

A Public Partnership

St. Louis County's Shutdown and Revival



As felt throughout the law enforcement community, budget and economic factors greatly influence high output police operations such as aviation. The Air Support Unit of St. Louis County (Missouri) began experiencing difficult financial issues last year and faced ultimate extinction if these problems could not be quickly remedied.

By Derek Lee Dunmire, St. Louis County Air Support Chief Pilot

In August of 2003, the St. Louis (MO) County Aviation Unit's fuel budget was suddenly cut and the firmly established and effective aerial patrols were forced to modify into a "firehouse" operation that only allowed response to calls for service. This resulted in an immediate and substantial reduction in officer safety and aerial patrol coverage of the area at a time when heightened homeland security concerns had been at their highest levels.

Since September 11, 2001, the unit had been tasked with the increased patrol of areas deemed by the Department of Homeland Security as "targets of opportunity" for terrorist attack. Bridges, critical infrastructure, historical landmarks, power plants, economically critical businesses, defense contractors and stadiums all had been added to the daily patrol activities of the aircrews.

Under the leadership of Lieutenant Kurt Frisz, the unit began to seek out progressive approaches to maintain the police department's rich aviation heritage. After speaking with several community, government, and business leaders in search of a solution, the unit decided to develop a sponsorship program. It would provide the opportunity for the numerous small businesses and large corporations in the St. Louis Metropolitan area to become actively involved in the airborne law enforcement program by sponsoring the unit's operations through donations of monetary assistance and services.

Surco Manufacturing was the first corporation on board. The owner, David Surkamp, knew firsthand the capabilities of the unit as his son had fallen more than 130 feet from the side of a cliff during the summer of 2003. The aviation unit's crew responded to this nighttime rescue with precision and delivered the 21-year-old to safety. "After the accident, I certainly realized how important aviation is to protect



the citizens of our community. The helicopter can simply do things that can't be done from the ground. When I heard the aviation unit was in financial trouble, I wanted to help," said Surkamp.

Members of the unit began to meet weekly with corporations throughout the St. Louis Metropolitan area giving presentations on their sponsorship program. "We have spoken very candidly about our budgetary constraints and emphasize that without continued support through monetary donations or otherwise, we will have tremendous difficulty providing the overwhelmingly effective tool of patrols of the economic centers or continued efforts to increase the level of safety of the officers," explained Frisz.

"With the tragic events of September 11, our mission has changed. We have taken on greater responsibilities and expanded our coverage. The business

owners understand that the emphasis of law enforcement as a whole has had to evolve and have been willing to become more active participants. In the beginning of our efforts, we believed that some businesses would participate for self-serving reasons (advertising, etc.), but we have found that every business we have contacted wants nothing in return. No public recognition; no advertising; and nothing other than joining the effort to prevent another attack, and further the safety of officers in the beats."

As a result of these efforts, on January 1, 2004, the Air Support Unit was able to return to their aggressive daily aerial patrols. The unit is now establishing a charitable foundation to ensure that the financial support will continue to be dedicated to the Air Support Unit.

While our county department was experiencing budget cuts, the St. Louis





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Metropolitan Police Department’s Aviation Unit was also experiencing operational difficulties. While others perceived these issues to be threatening to the very life of the unit, Lieutenant Frisz only saw opportunities for increasing the aerial services available to the officers riding some of the most dangerous streets in our country. The unit began to make contacts with supervisors and commanders at St. Louis County, the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, and the St. Charles County Sheriff’s Department and suggested that the department investigate the reorganization of the area’s air assets into a regional approach to airborne law enforcement.

In March of 2004, the St. Louis County Police Department and St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department’s Board of Police Commissioners, agreed to

develop a regional air support unit. With the recommended reorganization of the region’s law enforcement air assets, airborne law enforcement in the region has not only been saved, but also greatly expanded. As of this writing, the regional air support unit has been continuing to develop and may include a third department, the St. Charles County Sheriff’s Department. With the addition of this third department, the Air Support Unit’s patrol area will have increased to approximately 1,300 square miles with a population of 2.5 million people.

