

# Chopper backs up York Regional officers on the ground



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From page 4.

change ours."

Apart from being a police

officer, Const. Saunders sees the marijuana-growing proliferation from a taxpayer's point of view.

"They're stealing millions of dollars in hydro," he said. "That's costing all of us money."

Then it was off to industrial areas, where Air2 slowly circled over buildings, its searchlight looking for any untoward activity.

In King Township, a van was seen driving slowly beside a small industrial site before it stopped near a driveway. Keeping watch with his infrared, Const. Saunders called for a cruiser to investigate and then directed it to the hard-to-locate area. From above, the crew watched as two cruisers, lights flashing, pulled up to the van.

No problem. It belonged to a security guard doing his rounds. It was an example, however, of the teamwork required between Air2 and ground forces. Another example came when Air2 responded to a possible

break-and-enter in a residential area of Markham.

Arriving before ground officers, Const. Saunders used both his searchlight and infrared to scan the area around the house. A couple of minutes later, the bright white images of police officers could be seen searching around the house. Another false alarm. It seemed a relative of the home owners had placed a birthday congratulations sign on the front door.

Criss-crossing the south end of the region, listening to the constant radio clicks, beeps and calls from dispatchers, cruisers and air traffic controllers at both Buttonville Airport and Pearson International Airport, Const. Saunders and his pilot checked known biker gang clubhouses, more industrial areas, and circled over cruisers that had stopped vehicles for traffic violations.

"It makes the officer on the ground feel more secure knowing we're up here," he said. Nevertheless, with the Air2 program less than two years old, Const. Saunders said ground officers and dispatchers still need to be more aware of the helicopter's uses and availability. To that end, he makes his presence known to dispatchers as he moves from one district to another.

The unit comprises Const. Saunders and Const. Mark Baggatt, the two full-time "observers", three pilots and three alternate observers. "If you're doing the job properly, you can barely walk out at the end of the shift," he said. "It's a physically demanding job. It sucks a lot of energy out of you."

But it has its special moments, such as the night last fall a 78-year-old woman, suffering from Parkinson's disease and paranoia, was reported missing from a retirement home in Richmond Hill. Air2 used its infra-red scanning equipment to locate the woman approximately 300 feet from the home and direct officers on the ground to the location. She was lying under thick brush, wet and semi-conscious. Due to the darkness of the night and the density of the brush, it was impossible to see her from the ground.

"If we save one life, it's worth it," said Const. Saunders. "As a peacekeeper in a foreign land — (he served with the Canadian forces in Cyprus) — I had to keep reminding myself why we were there. It's the same here."

He said the helicopter unit has proved itself to the force, "but we're only scratching the surface of what we can do". When answering fugitive calls, Air2 can set up an "aerial perimeter" and also marshal forces on the ground to appropriate check points.

"That can force people to go to ground and let us get the canine unit in," he explained.

And then there are the perks that occasionally show up during patrol, such as observing a number of deer quietly gazing just yards away from homes in the Bayview/16th Avenue area, or just taking in the breathtaking view of the Greater Toronto Area spread out below like a carpet of brilliant lights.

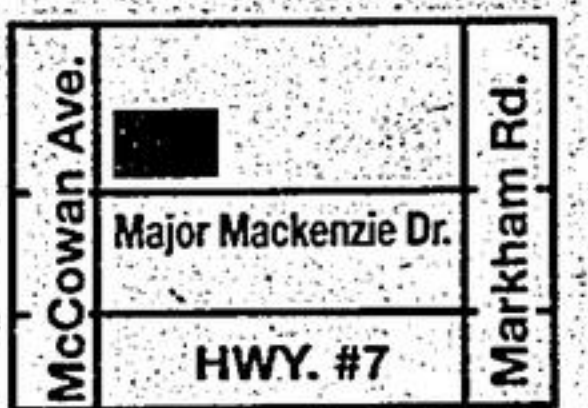
Such moments are brief, however. As Const. Saunders said, "there's always something to do."

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