

It's noisy, but ...



'As we learn and as we grow, we can minimize the disturbance to the public and maximize the fight against crime.'

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Both citizens and police are learning how disturbing crime fighting can be now that it has taken to the sky. York Regional Police's air support unit — the whirlybird dubbed Air 2 — has responded to 164 calls since June 26, prompting calls from residents throughout the region about its noise.

"There is a learning curve there, for us and for the public. What calls require a priority response, (versus) what the public tolerance is for those calls," Staff Sgt. Craig Rogers said. "As we learn and as we grow, we can minimize the disturbance to the public and maximize the fight against crime," Rogers said.

Police say the helicopter is invaluable in tracking fleeing suspects and for disbanding large groups of people, either at bush parties or, in one example, a rival gang fight in a public parking lot.

"Most noise inquiries are just that, inquiries," Rogers added. "People are curious about what the chopper is doing, what's going on, do they need to be concerned. Some call to say it woke them up at 2 a.m., but the chopper is not coming in residential areas doing low fly-overs unless it's an emergency. Before, we'd be running through your back yard with the dog and you'd never know we were there."

As the program continues, refinements will be made to respond to the public's concerns, Rogers said. For example, a deci-

sion to have Air 2 monitor an area that has experienced a spree of car thefts might have full support of those residents.

"Nothing chases the bad guys away faster than the helicopter," Rogers said. "But we're sensitive to the fact it does cause noise and we're sensitive to the fact we operate in the hours of the day most people are asleep."

He said the helicopter, a 1995 turbine-powered Enstrom 480, has proven its worth in dozens of occasions. For example, Saturday night, police received a report of kids on the roof of a Newmarket school trying to break in. The helicopter was there in less than 30 seconds, using an infrared camera to confirm five heat sources on the roof.

"The ground units wouldn't have access to that information otherwise," he said. "Air 2 was able to report they were coming down on the north side of the school and that information was invaluable to the ground units."

That same night in Stouffville, police responded to a complaint about drag racers. Air 2 officers watched as a red car tried to evade ground officers by driving off without lights. Using their information, street officers located the car and arrested the 18-year-old driver.

Toronto Police, under former York chief Julian Fantino, launched its own pilot project last week, with two Jet Rangers on duty for the next six months. They received the first rash of noise complaints Tuesday after a chopper was sent into a resi-

dential area to search for a suspect in the middle of the night over the weekend.

The York force wrapped up its pilot, with Durham Region as partner, in 1999. The bird had responded to 400 calls with an average response time of three minutes.

In a particular area that was consistently helicopter-patrolled, break and enters dropped by 19 per cent. It aided in the seizure of \$4 million in drugs and helped police lay 86 charges against dragsters.

'Before, we'd be running through your back yard with the dog and you'd never know we were there.'

With the donation of \$750,000 last March from Charles Burnett, the air support unit was established by June 1 and flying June 26. It will cost taxpayers about \$350,000 annually to run and maintain.

Air 2 staff consists of two full-time pilots, two full-time officers and an alternate. It flies four hours a day, six days a week, for a total of 732 hours this year. It is available 24 hours a day for emergencies.

"If there's a chopper in the area, it's up there for a reason — to ensure the officer and the public are safe," Rogers said. "For example, we get quite a few 'shots fired' calls and if they take place in vacant farm land or a rural area, it's very difficult for police officers, walking into an unknown situation in an unknown area in total darkness, with the possibility of someone

Despite the racket it creates in the night skies, fighting crime from above is proving to be a winning situation for both police and citizens.

with a gun. The helicopter can check a huge amount of area without having to risk human life and we're not sending an officer into something that could be very dangerous."

Other recent success stories:

- A patrol unit in Newmarket observed a suspicious vehicle at Mulock Drive and Yonge Street June 22. Officers attempted to stop the car, but the driver evaded police and suspects abandoned the vehicle east of Yonge, running north.

- Officers aloft in Air 2, communicating with the canine unit on the ground, located two heat sources — the suspects — nearby.

