

AIR-ONE moves to Lake County

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It began with a donation of a used, two-seater helicopter to the small village of Winthrop Harbor in 2003. Today, that helicopter and a much larger one, worth millions of dollars and equipped with state-of-the-art technology, sit ready for action in a hangar at Landmark Aviation in Waukegan, with seven more helicopters stationed elsewhere in Illinois.

Through the nonprofit AIR-ONE Emergency Response Coalition, law-enforcers and other public servants can use the helicopters when pursuing felons or missing persons such as children or an Alzheimer's patient who has wandered away from home. The helicopters can also be used if homeland security situations arise.

Just last month, one of those helicopters was used to locate a man in the Lake Villa area who was armed and threatening suicide. "He was taken into custody without incidence," said Sgt. Curtis Gregory. A former U.S. Marine, Gregory is one of six Lake County Sheriff employees who just started training as volunteers to use the helicopters when needed.

"The advantage of the helicopter is you can direct people based on what you see," said Gregory, who works in the sheriff's Libertyville office. Using helicopters for such incidences would not have been possible 10 years ago in Lake County, he said.

Cmdr. Michael Bitton, director of AIR-ONE Emergency Response Coalition, agreed.

"If a felon runs into the woods, we can establish a perimeter of [law enforcers] on ground – they can gather on the perimeter, and the helicopter can go overhead and direct them to where the felon is," Bitton said. "This keeps a deputy from twisting an angle or even getting shot."

Bitton, employed as a commander with the Police Department of Winthrop Harbor, has directed the AIR-ONE coalition as a volunteer since its inception nearly 10 years ago, when it was called the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition. He's been instrumental in raising the funds and securing volunteers to keep the nonprofit coalition growing – and with its recent move from Kenosha to Lake County, the Lake



Cmdr. Michael Bitton, left, and Sgt. Curtis Gregory, right, volunteer for AIR-ONE, a non-profit organization that uses helicopters to search for missing persons and potential felons (photo: Sheryl DeVore).

County Sheriff's office is getting involved. When he's not working, as with many of the volunteers, Bitton is at the hangar, working on the computer or out training or giving presentations on AIR-ONE.

"Our mission began in 2003 with a privately owned Eurocopter EC135 helicopter," said Bitton. The aircraft was made available at no cost to the Winthrop Harbor Police Department, which then offered the helicopter's service to local agencies who needed it for missions. Experienced pilots and tactical flight officers from various police and sheriff departments trained as volunteers.

"These volunteers responded to countless call-outs for air support, including searching for lost persons, assisting with felonies in progress, and life-saving rescues over Lake Michigan and in New Orleans," said Bitton, who also operates the group's website at www.airsupport.org.

One of the first big missions was Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Bitton said.

"We took an 11-hour flight to New Orleans," he said. "We were the first helicopter crew that had night vision, outside of military. Think what it was like flying into a city like Chicago, with no power, no lights and 60,000 people screaming to be rescued."

AIR-ONE was part of the team that rescued 1,800 people from a hospital, and also came back with generators and supplies, he said.

In another more recent incident, fishermen capsized in a boat in Lake Michigan and the U.S. Coast Guard could not find them, Bitton said.

"The helicopter came out and found them and directed the coast guard to where they were, and they were rescued. They were minutes from death," Bitton said. "They were hypothermic, giving each other last rites.

"That's a dramatic illustration," of what can be accomplished with these helicopters, he said.

Thanks to government dollars, corporate and private donations, volunteers and a state organization called ILESO, AIR-ONE now has nine helicopters stationed throughout the Illinois and southern Wisconsin area ready to be used by more than 60 volunteers from local, regional and state law-enforcement agencies.

ILESO, the Illinois Law Enforcement Support Office, gave AIR-ONE surplus Army helicopters, which volunteers worked on to repair, add up-to-date equipment and give the final polish.

The November 2012 move to Waukegan was also made possible by Landmark Aviations, who donated the space for the helicopters as well as a 24-hour manned operation – something in the works for now.

"This would easily have cost us \$5,000 a month," Bitton said. "This is a little piece of heaven."

AIR-ONE operates by responding 24 hours daily to any call made by what are called first-responders (sheriff's office, police officers and the like), assessing the situation and then determining the appropriate action. AIR-ONE receives about 120 calls annually.

The move to Waukegan prompted the Lake County Sheriff's office to select six volunteers to learn ways to help residents and pursue felons through the use of helicopters.

“Many of us had prior military experience and spent time in helicopters before,” said Gregory, who has been with the sheriff’s office for 18 years.

“Lake County is a big county,” said Gregory. “We have availability now to cover a large area in a short amount of time.”

The training, provided by AIR-ONE, includes learning to communicate with the pilot as well as a tactical officer on ground, understanding the operations of the highly technical equipment on the helicopter, including a special machine that can see through fog and other situations with very poor visibility.

“It takes a big personal commitment to be part of this,” Gregory said. “This is just the beginning of the Lake County Sheriff’s office involvement with AIR-ONE.

“We are not just here for law-enforcement,” he added. “We’re being trained on rescue missions, for example if there’s a natural disaster.”

“Maybe there’s a school shooting – heaven forbid – and we need to get people to places quickly,” added Bitton.

“AIR-ONE should make people feel safer, when bad guy’s out there, and when someone is lost.” he said.

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