

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING

By Mark Lang

For law enforcement agencies in the United States that have helicopter support, there is one potential program that, if properly developed, has the potential to bring major incidents to a successful end. Many SWAT commanders will tell you they want as many options as possible on the table during a tactical operation, and while an aerial platform does not guarantee success, it increases the likelihood.

An aerial platform (AP) is also referred to as aerial gunnery, aerial marksmanship or aerial platform interdiction. All of these terms are simply defined as the placing of accurate rifle fire from a hovering, crawling or moving helicopter in support of a tactical operation.

This article will focus on how you can develop and implement such a program at your agency.

ESTABLISH THE NEED

First, you must establish the need. Does your agency need an aerial platform as a tactical option? An AP program should be established for the right reasons and supported by appropriate training and policy. Ultimately, if you do not

have the right justifications in place, you may sabotage your good intentions from the start.

Take a look back at your agency's operational history and pinpoint when the option of having a trained SWAT operator in the helicopter could have been beneficial through observation, communication and possibly, accurate rifle fire.

Of course, there is no substitute for a SWAT officer in the helicopter communicating with another SWAT officer on the ground. This is by no means meant to lessen anything the pilots or Tactical Flight Observers (TFO) may have to communicate, but some messages can be lost in the translation. SWAT operators train extensively with their teammates. The frequency of training and communication between SWAT operators is clearly much higher than that which occurs between SWAT and aviation personnel. The assumption that the two groups can seemingly blend together on demand is usually incorrect.

There are many justifiable incidents where AP would be of great benefit to officers and the public. The following are some examples:

AN AERIAL PLATFORM PROGRAM

Deployment into aircraft can be achieved in minutes, allowing for quick response to an incident.

- High structures with armed suspect(s)
- Isolated rural areas where suspect(s) is at large
- Protective overwatch on warrant service or barricaded subjects
- Vehicle pursuits where public safety is at great risk
- Active shooter(s) in open/elevated areas
- Terrorist attack on a structure or in pursuit
- Armored vehicles driven by homegrown violent extremists (HVE)
- Vehicle pursuits that compromise perimeter gates at airports

The list goes on and perhaps you can add to it from your own experiences. AP can greatly increase officer safety from the air as ground officers close in on suspects, but it is important to realize that an aerial platform is a specialty skill within the SWAT team.

After conducting your research, develop a presentation that begins with defining AP. Realize that your command staff may not understand the concept or may have reservations

about its hazards. Focus on past incidents in your jurisdiction where it would have been of value. Continue with incidents that may have occurred around the country to other teams and speak specifically to the ones that your agency may encounter in the future.

Keep the following seven key components in mind as you develop your presentation:

1. Aircraft
2. Pilots/tactical flight officers
3. Law enforcement snipers/SWAT operators
4. Dedicated safety equipment
5. Formalized training
6. Sustainment training
7. Standard operating procedures

Aircraft: If you don't already have an existing aviation program, advocating for funding a multi-million dollar unit for the sole purpose of having an AP capability is unlikely. However, if you do have an existing aviation program, a determination must first be made if the aircraft you have is

appropriate for this type of operation. Weight limitations and appropriate seating configurations are the two primary concerns. A trip to the aviation hangar and discussion with the pilots are your first steps. Do some research and talk with other agencies that have similar aircraft and made it work.

Pilots/tactical flight officers: One of the most important keys to a successful program is the relationship and training between pilots and operators. An aerial platform is not just about the SWAT operator and his ability to fire a rifle. It is about the trust that will be earned through training and recognizing the capabilities and limitations on both sides.

First make contact with the pilots and get their thoughts and concerns. This is usually accomplished by visiting the hangar and sitting down and having an informal conversation of past incidents where AP could have been a viable option. You will most likely find that these like-minded law enforcement officers will be in agreement with establishing a program. The pilots may have very legitimate concerns about AP operations and you should recognize that the pilot is in control of the aircraft and consequently is the final authority on any tactic that may be deployed. By having a variety of options for engaging a threat, you and the pilot should be able to find one that may result in mission success. However, this will only occur if training is taking place on a consistent basis. Allow the pilots/TFOs to be in the operator's position with a carbine so they can see exactly what you are seeing in this role. For many, the light bulb will turn on and they will have a greater appreciation for what you are trying to accomplish.

