Helicopters play a unique and vital role in law enforcement. Helicopter Association International (HAI) counts 97 members worldwide who are involved in law enforcement. The list is a mix of government services, regular commercial, and corporate members who operate as either "for hire" or "not for hire."

Law enforcement helicopter pilots and their crews are everyday heroes who routinely engage in high-risk missions for the public good. Helicopters provide law enforcement with a tactical advantage in dangerous situations. Many of us have witnessed aircraft law enforcement in action on television, assisting ground officers in hot pursuit of evading vehicles, thereby limiting the risk to innocent citizens and law enforcement officers on the ground.

In 1947, The New York City Police Department purchased a Bell 47D. It marked the first time a helicopter was used by law enforce-

are Laying Down the Law

Unit supervisor Sgt. Eric Thomson prepares for a long line rescue as pilot Andrew MacRitchie lifts off in Henry 1.
ment, and a significant milestone in the evolution of crime fighting. Today it is unusual for a major law enforcement agency not to employ a helicopter. Airborne patrolling gives police a window to what’s happening in and around their cities and along the nation’s borders and coastlines.

Helicopter law enforcement plays a major role in counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism surveillance, reconnaissance, officer transport, re-supply, command and control, fire support and investigation missions, medical evacuation, search and rescue operations, environmental protection, and outdoor event management. They also facilitate emergency evacuation, and perform airborne tracking and recovery of stolen vehicles.

Airborne law enforcement officers are called on to perform varied search and rescue missions. Sometimes plucking victims from rooftops, or performing dramatic rescues from towers, skyscrapers, hillsides, canyons, mountainsides, and even off of construction cranes. They must face all the typical hazards associated with any aviation mission, but must also be prepared to confront life-threatening situations, such as exposure to gunfire, or projectiles fired at them from the ground, and they must be prepared to operate effectively in a high-stress environment, in less than ideal flying or landing conditions.

With advanced communications equipment, law enforcement helicopters are able to stay in contact with ground stations through radio and microwave transmitters. Sophisticated devices such as radar sensors, and long-range video and photographic cameras enable law enforcement to read a license plate from 1,000 feet away. Onboard digital radio transmitters "downlink" live video streams—complete with GPS-derived coordinates and GIS-created digital maps that send information to receivers installed in police stations, police cars, and to handheld devices. Infrared imaging allows law enforcement to visually operate at night. Some aircraft are equipped with enhanced day and night optics, which are capable of recording observed activities.

Law enforcement helicopters are outfitted with many safety features, such as superior cockpit and cabin visibility, rollover bulkheads for crew and passenger protection, rupture resistant fuel cells, wire-strike protection, and advanced avionics. But all the bells and whistles are of no consequence if the aircraft is not available when needed. Effective and regular maintenance is very important for safety, reliability, and for keeping an aircraft mission-ready.

Law enforcement pilots, crews, maintenance, and other personnel must ensure the maximum degree of safety in their operations, and are required to possess a complete knowledge of helicopter operations. Law enforcement operations are conducted by qualified personnel, and safety is emphasized at all times. They must have received the appropriate specialized training prior to performing their duties and responsibilities. Finally, they must adhere to all agency policies and follow standard operating practices and procedures.

HAI member Sonoma County Sheriff’s Department in Santa Rosa,
California, responded to a call for rescue after a boat overturned in the ocean with several people on board. The boat had been pounded by 13-foot waves and the water temperature was around 49 degrees Fahrenheit. The boat and the victims were drifting out to sea near Shell Beach. The victims had been widely separated by a strong current. There were two adults with a boogie board about 400 yards from another adult and an 8-year-old boy. The U.S. Coast Guard had been dispatched to the scene, but the rescue boat was reportedly two hours away, and their helicopter was estimated to be one hour away. The Sonoma County Sheriff’s Department helicopter, dubbed Henry-1 arrived in 12 minutes. Deputy, John Hurt, and Paramedic, Bob deLambert, donned wetsuits and set up a long line rescue. The crew attached one end of a one hundred foot rescue rope to the helicopter. The rescuers were then flown on the end of the rope and placed in the ocean alongside the victims. One by one, each of the victims was extracted safely from the sea.

Cash strapped police aviation departments have had to be creative to support their operations. Some purchase and maintain helicopters by using confiscated drug monies, at no cost to taxpayers. Others rely on contractual arrangements or join in regional or mutual partnerships with other jurisdictions. Even large police departments have difficulty securing the funding necessary to procure a helicopter.

HAI member, Calgary Police Service Unit, located in Calgary, Canada, began helicopter operations in 1995 following a tragic accident that occurred in 1993, and claimed the life of Constable Rick Sonnenberg, who was killed by a hit-and-run driver trying to elude police during a high-speed chase. His sister, Lisa Barrett was inspired to ensure that the Calgary Police Service Unit received its helicopter. Lisa started the Constable Rick Sonnenberg Memorial Society. Selling t-shirts, pins, and conducting a lottery with the help of a private group called the HAWCS Society (Helicopter Air Watch for Community Safety); raised $1.5 million and purchased a McDonnell Douglas (MD) 500N helicopter, which the Society dubbed HAWC1.

