



2011-April : Newsletter

PILOT-ONLY OPERATIONS

Pilot-only operations continue to pose a major threat to the safety of law enforcement aviation operations. During the last three years, we have had four pilot-only mishaps, three of them being fatal. Law enforcement aviation missions are challenging enough with multi-person crews. Pilot-only operations place an unacceptable workload on pilots. We have numerous accidents, 23 including seven fatalities in last two years. Even with multi-person crews, pilots lose situational awareness when distracted due to focusing too much attention on what's occurring on the ground rather than flying the aircraft. It is unrealistic to think that the pilot can fly and do the TFO's job at the same time.

Of the four pilot-only accidents, three of them occurred in fixed-wing aircraft. Performing tactical operations with a pilot only generally requires the pilot to operate below 1,000' AGL in order to see what is occurring on the ground and effectively direct ground operations. Two of the accidents occurred due to a loss of situational awareness when the pilot stalled the aircraft and there was inadequate time and sufficient altitude to recover. Both of these accidents occurred during traffic enforcement operations. Traffic enforcement is a tactical operation and should always be conducted with a pilot and TFO. In the case of the other two accidents, one occurred in a gear-up landing and the other was fuel exhaustion. Had there been a second person on board in all of these mishaps, it is unlikely that any of these mishaps would have occurred.

Attempting to cut costs by operating with a pilot only is an unrealistic expectation. Think of the millions of dollars these accidents cost, the impact on families, friends and co-workers; if you are a one-aircraft operation, you are out of business. Consider the adverse impact of your department's management and public perception of the unacceptable costs of having an aviation unit, the increased cost of insurance, and scrutiny by the press and government officials. And, several more law enforcement aviation units were closed recently due to budget shortfalls. If you want to get shut down or cut back, have an accident. And if these costs are not enough, throw in losing a trained, experienced pilot and the cost and time lost due to having to investigate the accident, legal claims and fines.

I often hear people say that they operate with a pilot only in order to save money. Really? I propose that you cannot afford to operate with a pilot only. If you cannot afford to operate with a crew of two, maybe you should not be in the law enforcement aviation business. And, just because you have been operating with a pilot only and have not had an accident does not mean you are doing it right. You are just rolling the dice, and eventually they will come up "snake-eyes."

Send me your comments and I will publish them in the next newsletter.

Remember – Safety First!

Keith Johnson

Safety Program Manager