chance she was willing to take, and it paid off. She became the first female rotary pilot for the agency.

Cassidy first met Stewart (who later became her boss in the commercial sector flying for Canadian Helicopters Ltd. in Alberta) while building up her flying hours. The more the two got to know each other, the more interested Stewart became in police work. So, when the agency's policy change to hire civilian pilots became effective, Stewart jumped at the chance.

"When Jodeen went back to the RCMP, I thought, what a great job police work is," she recalled. "It's interesting, you're flying good equipment, you're making a difference and using your operational skills in a different environment."

Both pilots downplayed their personal contributions, instead praising the efforts of the officers on the ground. Cassidy and Stewart credited their engineers for the outstanding work they do to keep the helicopters airworthy and ready to go at a moment's notice. "They're really the unsung heroes," Cassidy said.

And both are looking ahead to the ongoing challenges of the job, which, for one or both, could include support work for the 2010 Olympic Games. "That could be real interesting, because RCMP will likely be playing a major role with the security," Cassidy said. "But also, I can't forget my personal life. In addition to maintaining the standards of being a good pilot and a good police officer, it is very important to me to be a good mom and spouse. It is making those 'roles' balance that makes each day challenging. If I can maintain a sense of humor and keep up with my schedule, then I

feel like it was a good day."