

High-flying police respond to calls in St. Louis area

Posted on Mon, Dec. 25, 2006

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS - A specialized team of high-flying police officers has responded to an increasing number of calls to help with St. Louis-area arrests and searches since the helicopter unit formed in 2004.

Metro Air Support, composed of police officers from the St. Louis city and county departments and the St. Charles County Sheriff's Department, patrol nearly 1,200 square miles throughout the metropolitan area each night and day.

The team of 11 officers searches for missing people, photographs crime scenes, follows stolen cars and checks out criminal activity.

St. Louis County's helicopter program started in 1970. The city's began in 1998. In March 2004, those agencies, along with the St. Charles County Sheriff's Department, merged to form the Metro Air Support Unit.

Through November, the helicopter unit assisted on 634 arrests, a 12 percent increase over all of last year, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported. The unit has made 136 searches for missing people, nearly three times last year's total of 55 searches.

The unit is based at the helicopter hangar at Spirit of St. Louis Airport in Chesterfield, a St. Louis suburb. The fleet includes six helicopters and an airplane.

Michael Opfer, a St. Louis police officer, calls the MD500E, a four-person chopper with a top speed of about 180 mph, the "Ferrari of helicopters."

The city and county each contribute \$150,000 a year to the unit, while St. Charles County pays \$100,000, says St. Louis County police Capt. Kurt Frisz, the unit's commander. Metro Air Support saves money by using its own mechanic, acquiring military surplus equipment and getting corporate donations.

Nights are busiest for the unit. On a recent call, the airborne police pointed their spotlight on a speeding car. Many times, Opfer says, the spotlight unnerves fleeing suspects so much that they either pull over immediately and stop or bail out of their cars.

While one officer flies, the other looks for criminal activity below. Aircraft instruments include a computerized mapping system that allows them to find targets more quickly, an infrared camera mounted on the front, and the spotlight.

"We used to flip through map books," Opfer says. It's much easier now, because all he has to do is punch an address into the computer and it tells them where to go and estimates how many minutes it will take to arrive.

"Now, we're there like this," he says, snapping his fingers. "To have a response time of over five minutes is difficult for us."

