

SPOTLIGHT ON A MEMBER:

A New Beginning: Calgary Police Service Unit

by Martin J. Pociask

Photos courtesy of the Calgary Police Service, Air Services Unit. Photographer: Constable Troy Rudy



Patrolling the city by ground and by air.

Every story has a beginning. This one was the result of a city that had taken notice of a tragic event that claimed the life of a very good police officer, and resolved to do something about it. It's also the story of a helicopter that has proven itself to be indispensable to area law enforcement in protecting the community. The police unit reliant on it for daily policing effectiveness-and as many Calgary police officers believe, it also contributes to their own personal safety.

Advocates of helicopter patrol operations in Calgary, Canada had long been fighting an uphill battle to secure a helicopter for its police force. Sadly, it took the death of one of their police officers, Constable Rick Sonnenberg, who was killed in 1993 by a hit-and-run driver trying to elude police during a high-speed chase. Everyone agreed that the officer's death could have been avoided if only the chase had been conducted from the air rather than on the ground, so it was determined that the city needed one, and there was no time to waste.

In the fall of 1993, Constable Richard Sonnenberg had just laid out a spike belt on a lonely stretch of freeway, to try and stop a speeding, stolen car. The teen driving the car spotted the belt, swerved to avoid it, and struck and killed Constable Sonnenberg.

Rick had always dreamed of a safer city, and in his memory, his sister Lisa started the Constable Rick Sonnenberg Memorial Society. She began by selling t-shirts and pins to try and raise enough money to purchase a police helicopter.

Lisa's hard work and dogged determination eventually paid off when she met someone who helped her run a lottery. In July of 1995, within a year of Constable Sonnenberg's death, a private group called the HAWCS Society (Helicopter Air Watch for Community Safety) had raised \$1.5 million. With these funds, the HAWCS Society purchased a helicopter for Helicopter Association International (HAI) member, Calgary Police Service Unit. That helicopter was a red, white, and blue

McDonnell Douglas (MD) 500N helicopter, which was dubbed HAWC1. That event marked a turning point; it established the Calgary Police Services Unit as the first municipal police air service unit in Canada and the acquisition of a full-time patrol helicopter. The unit has adopted the hawk as a symbol of safety, and the aircraft does indeed have the image of a hawk on it. Consequently, the HAWC1 has, at times, also been referred to as Hawk-1.

The helicopter was put to work right away, patrolling the 750,000 sq km area of the city and its population of around a million people. To everyone's delight, the helicopter, flying at 136 mph (220 km/hr), could quickly cover Calgary from one end of the city to the other in just three to four minutes! Even more astounding, the helicopter's average response time was approximately 90 seconds.

In its first year of operation, the Calgary Police Services Air Services



Thousands of children have had the chance to see the HAWC1 up close, during school visits.

Unit clearly demonstrated the critical need for helicopter patrol by logging more than 1,000 hours of helicopter patrol time and assisting in more than 500 arrests, while saving lives and preventing property loss. Their success was noted and

served as a catalyst to help kick-start discussion by other police units throughout Canada on the advantages of aerial police patrol, and how this aspect of police work might help to expand their ability to
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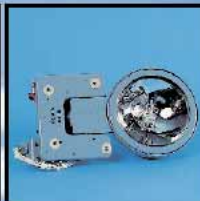
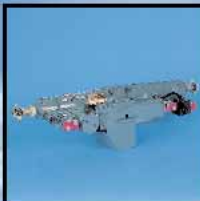
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firsthand, by accompanying flight crews on operational shifts. Public support is very important to the unit's mission. The Air Services Unit has gone to great lengths to make the helicopter as accessible as possible to the public.

As part of their ongoing commitment to give back to the community, there have been more than 350 "fly-along" certificates given to charitable organizations in Calgary. These are often auctioned at events, and to date, have raised more than \$300,000 for local charities. Thousands of local children have had a chance to see HAWC1 up close, during school visits, where they land in the schoolyard and give a short presentation.

The HAWC1 has also been involved in assisting other City of Calgary departments covering a variety of functions and services, including aerial photography, videotaping, disaster planning, scene assessment, and emergency response. The helicopter and flight crew have assisted Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) members in giving pursuit when, in the course of events, a crime has been committed and the perpetrator has fled the city and has entered into RCMP's jurisdiction. They have also assisted ground-based command personnel during disturbances and for coverage of public events.

Greg Taylor, Director of Maintenance for the Calgary Police Service, states, "HAWC1 has helped change the way we handle vehicle pursuits. Once a fleeing vehicle is spotted from the air, ground units can be moved safely back while HAWC1 follows from above. With HAWC1 in action, the apprehension success rate in pursuits is over 90

percent. When HAWC1 is not available, the success rate drops to less than 30 percent. Calgary is a modern city of about one million people spread out along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Because of the city's growth, the response time to a call has slowly increased from 90 seconds to almost two minutes, but, HAWC1 is still 'first on scene' at over 60 percent of the calls we are dispatched to."

The Air Services Unit has always had an exceptionally good working relationship with the Calgary Fire Department as well as the local

its kind in Canada. Working with HAWC1, Aquatic Rescue Team divers can be placed into fast moving water or isolated open water to assist a victim who might otherwise not be rescued. HAWC1 has assisted the Calgary Fire Department at over 600 separate incidents."

