

Instead of Walking a Beat, Flying One

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The two officers were on routine patrol heading up the West Side Highway in Lower Manhattan when the call squawked across their radio: A burglar who had just looted an apartment on East 49th Street and Second Avenue was making his escape along the rooftops. The address may have been several miles and dozens of traffic-clogged blocks away, but in less than two minutes Sgt. Jon Goldin and his partner were on the scene.

Or more accurately, above the scene.

Flying one of the New York Police Department's new Bell 412 helicopters, they hovered over the pinnacles of Midtown, boring down with the telephoto lens of a video camera. If it had been nighttime, their infrared sensors would have been used to reveal whether the thief was hiding among the ventilation equipment. But the suspect, it turns out, had already escaped into the throngs.

"If there's a bad guy down there, we're going to see him before he sees us," said Sergeant Goldin as he banked over the United Nations and continued on his beat. "And it's kind of hard to outrun a helicopter."

During the next 90 minutes, Sergeant Goldin and his partner, Detective William Lapaugh, responded to a half-dozen requests for assistance: a suspicious plane flying over Staten Island, a brush fire beside the Cross Island Parkway and reports of a kayaker in distress near the Statue of Liberty.

Once confined to trailing stolen cars from 1,000 feet or throwing their powerful klieg lights on nighttime demonstrations, the Police Department's aviation unit has quietly taken an aggressive role in law enforcement, transforming the age-old model of policing.

These days, there is almost always an airborne cruiser over the city, providing bird's-eye advice to traffic officers, chasing teenagers out of cemeteries at night or giving a lift to fire chiefs who want an overhead view of a raging blaze.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, they have also taken on a front-line role in thwarting terrorism. Outfitted with the latest mapping, tracking and surveillance technology, the department's seven choppers spend much of their time peeking at train yards, shipping terminals and high-profile landmarks that a would-be terrorist might find irresistible. Often police officers hover so high — or fly in their new \$10 million "stealth bird," which has no police markings — that those on the ground have no idea they are being watched.

"We used to be more about observation," said Assistant Chief Charles Kammerdener, who oversees aviation as well as the department's other elite units, including emergency services and harbor patrol. "Now we're more involved in tactical operations. It's really a militarylike approach to terrorism. These days we're trained to handle just about anything."

New York's two dozen pilots are also undergoing training on how to carry out such operations as rappelling into "hot zones" to fetch injured comrades or using an officer's formidable weaponry to, say, take down an unresponsive Cessna buzzing toward Yankee Stadium.

Although Los Angeles has twice the helicopters, New York's choppers are faster, more powerful and better suited to rooftop evacuations, air-sea rescues and counterterrorism operations, officials said.

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New York is also the only city whose aviation unit has scuba divers on standby 24 hours a day.

Urban police departments across the country have been swept by chopper fever. Inspired by new devices worthy of James Bond and buoyed by grants from the Department of Homeland Security, aviation units from Philadelphia to San Diego have been expanding their use of helicopters, said Officer Daniel B. Schwarzbach, president of the Airborne Law Enforcement Association and a pilot with the Houston Police Department.

"Sept. 11 opened up a whole new world for aviation," he said. "We're doing missions we never did in the past. It's an exciting time."

Not everyone is so enamored of New York's embrace of aerial policing. Civil libertarians worry about the potential for abuse, citing an incident during the Republican National Convention in 2004 in which a police helicopter's night vision camera secretly recorded a couple during what they thought was a private moment on a Manhattan rooftop.

Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said she was concerned about overzealous use of aerial surveillance equipment so powerful it could scan the headline of this article as it was being read in Central Park.

"We worry that it will be used to monitor the innocent comings and goings of New Yorkers or to create personal dossiers on people who haven't done anything wrong," she said.

Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly said he thought such concerns were overblown. "We're not able to, even if we wanted, to look into private spaces," he said in an interview. "We're looking at public areas."

Although they are considered an elite unit, the city's aviation police are at

the disposal of any beat officer who needs an eye in the sky. They are also at the service of a prosecutor who wants an aerial picture of a crime scene or a building inspector who needs to peer inside a fenced-in construction site. During protests or high-speed car chases, the images can be transmitted to a command post on the ground.

"We can save the cops from having to climb 16 stories to get to a roof," said Sergeant Goldin. "From the time a call comes in, we can get anywhere in the city in 15 minutes."

With the nearest Coast Guard station 125 miles away in Atlantic City, the unit is also responsible for the waterways that weave through the metropolitan region, and 25 miles out into the Atlantic.

In a department known for its tough-guy swagger, the 56 men (and one woman) who make up the aviation unit are an eccentric collection of self-described technology motoreads.

"We're basically a bunch of big boys who like big expensive toys," said Deputy Inspector Joseph Gallucci, the unit's commander, whose office is packed with model helicopters.

Sergeant Goldin, 39, is so consumed by flying that he spends much of his down time in the unit's simulator, a recent acquisition that teaches pilots how to fly in heavy fog or tests their wiles when faced with engine failure. "Planes are cool, too," he said. "But when you watch TV, all the really cool stuff is done with helicopters."

In the middle of the night, when calls for help dwindle, the pilots and mechanics lounge around the muster room, a windowless box nestled within an old Coast Guard hangar at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn that is filled with castoff sofas, aviation memorabilia and a television that is almost always tuned to the Discovery Channel. When they are not filling out flight logs or reinspecting the guts of a helicopter, they eat takeout Chinese or rewatch a selection from the video library: "Mission Impossible," "Dangerous Pursuits" or "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral."

But rarely is a film, or a meal, consumed uninterrupted. During a recent shift, the blare of electronic bells sent the officers running a half-dozen times, not counting the regular hourly patrols. Within two minutes, the pilots, support crew and a two-man scuba team were strapped inside a blue-and-white Augusta Koala and were headed out over Jamaica Bay. The mission, in response to a 911 call of what someone thought was a boater in distress near Far Rockaway, turned out to be a derelict rowboat, its interior encrusted with barnacles.

An hour later, Sergeant Goldin and Detective Lapaugh were up in the air again, making their rounds over the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the ventilation towers of the Lincoln Tunnel and a half-dozen rail yards scattered across the city.

They twirled around the spire of the Empire State Building and dipped over Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, their aircraft casting a fleeting shadow over the turquoise orbs of backyard swimming pools. Naked sunbathers on Rockaway Beach waved from their sequestered haunts in the dunes.

The pilots might be forgiven if they sometimes sound a bit prideful. "When I was a kid, I thought police officers mostly handed out tickets," Sergeant Goldin said as he zipped along the peaks of Lower Manhattan. "Boy, was I wrong."

Correction: July 13, 2006, Thursday An article on July 2 about the New York Police Department's aviation unit referred imprecisely in some copies to the Coast Guard station in Atlantic City. While it is the closest station with an aviation unit, it is not the closest Coast Guard station to the metropolitan region; Staten Island's is closer. The article also misstated the name of the manufacturer of one of the two types of helicopters the department uses. It is AugustaWestland, not Augusta. The article also reversed the identifications for a helicopter

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