



High-tech helicopters latest police tool

Nov 15, 2007 @ 11:46 PM

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RRSTAR.COM

ROCKFORD -

A couple of armed bank robbers ditched their vehicle last week along Wisconsin 81 in southern Wisconsin and fled out of sight into a field.

Thanks to a Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition helicopter known as AIR-ONE, Rock County sheriff's authorities did not have to deploy extra manpower and time to search the two square miles of sparsely populated terrain of farmland, woods, marshes and streams.



“The use of the helicopter was very useful in covering that area,” said Rock County Sheriff's Department Cmdr. Troy Knudson.

“They covered the entire area very quickly, and then they came back and searched it with a fine-toothed comb. As a result of their very thorough search of the area, we felt confident the subjects were no longer in the area. We were able to focus our investigation elsewhere.”

Thursday, members of the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition or LEAC, made a presentation to area police and fire departments and explained how their fleet of four helicopters, eight pilots and 24 tactical flight officers could be of service to them.

Operations Director Michael Bitton said primary use of LEAC and their AIR-ONE helicopters are “life safety situations. Missing person searches, a missing elderly person or child, someone is in the river, ground searches, felonies in progress, vehicle or foot pursuits.”

Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, AIR-ONE can help police day or night thanks to the use of night vision goggles and forward looking infrared technology, an airborne thermal imaging device.

Bitton said if an incident commander is faced with searching for an armed subject in an unfamiliar area, the agency should merely contain the subject and call LEAC.

“Don’t send your officers. Don’t even send your dogs in. Call us. Reduce your liability and increase your safety.”

While flying missions, the LEAC flight crews are under the command of the agency requesting service or support.

LEAC was founded and coordinated by the Winthrop Harbor Police Department and serves 17 counties in northern and western Illinois and southern Wisconsin. The coalition is made up of members from law enforcement and public safety agencies from those regions.

Helicopters are based at Chicago/Rockford International and the Kenosha, Wis., airports. They are flown at an estimated cost of \$300 an hour.

Stephenson County Sheriff Dave Snyders is a member of the LEAC board of directors.

“I think it’s a huge benefit to the area,” he said. “We’ve been without air support for so long, this is an added tool for first responders.”

Chief Pilot and Winnebago County Board member Randy Olson said donations from municipalities and the public are crucial to LEAC operations.

“The way this thing is set up ... the Department of Defense furnished the helicopter free of charge and Illinois Emergency Alarms System, the Illinois branch of Homeland Security, provided money to equip the ships.”

As for covering the cost of jet fuel, insurance and maintenance, Olson said, “They leave that up to local municipalities. They want the communities to pitch in.”

Knudson said AIR-ONE is a valuable resource.

“This was the first opportunity we had to put that resource to use. It’s such an expensive resource, but if you can deploy all over southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois, it makes it easier to share the burden.”

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