

Houston: Home to Airborne Education

By **Kenneth J. Solosky**

Although Houston, TX, is known by various nicknames, officially it is "Space City," because it is home to NASA's Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center. Other unofficial nicknames include "Bayou City," for it is home to 10 winding waterways that flow through the region. But for the week of July 14-19, 2008, Houston was home for the Airborne Law Enforcement Association's 38th Annual Conference and Exposition at the George R. Brown Convention Center.

The Houston Police Department Air Support Division was the host agency, and ALEA President Dan Schwarzbach and the Board of Directors welcomed more than 150 vendors and 1,000 attendees to this year's conference.

As in past years, the main conference was preceded by an array of pre-conference courses. The course offerings continued to focus on the subjects most requested by ALEA members. Pre-conference courses included Advanced Thermal Imaging, Aircraft Accident Investigation, Aviation Safety Management, Aviation Unit Manager's Course, Flight Instructor Refresher, Maintenance IA Renewal Course, NVG Operations, Tactical Flight Officers Course, Disaster Response Training, and Flight Ops and Improving Internal Communications. ALEA Education Program Manager Jim DiGiovanni was pleased with the strong attendance at the courses and, in particular, the large amount of walk-up students.

On Monday, July 14, the corner of Lamar Avenue and Avenue de las Americas became a heliport, as various manufacturers flew in their aircraft for display at the expo. ALEA members could be found snapping digital photos and shooting video of arriving aircraft from Bell Helicopter Textron, AugustaWestland, American Eurocopter, Robinson, MD Helicopter, Enstrom and Schweizer. The intersection was secured with the assistance of the Houston Police Department, and all aircraft arrived under the watchful eye of a crash-rescue team from George Bush International Airport.

Cessna Aircraft, which had considered flying in a fixed-wing aircraft for display could not solve all the logistical hurdles associated with that endeavor and opted to show off their aircraft at Ellington Field. They had three airframes on display: the 206, 208 and new 400.

On Wednesday, July 16, the main conference opened with 156 affiliate members displaying aircraft, as well as the latest cutting-edge equipment and training offered in the airborne law enforcement industry.

Several manufacturers delivered new aircraft to agencies from around the country, including Bell Helicopter-Textron, which delivered a Bell 407 to the King County (WA) Sheriff's Department. American Eurocopter delivered a new aircraft to the Texas Department of Public Safety, a "fully-law-enforcement-outfitted" 350B2 A-Star. MD Helicopters was still celebrating their recent deal with the Houston Police Department for eight MD 500Es. Robinson Helicopter also delivered a law enforcement R-44 to the New Hanover (NC) County Sheriff's Office, a new start-up aviation unit.

Although the educational opportunities and exposition are the main draws of the conference, networking opportunities were in full swing. AugustaWestland, Avalex, Bell Helicopter Textron, FLIR, MD Helicopter, Turbomeca and Wulfsberg sponsored various networking events. Participants also took tours of the NASA Space Center, and numerous ALEA members attended the Cubs-Astros game at nearby Minute Maid Park on Friday evening.

The conference officially ended on Saturday, July 19, with an awards luncheon. This year's ALEA award presentations included the Captain "Gus" Crawford Memorial Air Crew of the Year Award, which went to Corporal Kurt Franklin and Deputy Chad Marlatt of the Riverside County (CA) Sheriff's Aviation Unit. The Robert L. Cormier Memorial Award went to Commander Dan Bitton of the Winthrop Harbor Police in Illinois. This award celebrated Bitton's involvement in creating a successful volunteer air support operation.

ALEA also awarded 13 scholarships to the children of ALEA members to help further their education (see sidebar at left). Six of the scholarships are made possible through the donations of various ALEA affiliate members.

The guest speaker for the luncheon was Rep. Ted Poe (R-Texas). Poe offered a speech on his career as a prosecutor, judge and congressman. He emphasized the important work being done by the men and women

of law enforcement and stressed that “one person can make a huge impact” in the world. Poe drove home his point with a moving story of how one Galveston police officer was the difference in winning a conviction in a child sex offender case.

The luncheon also featured a “table of honor” set in front of the dais. The table, with full place settings, remains empty as a reminder of our lost colleagues. It serves as both a tribute and a reminder of the ultimate sacrifice made by airborne law enforcement aviators over the last year.

As vendors and delegates packed their bags, many participants were already marking their calendars and making plans to attend next year’s conference to be held in the City of Savannah, GA, on July 22-25, 2009.