

# Courtesy, Service & Protection: 73 Years For Lone Star State's Police Aircraft Section

By Sgt. Wade Ford and Chief Pilot Jack Reichert, Texas Dept. of Public Safety Aircraft Section

The Texas Department of Public Safety's (DPS's) Aircraft Section was organized in 1935 with the primary purpose of monitoring traffic. In 1949, agency leaders determined a need to transport personnel more efficiently. The first aircraft, a Navion single-engine airplane, was purchased, and one patrolman was transferred in as the first commissioned pilot. Increased demands for aerial support prompted the addition of a second pilot in 1952.

In 1967, the DPS acquired its first two helicopters. Stationed in Dallas and Austin, the Bell 47G made a positive impact and proved to be highly effective for law enforcement missions. These aircraft were in high demand by ground personnel, and soon the DPS needed to upgrade its rotorcraft equipment.

In 1969, the Bell Jet Ranger came into service for the agency. Seven helicopters began serving the needs of Texas law enforcement in Austin, Dallas, Corpus Christi, Houston, Lubbock, Midland and Waco. By 1975, the Jet Ranger was the workhorse of the DPS helicopter fleet.

The requests for SAR missions increased during the next 12 years, and with new technology and rising demands for additional performance, the department decided to upgrade to a newer, stronger helicopter. The transition to replace the Bell Jet Rangers with AS 350 (A-Star) helicopters began in 1984. The A-Star provided additional power, lift and incorporated more police specialized equipment, which included thermal imaging, nightsun, GPS, LoJack and ETS tracking equipment, as well as other options depending on the age of the specific aircraft.

In the summer of 2008, the existing fleet of nine A-Stars will be dramatically increased to include five new AS 350 B2 machines. A special operations helicopter, an American Eurocopter EC-145, will be delivered this summer, as well, bringing the fleet to 14 helicopters. The Austin-based EC-145 will assist in SWAT operations, disaster evacuations and rescues using its hoist and perform disaster reconnaissance, search and rescue missions and other special law enforcement needs. Four new flight stations are scheduled to open in 2009 along the Texas/Mexico border, and the opening of another aviation station is scheduled to occur in Amarillo.

In addition to its helicopters, the Texas DPS currently operates five Cessna 206s and two Cessna 210s. These single-engine aircraft support ground law enforcement with any request. The aircraft are stationed across the regions of Texas to provide quick response to the needs of local agencies. To assist in long distance needs, a Gulfstream Commander 1000 is operated out of Austin. That aircraft is used for special assignments and the extradition of prisoners in the U. S. In fiscal year 2007, 44 percent of the flight hours made with the Commander were outside of Texas.

The Texas DPS employs over 8,264 employees with over 3,816 commissioned officers. It is the largest law enforcement agency in Texas with a responsibility to over 21 million people in 254 counties. The geographic area of Texas covers more than 250,000 square miles.

Any Texas DPS commissioned personnel is eligible to apply to become a pilot after four years of service if he or she possesses a private pilot license. Additional training and ratings are provided on the job. To become a pilot-in-command of a DPS aircraft, a pilot must accrue a minimum of 240 hours of flight time in the specific make and model aircraft. The goal of the aviation unit is to have all Texas DPS pilots rated to fly both airplanes and helicopters.

Chief Pilot Jack Reichert and Pilot Bill Nabors head the Aircraft Section. Reichert has 26 years in the aviation unit and has accumulated over 8,500 accident-free flight hours and 7,000 hours flying DPS aircraft. Assistant Chief Nabors, also a veteran of Texas DPS with 15 years in the Aviation unit, has over 4,000 accident-free DPS flight hours. The quick growth by the section, both in equipment and personnel, could not have been accomplished without the excellent leadership provided by Reichert and Nabors. Both men developed and maintained exceptional working relationships with agency leaders and members of the Texas Legislature.

Training and safety are constantly stressed. All pilots receive training throughout the year in various procedures and emergency operations. Tim Ochsner is a full-time aircraft training/safety captain who oversees this need.

In 2006, the Aircraft Section received funds from the Division of Emergency Management to provide all pilots with night vision goggle (NVG) training. In addition, all helicopters were equipped with two sets of NVGs, and the cockpits were retrofitted for NVG lighting requirements. The NVGs not only have dramatically increased the safety of the unit, but also have had a direct impact on pilot confidence and effectiveness during night operations.

The efficiency and effectiveness in the cockpit also has been increased with the addition of full-time TFOs. This allows the unit's pilots to focus on their primary responsibility: to fly the aircraft.

All DPS helicopters are equipped with thermal imaging devices. In the first three months of 2008, in border security operations alone, this technology has been instrumental in the apprehension of over 350 fugitives.

Maintenance of the helicopters and airplanes is done in Austin by state mechanics employed by the Texas Department of Transportation. Each aircraft receives an inspection every 100 hours. The maintenance on the aircraft is proactive, replacing worn parts before they become a problem.

## **Success From the Air**

How valuable is an aerial platform in law enforcement work? For Texas DPS, the results speak volumes.

In 2007, a DPS helicopter was called to assist ground units searching for an elderly man suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The man had wandered away from a rural cottage. Searchers on horseback, foot and 4-wheelers had failed to locate the man for six hours. The helicopter arrived on location, took on two observers, and located the lost man on the first pass within the first minute of flight in a dense group of trees about 500 yards from the cottage. The man was unharmed.

But perhaps the most notable rescue occurred in 2006. A two-year old boy disappeared from a home in a rural wooded location. A search was started immediately. Two days of air and ground search yielded no results. However, on the fourth day, one determined DPS pilot, along with his tactical flight officer (TFO), returned to the search area on their day off. Flying over a previously searched area, the flight crew located the lost boy. The helicopter landed, rescued the boy, and immediately flew him to a local hospital. Miraculously, the boy was only suffering from dehydration and numerous insect bites. This rescue landed the flight crew on Good Morning America.

As Texas DPS Director Thomas A. Davis, Jr. once said, "What is the cost of a helicopter when compared to a child's life?"

With the addition of new aircraft, personnel, high tech equipment and five new flight stations, the Texas DPS Aircraft Section will be able to provide faster response times to pursue criminal activities and law enforcement requests for aerial coverage to Texas agencies.

## **TEXAS DPS AIRCRAFT SECTION 2007 Statistics**

6,257 -total hours flown  
2,686 -total missions  
1,787 -criminal investigations  
419 -narcotics investigations  
738 -suspects located  
566 -felony arrests

51 -missing persons located  
\$3.7 -million stolen property located  
\$43.7 -million narcotics recovered