There was of course, a significant amount of training, necessary for operational flight safety and to ensure personnel preparedness. Regular maintenance is performed on HAWC1, including daily inspections, scheduled maintenance, specialty equipment installations, and unscheduled

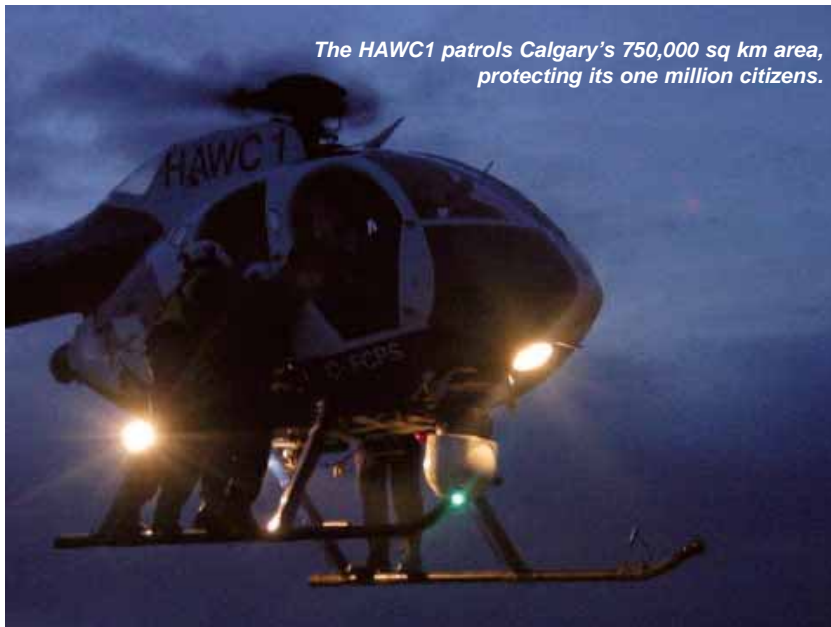
maintenance. According to Taylor, "To date we have logged over ten thousand hours on one helicopter, with no major incidents, and we were very proud to receive HAI's Law Enforcement Award in 1996."

The Air Services Unit has been involved in several high profile operations, such as the G-8 Summit, which was held at Nakiska (80 miles

west of Calgary), in 2002.

Taylor notes, "This was a very interesting experience because we worked with so many different organizations, including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and U.S. Marines with Presidential Security. This was all happening shortly after 9/11, so security was a very high priority."

He adds, "We have also assisted in several life saving operations. One such incident occurred on a cold winter night, when we went to assist STARS at a vehicle roll over on the edge of the city. We lit up the scene with the NightSun and STARS



The HAWC1 patrols Calgary's 750,000 sq km area, protecting its one million citizens.

EMS provider STARS (Shock Trauma Air Rescue Society). HAWC1 has provided vital support to the Calgary Fire Department at several high profile fires in the city.

Taylor proudly points out, "We have used our "Bambi" bucket at grass and structure fires. At a very serious refinery fire the smoke was so thick and black, the ground crews could only direct their hose streams into the smoke and hope they were doing some good. HAWC1 arrived and using the FLIR and Downlink system, we sent real time video to the fire command bus, and the captain was able to see that most of the water was hitting the parking lot, and have the crews redirect their streams to hot spots. We have the only fast water rescue capability of

landed on the road at the scene. They were loading two critically injured patients, and one of the victims asked about the fourth passenger. There were only three people at the scene. One of the medical crew asked if we could have a look around to see if there was a fourth victim. We FLIRed the area and found a faint heat source 150 yards from the rollover. We directed one of the ground medical crew toward the heat source as STARS left with the two casualties. After wading through deep snow and thick bush, with only a flashlight and HAWC1's NightSun to see, the EMS member found the heat source, and it was the fourth passenger from the rollover. He had sustained the worst injuries, but had managed to wander, in shock, for 150 yards. It took 30 minutes to get more EMS members with equipment and a stretcher to the victim, and extract him from the bush. We had radioed STARS to return to the scene after delivering the first two patients to

the hospital. The helicopter returned just as the EMS team emerged from the trees, dragging the stretcher through the snow. Talking to the ground crew afterwards, we found out that this patient would not have survived, had he not been found as quickly as he was. This is an excellent example of teamwork, between agencies, as well as between air and ground crews. We couldn't do our job without the dedicated people on the ground doing theirs. After serving Calgary for over nine years, we recognize that we need another helicopter, and Lisa Stinson (Rick Sonnenberg's sister), has completed another lottery campaign to purchase our second helicopter, which will be dubbed HAWC2."

The addition of the helicopter has brought immediate benefits to the Calgary community. It has saved time and improved response time. It has reduced vehicle theft, resulted in a higher relocation rate, helped to better ensure officer


safety, aided in more effective searches, been instrumental in the reduction of criminal activity, provided better support and coverage of disturbances and public events, assisted fire suppression, been used to assist outside agencies, and provided EMS services following accidents and during emergency situations when a quick response or additional support assistance was necessary.

Members like the Calgary Police Services Unit are proof-positive of the benefits of the helicopter law enforcement. Calgarians are extremely proud of their law enforcement officers and grateful to Lisa for her efforts, which made it possible to purchase the Calgary Police Services Unit's first helicopter, and again, played an instrumental role in raising funds to purchase a second one. **R**


Martin J. Pociask is director of communications for HAI.

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