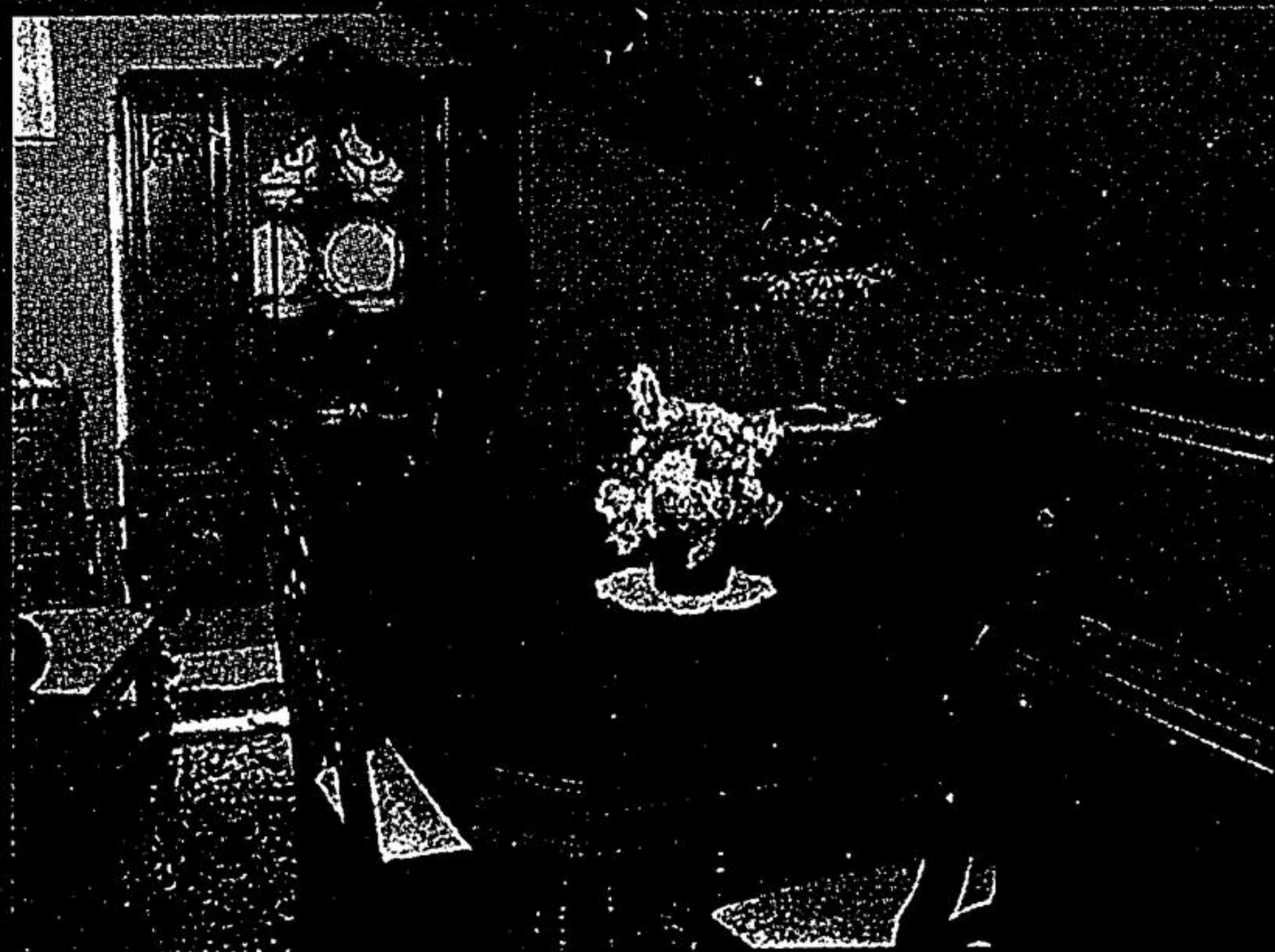
- On July 4, a vehicle wanted in connection with an armed robbery in Nobleton was found abandoned after a single car crash in King. The driver, reported to be armed with a handgun, fled on foot. Canine, Air 2 and area patrol units responded, the helicopter maintaining a perimeter by circling the area.

The canine unit tracked the suspect to a barn, where he was found hiding inside. He was charged with 21 offences relating to armed robberies in York Region and Toronto.

- Four days later, the helicopter converged on Paramount Canada's Wonderland after police received information about a possible gang fight to take place after a Kingswood concert. When Air 2 was dispatched to monitor the parking lot, groups of individuals wearing gang bandanas and clothing dis-banded and left.

"Imagine trying to manage a crowd of 1,000 to 1,500 people waiting for a fight to erupt. How would officers ever know? It would be long over before they got there. In a matter of 30 seconds, the people were aware of the police helicopter, the spotlight was on and they don't want any part of it. They know they're on camera now — that's a huge advantage."

THE
DISTINCTIVE
ALTERNATIVE



Visit our Showroom

Sheraton
ANTIQUES
REFINISHED BEYOND COMPARE

158 MAIN STREET
(905) 474-9677

Queen Anne, 9 piece
black walnut,
Bonnet top China cabinet,
Bulbous leg sideboard,
Splat-back dining chairs.

\$7,995