

Safety Knows No Borders

By Jay Fuller, ALEA Safety Staff

All police work is local no matter where your locale may be. Whether you serve in Chattanooga or Chihuahua, the operational focus of individual members and units doesn't (and doesn't need to) extend far. The police mission "to protect and serve" remains largely the same across international boundaries ...

Police aviation roles also remain similar throughout the world. Over the years, I've noted as much or more diversity between law enforcement aviation units in the United States as I have between U.S.-based units and units from other countries. This means that while foreign law enforcement aviation units don't necessarily have anything unusual to add to our knowledge base, they do expand the information resources available to us and the population base from which we can get ideas.

One of the primary advantages of the international aspect of our industry is the increased number of vendors and products available to us. From aircraft, to support equipment, to support services, law enforcement aviation units throughout the world rely on sources outside their borders, increasing the breadth and scope of products available to everyone.

From the standpoint of safety, we can only benefit from expanding cooperative efforts throughout the world. We owe this fact to the many vendors across the globe that service their clients with safety in mind.

In the November/December issue of Air Beat, Keith Johnson, ALEA Safety Program Manager, discussed how accident rates increase significantly when rules are broken and said that this non-compliance is sometimes a result of attitude (Rules Rule!). I have stated many times in ALEA Safety Seminars the quandary we are in. Pilots are not worriers by nature; in fact, we are far from it. And, when these airmen are police officers as well, this factor increases all the more. This fact does not change across borders.

All individuals in our business have a high-risk tolerance. Tactical aviation is by nature that way. I've seen it flying helicopters in Vietnam and in military fighter units. Those individuals who seize the initiative, who press on to the objective, who are willing to take a chance for mission completion, naturally gravitate into this part of aviation. The quandary arises because, fortunately or unfortunately, this attitude is desirable, even necessary, due to the nature of our work. Management often seeks this mindset in recruitment. But it must be thoroughly tempered by well thought out standards, rigidly enforced and adhered to. What we need to do is eliminate unnecessary risks.

Guaranteed, somebody reading this article is thinking, "My unit has never had any accidents; I don't need to really concern myself here." But think about this example: national aviation accident rates are listed per 100,000 hours of flying time. If your unit is flying 2,000 hours per year, it will take 50 years just to be statistically significant. You can operate for 20 years and go from perfect to bad with one accident. Just because you haven't had an accident doesn't mean you're safe. (Conversely, just because you've had an accident doesn't mean you aren't safe.)

The trick is to continually monitor what you're doing, keep the stuff you're doing right and modify or eliminate the rest. A sobering thought: according to an FBI study, the second leading cause of accidental deaths for law enforcement officers on the job between 1989 and 1998 was aircraft accidents.

Aviation unit management has the initial responsibility to create standards and the very difficult job of monitoring and enforcing them afterward. Accountability must be maintained and many hard decisions are necessary to accomplish this. However, the individual out on the beat, be it ground or air, ultimately makes the line decisions. This is where the rubber meets the road. Anyone seeking hazardous, exciting activity has been watching too much television and is exhibiting a foolish attitude.

Fate will provide us with as much verifiable excitement as we need. Consider my statement above about risk tolerance – just because we aren't worried doesn't mean we aren't at risk. Aviation decision making is always tricky and when done rapidly under pressure can generate unfortunate results.

A government study showed that between 1996 and 2000, for 83 percent of fatal, public (including law enforcement) aircraft accidents, pilot error (read: crew error) was a primary or contributing cause. Each person on the job must steel themselves, avoid unnecessary, high risk operations and stick with the rules. That must be your primary guide. The superb pilot is the one who uses superb judgment to

avoid situations requiring superb skill. This is not a negative attitude; it's an attitude that will engender confidence and respect and preserve valuable assets.

Fly Safe. There may be different ways to say it across the globe, but it always means the same thing.