The Calgary Police put their new helicopter to work right away, patrolling the 750,000 sq km area of the city and its population of one million citizens. To everyone’s delight, the helicopter, flying at 136 mph (220 km/hr), could cover one end of the city to the other in just three to four minutes, with an average response time somewhere around 1.5 minutes. Working with the Calgary Fire Department, as well as the local EMS provider STARS (Shock Trauma Air Rescue Society), the Calgary Police Service Unit has assisted in numerous life-saving, search and rescue, and firefighting operations. By the way, Lisa conducted another successful drive and raised money for a second law enforcement helicopter, HAWC2.

Law enforcement pilots are generally individuals who have served in law enforcement first and then applied to a helicopter program. A
Law enforcement background gives the pilot a clearer understanding of what is happening on the ground.

Law Enforcement helicopters are used to transport injured officers, civilians, prisoners, canines, cargo, evidence, pyrotechnic devices, hazardous materials, and chemicals. Before transporting a seriously injured officer by helicopter, his or her weapons are secured by another officer onboard; canines are placed in the rear of the helicopter, and are either muzzled and secured, or are restrained in a portable carrier.

Prisoner transports follow strict guidelines and standard law enforcement policy and procedures. All prisoners are searched for weapons and contraband and then are secured with restraints. During transport, prisoners are seated in the rear of the helicopter, away from the pilot and access to flight controls, and are guarded by another law enforcement officer. If the prisoner is located in the front of the aircraft, a belly chain or other secure device must be employed. Before transporting a prisoner by helicopter, the pilot briefs the prisoner on aircraft safety, using the same standard briefing format the pilot would give to any other passenger. The pilot must be advised, when weapons are brought onboard. Also, law enforcement must brief the pilot prior to transporting hazardous material, such as pyrotechnic devices, mace, oxygen, propane, gasoline, or gases.

The Arizona Department of Public Safety’s Aviation Section, an HAI member, located in Phoenix, is comprised of four air rescue helicopter units, a fixed-wing air support unit, an aircraft maintenance unit, and administrative staff strategically based around the state. The air support and aircraft maintenance units are based at the Aviation Section Headquarters facility at Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport. The Aviation Section operates 24-hours per day, and maintains a fleet of five rotary-wing and four fixed-wing aircraft. Their mission is to protect the public and to facilitate statewide air support response capability for critical circumstances, and emergency situations, including aerial fire fighting. Their air rescue crews, utilizing rappel and short-haul heli-rescue techniques, have on numerous occasions assisted county sheriff personnel during operations.

Since its beginning, the Aviation Section has provided efficient and effective service, including hundreds of life-saving rescues. Many people have been extricated from mountainside cliffs, deep canyons, and other locations not immediately accessible by ground personnel. They also provide first responder emergency medical services, conduct search and rescue operations, carry-out medical and disaster evacuation, provide aerial and logistical support for law enforcement, highway safety and traffic enforcement operations, and carry-out transport services to support government operations and critical administrative functions.

The Maryland State Police Aviation Division, an HAI member, began their helicopter operations with a single Bell 206B Jet Ranger, whose cover area included the...
entire State of Maryland. Today they fly 12 Eurocopter Aerospatiale Dauphin II and Dauphin N3 AS365 twin-engine aircraft, out of eight bases located throughout the state, averaging nearly 9,000 missions annually, approximately 25 per day. The eight bases are linked by SYSCOM (System Communications) located in the Maryland State EMS office in Baltimore. Maintenance is performed by the Division's FAA Authorized Repair Station, located at Division headquarters, just east of Baltimore at Martin State Airport. The Dauphins are equipped with FLIR, a NightSun® searchlight mounted in the tail assembly, and an electric hoist capable of lifting 600 pounds up to 295 feet. Some of the N3s are also equipped with Traffic Alert Collision Avoidance systems (TCAD) and Enhanced Ground Proximity Warning Systems. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, the Division's helicopters have been equipped with Automatic Dependent Surveillance Broadcast (ADSB) transceivers. The ADSB allows Federal agencies to track the helicopters, so they can operate in the Washington, D.C. ADIZ. The Maryland State Police Aviation Division is the largest government sponsored "non-military" medevac operation in the U.S., transporting nearly 5,400 patients annually and employing a staff of about 145. These include supervisors, civilian and sworn pilots, trooper-medics, aircraft mechanics, and support personnel.

The Maryland State Police also fly significant law enforcement, search and rescue, and more recently, homeland security reconnaissance missions. The program, which is viewed worldwide as a model for law enforcement is maintained through a special fund created by the Maryland State Legislature. The fund is supported by revenue collected from each vehicle registered in the state, which is charged an additional $14.00 for the service. A portion of that amount, approximately $3.00 is used for equipment purchases and training. Many aspects of law enforcement go beyond just catching "bad guys." Helicopter law enforcement operations can also involve providing assistance to local fire departments, or being called upon to serve during flooding, earthquakes, be on the scene when a major traffic accident occurs, pursue aggressive drivers, or to perform airborne evacuations.

HAI is proud of its law enforcement members who serve to protect their fellow citizens and their communities. Each year, since 1972, HAI has awarded the "Salute to Excellence" MD Helicopter Law Enforcement Award to a deserving individual or organization, recognized as having contributed to the advancement of crime suppression, through the use of the helicopter. This years presentation to Don R. Roby, Baltimore County Police Department, will take place in Dallas, Texas, on Monday February 27, at our “Salute to Excellence” awards banquet.

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