



Perris Press Release

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Sheriff Department's Aviation Patrols Complement Ground Services

From their hangar just east of Perris, pilots from the Riverside County Sheriff Department's aviation unit patrols the skies over the City, searching for missing children and adults, searching for criminal activity and suspicious peoples and providing an unequalled "eye-in-the-sky" view of neighborhoods, schools, roads and businesses. The aviation unit provides a vital element in the City's umbrella of law enforcement services, which include ground-based patrol units, divers, mounted patrols and forensics specialists all stationed in Perris.

Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough recently took a ride in one of the department's five helicopters to learn first-hand about the aviation unit, get an up-close look at the challenges air-based deputies face daily and express the City's continuing support for the spectrum of services provided.



Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough exchanges information about the City's aviation unit with deputies Eric Bashta and Michael Calhoun during a chat at the aviation hangar in Hemet.

"Money well spent."



This 33-million candlepower searchlight can penetrate the best hiding places when law officers search for hidden suspects.

Yarbrough said after climbing out of the Euro-copter A-Star helicopter after an hour on patrol with deputies Michael Calhoun and Eric Bashta. "We've got to make sure our law officers have all the available tools necessary to keep our residents as safe as possible. This is one of those tools. We've got to make sure we keep it."

The City's public safety expenditures represent the largest portion of the current Perris budget. Police and fire protection total nearly \$15.9 million of the City's \$26.06 million general fund. Crime in Perris has declined by more than 20 percent in the last five years.

Deputies flying in a helicopter can see as much as 16 officers on the ground. Airborne crews spend up to six or seven hours each shift in the air, racking up hundreds of air miles a day.

The sheriff's aviation unit is based at Hemet-Ryan Airport, about five minutes by air east of the City. From there, deputies assigned to the aero-squad fly all over Riverside County—from Corona to Blythe, the San Geronio Pass to the San Diego County line. During a typical shift, helicopter deputies might be called to help in the search for a stolen car, provide air cover for a ground-based officer dispatched to a remote location, scan a neighborhood for graffiti, thefts and vandalism or search for a missing toddler or Alzheimer's patients.

Lost and injured hikers are a common call. In one year, the helicopter detail assisted in locating 57 hikers.

Although based in Hemet, helicopters sometimes land at the pad at the Perris sheriff's station, underscoring the City's importance as a center of law-enforcement activity in western Riverside County. Sheriff's Capt. John Hill, who serves as the chief of the Perris station, said airborne patrol provides the "the perfect complement to our officers on the ground."

"I know of many occasions where our air units have assisted with crime scene documentation, investigations, police pursuits, suspect apprehensions, and search and rescue operations," Hill said. "By having a helicopter on scene of a critical incident, we enhance officer and public safety, and provide a powerful deterrent against continued illegal activity. Our aviation unit is an asset to the police department's crime prevention efforts within the City of Perris."

The unit employs some high-tech wizardry to assist them.

Helicopters sport an infrared camera ideal for spotting hidden or fleeing suspects at night. A 33-million candlepower searchlight also helps locate people in the dark. Imaging equipment onboard can take pictures and send them via a downlink transmitter to officers on the ground—ideal in assisting in calls about barricaded suspects when ground units may not have a complete picture of potential hiding places.

Helicopter cops also make use specialized binoculars capable of compensating for the vibrations inherent in flying and making it possible for officers to read license plates while from hundreds of feet in the air, where choppers often cruise at 100 to 120-mph.

The job poses risks not encountered by land-based patrols. A single bird can damage or bring down a helicopter. Kites can tangle a helicopter's rotors. Remote-controlled airplanes launched from short runways also pose hazards as do other small aircraft, power lines and radio and cell phone towers. Once in a while, an angry suspect will take a shot at the sheriff's helicopter.

Sheriff Cpl. Andy Rasmussen said law enforcement's connection to aviation dates back to the 1940s. For decades it the unit was small, often consisting of a single pilot who flew part-time. In the 1990s, helicopters were introduced. Today the sheriff department's air fleet includes five helicopters and a Cessna fixed-wing plane and 17 personnel.

The process of becoming a seasoned helicopter pilot and flight officer is lengthy—five years from the start of training to accomplished aviator. Some of the pilots in the sheriff's aviation squad served in the military, but all earned their aviation licenses through civilian flight schools, Rasmussen said.

Both Calhoun and Bashta served in the Armed Forces, Calhoun as a machine gunner with the Marines and Bashta as a teen-ager attached to the 2nd Armored Cavalry in the first Gulf War.

During their recent patrol with Perris councilman Yarbrough, the pair flew over unincorporated communities and found several marijuana groves in backyards surrounded by plywood fences. Some marijuana groves are produced by medical marijuana advocates; others are under the control of drug cartels. The deputies notified their dispatcher, who would pass the information on to department drug experts.

The chopper also flew over the Big League Dreams sports complex, Perris City Hall and Perris High School, providing stunning aerial looks of those venues. They also flew over a patrol car on a vehicle stop and responded to a report of an abandoned vehicle in Lake Elsinore. The helicopter circled the remote location of the van, which was hidden on a dirt lane camouflaged by tress, until a ground-based officer could locate it.

It was mostly a routine patrol. But choppers have been called to tail speeding vehicles, locate auto thieves, graffiti vandals and burglars and provide backup to deputies called to remote locations at night. In a pinch, the helicopter can set down and an aviation deputy turn into a ground officer.

Rasmussen said aviation deputies are law officers first, pilots and flight observers second.

"You can teach a cop to be a pilot, but you can't teach a pilot to be a cop," he said.

Bashta and Calhoun said their job provides them an office with a view like no other.

"I've wanted to fly helicopters since I was a kid," Bashta said. "This is a dream. The view is phenomenal."

Bashta and Calhoun say they like the idea that their duties allow them to protect the public and their colleagues by providing aerial cover. They say criminals sometimes will simply give up rather than try to outrun or hide from the bird. The helicopter, they say, often takes the fight out of the bad guy.

"I truly love coming to work every morning," Calhoun said. "We get to keep our guys on the ground safe and find lost kids. I get to be a cop and a helicopter pilot."



Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough monitors radio traffic while riding in the back seat of the Riverside Sheriff Department's Euro-Copter A-Star helicopter.



A stunning aerial view of the Big League Dreams sports complex in Perris.



The charming Perris City Hall Campus was captured in this aerial image as the helicopter flew a routine patrol in the City.



An aerial view of a Perris neighborhood.



After the flight, Riverside County Sheriff Department deputy Michael Calhoun, Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough and deputy Eric Bashta flash the "thumbs-up" signal.