

POLICE: Air One keeps an eye on York Region

# The voice in the sky

BY JENNIFER BROWN  
Staff Writer

Although he's often first on scene, bringing with him the equivalent force of 15 cruisers, Const. Mark Baggett never makes an arrest and rarely gets any credit.

Still, most York Regional Police officers want his job.

Whirring high above York's 1,700 square kilometres, along with pilot Andrew Dunt, Baggett is assigned to Air One — a joint-forces project to test the impact a helicopter could have on day-to-day police work.

"We're the voice in the sky," said Baggett, as we flew over southern York Region earlier this week. "We're the support service. We can deliver tactical information in real time to the guys on the ground."

Police Chief Julian Fantino believes the helicopter will provide better response in emergencies, such as with missing children or seniors, as well as enhancing traffic enforcement and assisting in police chases.

This summer, police discovered the view from above also helps them spot marijuana crops growing among area cornfields — about \$2-million worth.

Even when police aren't out looking for drugs, Baggett says if they do spot a patch while on another call, they can record the location on a computerized positioning system and return later.

The Bell 206 Jet Ranger, equipped with an infrared camera and high-powered search lights, can fly 190 km/h. The average response time to a call is three minutes.

When patrolling a region that is a mix of urban areas, rural fields and forests, the ability to travel quickly and get close to a subject is paramount, Baggett said.

A three-month report released last month showed the helicopter has assisted in 176 calls for York Regional Police. The test program is being shared with Durham Regional Police.

The York helicopter calls have ranged from noise complaints to robberies. But Air One's biggest advantage may simply be its presence.

"A recent survey of the region indicated that people wanted to see more of a police presence," said Baggett. "What more visibility can there be? We're more overt than covert."

Air One was used when Toronto police were looking for the Scarborough bedroom rapist. Using the infra-red and search lights, Baggett said they focused on the park and ravine area the rapist was using to sneak in and out of the neighbourhood.

"He was hitting sometimes twice a week. But after the night we started flying, he never struck again. That's a pretty good deter-

rence," said Baggett, who was also on scene when a suspect was arrested.

"I have kids and I know I want York Region to have a helicopter," he added.

Others aren't so sure. Last month, union president Dave Kingston questioned whether the money spent on the helicopter would be better spent on hiring more officers.

## ALWAYS A JUDGMENT CALL

Although the helicopter has been used in more than two dozen missing persons cases, Kingston pointed out it hadn't actually found anyone. Nor has it prevented a police chase or captured a fleeing criminal.

But Baggett argues that's missing the point.

"In missing person cases, it would take days of man hours for guys on the ground to form a line and search the fields, houses and doughnut shops. We can search the ground in a much shorter time."

"It's the multiplying concept — it's as if there are another 15 patrol cars on the scene," he said. "And at night is especially dramatic."

When on patrol, Baggett and Dunt operate much like officers on the ground.

"You've got your ear on the radio and it's always a judgment call. Sometimes it all comes at once. Obviously a missing person takes priority, but we have to be where we are most effective."

Priorities are occasionally dictated from the upper ranks, especially when emergencies occur in other jurisdictions.

When they aren't busy elsewhere, the helicopter will go on deterrence runs — swooping over industrial areas to help prevent late-night break-ins.

Baggett is convinced the deterrence runs are working.

"The stats are preliminary but I can say with confidence that it has had an effect in

the west end (of the region)," he said.

But he is careful to stress helicopters don't replace ground units.

"Cruisers on the ground can now have this vantage point, too," he explained as we swooped down over an industrial complex in Markham. "We can pass along information in real time to the units on the ground about what we're seeing. But it doesn't replace the ground support at all."

The helicopter's patrol schedule is 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. Monday to Saturday, but Baggett said that is rarely the norm. His life has been ruled by his pager for the past five months.

"We can be called out at 10 a.m. and then we bomb in here and go out searching."

Although Baggett is a qualified helicopter pilot, he leaves the flying to Dunt. A typical 12-hour shift involves flying six to eight hours on and off, depending on the calls they receive.

The helicopter can stay in the air for between 3-1/2 to four hours at a time, but that isn't often a necessity.

On Monday, Air One was called to help Metro police search a park in Toronto, looking for a missing person with Alzheimer's disease.

Later, the unit was called to Aurora to assist with a traffic call in which a car fled from an officer.

With the infrared technology, Baggett points out it's difficult to hide from the helicopter. He can even spot suspects hiding under bushes and other cover.

"Investigating officers will often tell us that (fleeing suspects) felt they had to hide because of the helicopter," he said.

The helicopter can also be used to leapfrog over fleeing suspects, dropping officers and canine teams in front of them to cut off their escape routes.

"We can drop guys off at the cutoff, so there's a fresh team in. Or, if it's an emergency where no one else can get to," he said.

STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

## FLYBOYS

These calls are among those answered by the Air Support Unit during week of June 28 to July 4 and Sept. 6 to 12.

June 29: Four calls

Theft reported in Richmond Hill. Response time, seven minutes. Three males fled from the scene after attempting to steal tires and rims from a vehicle. Air One provided containment and search of the area with a searchlight. Canine unit arrived and searched ground area contained by Air One. All three parties were found and arrested by ground units.

Sept. 9: Seven calls

Air One observed two vehicles travelling at high speed eastbound on Hwy. 407 at Hwy. 404 and directed ground units on side streets near Denison Street and McCowan Road to stop the second vehicle as it attempted to avoid detection. Numerous Highway Traffic Act charges were laid.

Air One spotted vehicle driving erratically at Jane Street and Rutherford Road in Vaughan. The vehicle was checked by ground units and a 12-hour suspension issued.

Robbery at Tim Horton's in Markham. Response time, less than one minute. The area was searched, but the suspects were gone.

Sept. 10: Eight calls

Missing person at Canada's Wonderland in Vaughan. Air One responded in less than one minute. Individual was still missing. Air One searched area with negative results.

Large disturbance reported at a banquet hall in Markham. Response time, three minutes. Air support provided top cover and lit area with a searchlight to disperse a crowd.

Sept. 11: 10 calls

Driving complaint. Response time, two minutes. Assisted Markham ground unit officers in location of drag racers at Warden and 19th avenues.

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