

Safety in Acquisitions

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Whether you are buying a new aircraft or upgrading an existing fleet, the process involves a thoughtful review of the goals for your aviation mission and serves as the perfect opportunity for implementing safety measures.

For the unit just starting out, the fact must be established up front that, while aviation provides a significant force multiplier for the law enforcement agency, plus capabilities that simply aren't available otherwise, it has limitations. Management and subordinate agencies supported by aviation must understand from the outset that, despite the cost, aviation can't do everything. And further, it can't perform its full repertoire of capabilities in every situation.

For the unit upgrading, new aircraft or systems must be incorporated and employed in a structured manner, which involves written, well understood, enforced standards. Aviation is dependent on technology, and improvements in technology can mean wholesale improvements in capability. But this improved capability must first be utilized to perform existing tasks better and safer; then the unit can worry about adding missions.

It can be easy to forget, by the time you're due for an upgrade, why safety measures are so important. And for units just starting up, it can be hard to foresee problems that can be avoided by being safe. So here are a few things to keep in mind when you're initiating or reworking your program.

ATTITUDE

Pilots aren't worriers by nature, and when you incorporate a law enforcement mentality, that fact is enhanced even more. As a whole, our members have a high risk tolerance. Individuals who are willing to seize the initiative, to press on to the objective, to take a chance, naturally gravitate into this line of work. Up to a point, this attitude is desirable for the law enforcement mission, but it absolutely must be harnessed through training and mandated procedures within the aviation unit. Emphasis on safety simply can't be a threefold or fourfold increase over that placed on ground law enforcement operations; it needs to be the primary guiding principle.

For the law enforcement agency anticipating development of an aviation unit, this understanding has to be at square one. For operational personnel, it must be understood that the mission and the environment will provide all the excitement they'll need; their job is to keep it to a minimum. And management at all levels must be prepared to support line decision makers in their judgments.

COST

About three minutes into the initiation or renovation process, you realize that aviation can generate some serious costs. We aren't driving troop cars here; in most cases it is a completely new realm over surface based equipment acquisition. A basic law enforcement helicopter can cost \$1 million, and the full up version with all modern technology can easily top \$5 million. A relatively minor repair on an aircraft like this can cost as much as a police car.

For the small unit, cost can mean more than money. The loss of an aircraft or simply an extremely expensive repair can mean the end of the aviation unit.

Finally, cost can also be measured in injuries or lives. Between 1989 and 1998, the second highest cause of accidental death for law enforcement officers on the job was aircraft accidents. Despite all the high risk activities undertaken by law enforcement personnel, aviation is one of the costliest in terms of lives taken.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Aviation is highly visible. This is mostly good, ensuring everyone knows that your agency is on the job. But, guaranteed, any minor mistake is going to be seen on the six o'clock news. For the new unit, appreciate this factor with the proper respect, and keep in mind that aviation's errors will reflect on the entire agency.

MISSION COMPLEXITY

This is not airline flying. Considerable time spent in the high risk zones of approach, landing, take off and departure, single pilot operations, high mission focus, task saturation and night operations are

a routine part of the law enforcement aviation job description. This is the highest hazard aviation environment we can encounter outside of combat, and sometimes we see a little of that. Equipment upgrade should be accomplished for the specific purpose of reducing this hazard level. In some instances, existing missions can be enhanced or new missions taken on, but this is just frosting on the cake and should not be the primary focus for acquisitions.

Further, incorporating the use of new equipment in operations must itself be accomplished in a formal and structured manner. Most upgrades are going to add complexity and, even when they provide more information to aircrew members, will increase task saturation levels until familiarity is developed. This familiarity must be achieved in a benign training environment.

Lastly, all of this activity must be defined by written, thoroughly understood and conscientiously enforced standards.

Industry Standard

This is not to say we need to worry about keeping up with the Jones's. We are different. But as professionals, we are going to be compared to other professional aviation organizations such as the military, commercial airlines or large corporate flight departments when we come under review, be it by the FAA or our own higher management. And the expectation here is for a highly standardized, highly proficient operation.

Regardless of your situation, and what you plan to do, safety must be the primary guiding factor.