

# Sky patrol's reach spans across region in minutes

BY PATRICK MANGION  
Staff Writer

The call came in at 8:30 p.m., while conducting routine patrols over York Region.

Officers with the York Regional Police emergency response unit radioed Const. Mark Baggett and his civilian pilot Andri Harasym, requesting possible assistance with a take-down in the Major Mackenzie Drive and Hwy. 404 area Friday night.

"Leave this channel open for about an hour or so. Just hang around. I don't think there's going to be a problem," the officer on the ground told Const. Baggett and Mr. Harasym.

The ERU officers have a lead on a suspect wanted in connection with a "10-83" in Toronto, who may be armed.

"That's a homicide," Const. Baggett said.

In the meantime, the new \$1.25 million Eurocopter EC120, swooped over some nightspots at Hwy. 404 and East Beaver Creek in Richmond Hill, briefly shining its powerful spotlight on the area.

"Let's remind any drunk drivers we're here," Const. Baggett said, as sections of the parking lot were lit up to near daylight brightness.

Following that, the two-man team hovered around an industrial area in Markham looking for suspicious vehicles.

"Markham's industrial area has been susceptible to break and enters," Const. Baggett said as the chopper circled several single-storey



STAFF PHOTO/PATRICK MANGION

York Regional Police Const. Mark Baggett (left) and civilian pilot Andri Harasym sit in the cockpit of Air 2, the force's helicopter that can reach speeds of 250 km/h and cross the region in 10 minutes.

buildings about 1,000 feet (300 metres) below.

They lit up a lone car parked at the loading dock behind one building. A few seconds later, the vehicle's reverse lights came on and the driver headed for the exit.

"After a while, you get pretty good at being able to recognize what's out of place," Const. Baggett said.

It's called proactive policing and it's the biggest attribute of Air 2, he said.

However, Const. Baggett tires of the often heard analogies the police helicopter can do the work of 20 officers on the ground, saying it supports, not replaces officers on the ground.

"It's as if you have 20 or 30 officers cruisers down there

The primary job of the chopper is to provide night patrol support (to ground units)," he said over the steady stream of chatter on the police radio.

Among the many features of Air 2 are an exterior mounted spotlight, thermal imager and a global positioning system.

No word yet from the ERU team in Richmond Hill.

Deciding which calls they should assist on — or in the infrequent event of having to decide on multiple requests for help — requires the unit's five tactical flight officers (TFO's) to make judgment calls, Const. Baggett said.

Air 2 is a seven day per week year-round operation, exclusively conducting night patrols around the region.

Weather conditions obviously become more of a factor during the winter months.

A mix of freezing rain and high winds can quickly turn a once-in-a-lifetime-experience into a bumpy and otherwise nauseating ride for inexperienced passengers.

Const. Baggett has logged 400 training hours as a helicopter pilot; he needs 1,000 hours to fly Air 2.

Rising to 2,500 feet (750 metres) can provide a more settling ride. But it also defeats the purpose to some extent.

"I'm getting a nose bleed," Const. Baggett jokes while struggling to see activity on the ground.

Then the chopper banks sharply and accelerates toward central York Region for a robbery call at a Newmarket convenience store shortly before 9 p.m.

A typical cruising speed

for the helicopter is about 150 km/h with a top speed of 250 km/h. It takes four minutes to fly from Newmarket to Markham.

*'People think it's a cushy job. You just look out the window and sight see. But it's hard work.'*

Air 2 arrived at the Davis Drive, Yonge Street area store just as the suspects, two boys believed to be between 10 and 12 years old, allegedly produced a toy gun while stealing merchandise.

The helicopter circles 360 degrees over the store in order to keep the side-mounted spotlight on the area until

ground units arrive.

It's what members of Air 2 refer to as a 'dynamic manoeuvre'. A police car quickly pulls up to the store. The call comes over the radio. "Suspects are in custody," an officer reports.

As for the ERU team in Richmond Hill, the call for assistance never comes and with freezing rain setting in Const. Baggett and pilot Harasym decide to head back to base in Holland Landing.

Inside a small office in a hanger at the flight school, Const. Baggett says it was a comparatively slow night.

One night they had 20 calls, spending eight hours in the air.

"People think it's a cushy job. You just look out the window and sight see. But it's hard work," Const. Baggett said. "Four hours of flying is like an eight-hour day."

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