With the previously utilized schedule and manpower, the St. Louis County Police Department was able to provide approximately 23 percent aerial coverage throughout a calendar year. The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department’s one OH-58 and one crew was able to provide

A Tradition of Excellence

Since 1971, the Air Support Unit of St. Louis County has performed with professionalism in its mission to provide an unparalleled aerial response to search and locate lost children and elderly, rescue victims of the Great Flood of 1993, ensure the safety of police officers riding in our streets, and prevent and deter criminal activities.

In 1999, the Saint Louis County Police Department, Chesterfield and Metro-West Fire Departments developed the Special Operations Aviation Rescue Team (S.O.A.R). This rescue capability has been developed to provide the entire region with an increased response capability to swift-water, confined area, and high-rise rescue missions. This increased capability has resulted in no cost to the citizens for which the team was developed. The team has the ability to rescue individuals stranded on burning buildings, adrift in the many waterways surrounding our area, injured in locations inaccessible to vehicles, and victims of terrorist attack.

11 percent coverage and the St. Charles County Sheriff’s Department had no operational air support. Through the combining of resources and financial commitments, the unit will be able to provide 100 percent on-call coverage (weather permitting) and 70 percent patrol coverage.

Once fully operational, the unit will include eight police personnel to provide four full time crews available for helicopter or airplane assignments. The unit will also increase from one full-time mechanic to two. The management of the unit will remain under the supervision of the Tactical Operations Lieutenant who will have dual responsibilities with command of the St. Louis County Tactical Operations Unit (SWAT Team) and the regional Air Support Unit. The contributions from the three participating agencies will provide funding for a 3,000-hour operating budget.

In order to be as fiscally responsible as possible, various methods of providing aerial services are being developed. There may be a possibility of a mixed fleet of turbine and piston powered aircraft such as the Schweizer 300 series helicopters. Administrators are also continuing to increase the use of the fixed-wing as more than just a surveillance aircraft by utilizing it as a mobile command vehicle and dispatch platform to “quarterback” the ongoing patrol responsibilities.

While the current fleet of five helicopters and one fixed-wing has served the unit well since acquiring the turbine powered MD500 in 1985, these aircraft have reached well over 10,000 hours of operational experience. The unit is exploring additional funding sources to institute a replacement program to provide for the acquisition of a new aircraft every four years through purchase or muni-lease


agreement. One such source of funding that is being investigated would be generated by placing an additional \$1 cost on fee-based services that each department provides through citations, summons, record checks, police report requests, and burglar alarm activations. This will provide the financial means for the implementation of a replacement program.

St. Louis area, the work is only just beginning. The unit’s survival is dependent upon the continued commitment of a public-private partnership and the dedication of the personnel assigned to the unit.

With aggressive patrol strategies and implementation of the developing concepts of aerial patrol, the future is in the hands of the individual crewmembers

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Although the creation of a charitable foundation, reorganization of regional assets, and contributions from various businesses and organizations have already provided the means necessary to improve airborne law enforcement in the greater

to continue to provide the productive patrol of our area. Our best advertising comes from within our own unit’s production and ability to successfully deter and prevent criminal activities. 



Under the leadership of Lieutenant Kurt Frisz, the St. Louis County Aviation Unit began to seek out progressive approaches to maintain the police department’s rich aviation heritage.

SHOWING THE PUBLIC

The St. Louis County Air Support Unit’s equipment, capabilities, and personnel are viewed by an estimated 110,000 people annually at local events such as the ones listed. More than 14,000 of those who attend these public displays are school-age children.



- Make-A-Wish Foundation
- D.A.R.E.
- Saint Louis County Fair and Air show
- Student Summer Camps
- National Night Out assemblies
- Boy and Girl Scouts of America events
- Department Resource Displays
- Young Eagle Events
- Aviation Youth Groups
- Church Events
- Local Charity Events
- Senior Citizen Functions
- Citizens Police Academy Graduations
- Backstoppers
- Museum of Transportation