Law enforcement snipers/SWAT operators: Who on the team is best prepared to serve as the observer and potential shooter from the aircraft? Firing a carbine rifle from the helicopter is not as hard as one might think. Actually, performing this task on demand with accuracy is something that most seasoned SWAT operators can do with adequate training. Most law enforcement agencies opt to train their snipers for this role. Snipers often operate on their own, separate from the team, and are used to performing skilled tasks with little help.



Officers must train securing the door during an off-site landing zone for aircraft with doors that do not retract.

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When selecting appropriate AP personnel, weight should be considered. Smaller operators allow for more equipment and contribute less to the overall payload weight. Basic equipment should include two weapon systems for redundancy. Do not assume a precision rifle with a variable powered riflescope will not work in this platform. There are specific applications where this weapon system could be invaluable. In addition, you may elect for a plate carrier and appropriate ammunition and magazines. With minimal safety equipment also factored in, you are already 25 to 30 pounds heavier. Higher caliber weapons (.50/.338) can also be used effectively from an aerial platform if properly set up and trained with. A shooting platform that can assist the operator is always preferred. This may be accomplished through using a tether, sling or kit bag if the prone position is not available.

Dedicated safety equipment: SWAT operators should be wearing a safety-rated riggers belt or rappel harness and be tethered to the aircraft with purpose-built adjustable safety lanyards approved by the pilot. The attachment and anchor point is preferably to the rear (6 o'clock) of the operator, but that should be approved by the pilot.

Any equipment that the operator brings into the aircraft must be secured to the craft in some manner or stowed away in a secure pocket. Loose or falling equipment is unacceptable and could jeopardize your safety. Communication headsets are a must and should allow you to communicate with both the air crew and operators on the ground.

Lastly, quality clear eyes are mandatory, as objects in the air could be traveling at speeds of 80 mph or above and impacts to your face could cause serious injury. Brass catchers may or may not be an issue, so discuss the pros and cons with the air crew. They do capture the brass but are also prone to causing stoppages with gas guns.

Formalized training: Seek out established and credible training sources. There are legitimate training companies in the United States that teach AP and offer a mix of former military (Special Forces) and SWAT instructors as part of their cadre. You should have as much documentation as possible when training, so demand that they provide certificates of completion, a syllabus and a lesson plan.

If you are taught correctly, you can replicate this training on a recurring basis for others on your team. Training must be documented and consistent to equip your officers to have operational success. Network with agencies that have successful AP programs and replicate what they have done.

Sustainment training: Sustainment training drives operational success. After receiving the formalized training, you must continue to train AP. Do not allow your team to get out of balance by having more operational deployments than you do training.

Training sessions should occur throughout the year. These sessions include the safe operation of aircraft doors, safety rigging equipment and emergency procedures as directed by the air crew. The TFO should assist as a redundant safety check in confirming the anchor point attachment to the operator.

The sustainment training continues with flying a variety of approaches to a static target and moving target. This can be accomplished in any area within your jurisdiction with a designated target for operator and pilot. These training sessions allow for pilot/operator communication refinement and are invaluable as different approach options may be needed based on the scenario threat.

Remember, all training should be documented with a lesson plan and rosters. Sustainment training should include

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both live fire and non-live fire evolutions during an annual training cycle. AP operations have inherent risks and are a perishable skill set, so non-live fire training allows both the air crew and operators to walk through the operation first with far lower risk.

Standard operating procedures: Develop a policy that is broad in scope and allows for variations in tactical deployments. Ensure that the policy outlines minimum training requirements and frequency. It is equally important that the policy not conflict with any existing aviation policies, FAA rules or guidelines or accreditation requirements if your agency is accredited with the Airborne Law Enforcement Association (www.alea.org).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Aerial platform is an underutilized option available for many agencies that operate aviation programs. When first establishing any program, there are always obstacles to overcome. Work closely with your air crew and they will help dispel any concerns that commanders may have about safety and effectiveness of an aerial platform program. Do your homework, be professional, and with the right motivation and support, developing and implementing an aerial platform program can become a reality at your agency. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Steel plate is preferred during training with a witness board underneath to show the students' natural tendency to shoot low.