

How To Sell Law Enforcement Aviation

By Ken Solosky, NYPD Aviation Unit

Everyone assigned to airborne law enforcement units knows the value, capability and advantages of this very specialized trade. The ability of officers to perform a multitude of missions, assignments and rescues safely and effectively is common knowledge. Or is it?

After a successful rescue of two pilots that had crashed into a river, a major east coast agency received positive media attention. The rescue made national headlines and was broadcast on all the major national networks. Everyone should have known of the training, crew coordination and teamwork that is necessary for such a successful outcome. But during the debriefing, the executive officer of the overhead command remarked, "Well, aviation personnel are just like taxi drivers, they brought the scuba divers to the scene, and the divers performed the rescue." This was an assignment that brought nothing but positive accolades and good press. If this is what the second-in-command of the division thinks, what exactly do they think downtown?

The City of Detroit is famous for many things, including being known as the Motor City and the birth of Motown. Unfortunately, Detroit also has earned a reputation for crime. Nevertheless, the city's aviation unit was recently shut down, and its helicopter was sold. The tenth largest city in the U.S. and the eighth largest metropolitan area, clearly with a need for airborne law enforcement capability, now has to rely on neighboring jurisdictions or the state police for airborne assets.

Unfortunately, decision makers in the various agencies that use airborne units do not always understand their value. Rather than being looked upon as a resource, the airborne law enforcement unit is sometimes viewed as strange and mythical. Add in the fact that airborne law enforcement units are usually located far away from headquarters at airports or other remote sites and it is easy to see how these units become isolated and misunderstood. So when the budget saber is rattled, or when the mayor and city council want to make cuts to show their zeal and commitment to lowering taxes, airborne law enforcement often takes a hit simply because of its high one-time costs and lack of exposure.

To avoid such cuts, make certain that when the budget axe is being sharpened, no one would dare touch the airborne law enforcement unit, because it is far too valuable. The outcry from the street officers, supervisors and command staff should be loud and clear. The community should rally and protest any threat to their airborne law enforcement unit. Elected officials, fully aware of a unit's value, shouldn't permit any reductions. Even our allies in the media should support us.

But how exactly does an airborne unit sell itself and rally that kind of support? The answer lies in proactive police work and proactive internal and external public relations. Sound difficult? It does not have to be. While on routine patrol, back up a unit or squad on a car stop. Loiter in the area and perhaps light up the scene with the night sun

(if tactically sound). The street officers will remember your concern. Respond to in-progress assignments and make certain the street officers know your presence above. Respond to assignments without being requested. Very quickly, the sense that the aviation unit really does care about their ground counterparts will be evident. The support and backing from the street officer for his or her aviation unit will be strong.

Aviation unit commanders and supervisors should make it a point to always sell their unit and its capabilities. If a police chief or precinct commanding officer has a sudden and alarming rise in burglaries, consider their appreciation when the aviation unit offers a well-formulated and sound tactical plan to help him or her address the condition. It shows a unit that is in-tune with the department's issues, concerns, conditions and trends. More importantly, it clearly demonstrates the aviation unit as ready, willing and able to assist with these issues. Goodwill will be generated if the burglaries drop after the aviation unit implements their tactical plan. The chief or commander may include the aviation unit in future plans and become an ally when cutbacks or other reductions are considered.

Has the department suffered a media "black eye" due to a particular incident? Perhaps airborne law enforcement can assist. For example, say an agency is suffering from serious negative publicity from a vehicle pursuit during which a ground unit had an auto accident causing non-participant injuries. This would be an ideal time for the aviation unit to sell their capabilities to conduct vehicle pursuits safely and effectively.

Do district attorneys (DAs) and crime scene technicians know the value of airborne photographs for a trial or investigation? Invite them for a ride-along and show them. Once a DA realizes that aerial photos greatly enhance their cases, you may win over another supporter and friend of airborne law enforcement.

Offer your services to other agencies and allow them to see your capabilities. In every jurisdiction, there are local, state and federal agencies all working in different capacities. Make certain all these agencies can utilize your services, within certain guidelines, and help them to perform their duties more effectively. Make your unit not only a department asset, but a regional asset as well.

If your department is planning a major event in the months ahead, airborne law enforcement should get involved. Reach out to the planners and commanders. Let them see both your concern and the unique and unparalleled perspective that airborne law enforcement gives them.

Never pass up the chance to showcase the unit. Plant the seed during basic police academy training; show new officers what you can do. Conduct training at all levels of promotion courses to demonstrate how airborne law enforcement makes the job easier and more effective.

Elected officials should be contacted and relationships established. New York State Senator Michael Balboni, R-N.Y., chairs the NYC Homeland Security Committee and remarked, "I can't stress how important it is for local response agencies to allow their elected officials to help them acquire the tools and equipment to do their jobs. Good communication between the agency and their elected representatives identifies needs and objectives, and then allows us a chance to pursue those needs."

Give your elected representatives a chance for ride-alongs. Let them see first hand what you do and how you do it. Make sure they understand the value of their airborne law enforcement unit. Let them know exactly how their money is being used and how

professionally and effectively your unit does its work. Prepare an executive summary at least yearly that not only offers statistics, such as flight hours and assignments, but also conveys a sense of the training, experience and commitment that is needed for a safe, competent and professional unit. Always strive to keep airborne law enforcement in elected officials' minds in a positive light.

Finally, always let the community know of your successes. Positive press highlighting the good work a unit is doing is invaluable. Reporters don't always have to be the enemy. Make the local media aware of your good work. Develop a positive relationship with them so they can be called on to highlight a rescue. Make airborne law enforcement aviation in your particular community a known and respected entity. Static displays when and where possible show the community that aviation is a part of their lives, allowing everyone to put a face on the crews and promoting the work being done.