

# Support grows for selective airborne use of force



## Trends in aerial weapons deployment and training.

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Contributing Writer

Law enforcement professionals continue to discuss the role of aerial gunnery and use of force from helicopters. While some still debate the effectiveness, practicality and safety of airborne use of force, others have embraced the concept wholeheartedly. Still others have taken a limited approach to the tactic by restricting it to critical incidents or by only using trained marksmen instead of aviation unit crewmembers.

Despite the continuing debate and wide variety of operational use, it's clear that use of force has become one of the established functions of many airborne LE operators in the US.

Among the operators and units that have adopted airborne use of

Texas Dept of Public Safety Eurocopter AS350B2 serves as an aerial gunnery platform as Trooper Donald Jackson (L) fires from the starboard skid and Trooper Freddy Duran takes aim from the port skid. Airborne use of force is now a widely accepted mission of law enforcement operators.

force tactics, the most well-known—and successful—is the US Coast Guard's Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) Jacksonville. Originally known as HITRON-10, the unit was established in 1998 to test and evaluate airborne force as a means of interdicting the high-speed boats known as "go-fasts" used by drug smugglers. Tactics were developed using leased MD900 helicopters, referred to in Coast Guard service as MH90 Enforcers. Flightcrews used a variety of small arms to fire warning shots (and, if necessary, disabling shots) at boats which failed to stop. During the early proof-of-concept phase, the unit successfully interdicted 5 drug-laden boats by airborne use of force.

After successfully demonstrating the program, HITRON was designated as a permanent USCG unit. In 2000, it transitioned to the Agusta A109 Power, which was given the military designation MH68A Stingray.

With the start of the "global war on terrorism," HITRON also took on the role of using airborne force for homeland security operations. Today, HITRON's official mission statement is "to provide the personnel, training and resources necessary to employ airborne use of force tactics in support of counter-narcoterrorism and homeland security to protect the US against potential terrorist activity."

HITRON is based at VQQ (Cecil, Jacksonville FL) although detach-

Photo by Jack Sykes



ments conduct missions regularly across the US and at sea.

Through Jun 2007, HITRON has employed airborne force successfully 114 times, according to squadron spokesman Lt Timothy Sutton. So far, he says, airborne use of force has only been used for the counter-drug mission and hasn't been necessary for homeland security.

Weapons in use with HITRON for airborne ops include the 7.62-mm-caliber M240 belt-fed machine gun and the 5.56-mm-caliber M16 assault rifle. According to Sutton, however, the squadron's most effective small arms are its .50-caliber (12.7 x 99-mm) precision rifles.

HITRON uses bolt-action Robar RC50 and semi-automatic Barrett M107 rifles, says Sutton. Both rifles are in widespread use by military and LE units in the long-range sniper role, as well as for destroying improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and landmines.

They are also quite effective for disabling vehicle engines, according to Robar Firearms General Mgr Karl Seglins. He says that .50-caliber precision rifles such as the Robar RC50 offer many advantages over smaller-caliber firearms. Seglins explains that the size of the projectile and the velocity it achieves combine to deliver a devastating blow to targets such as a boat engine. The RC50 is also highly accurate in the hands of a trained marksman, resulting in less risk of collateral damage.

Training of pilots and enlisted personnel assigned to HITRON is crucial, according to Sutton. Enlisted rates with duties as aircraft mechanics and rescue swimmers receive additional training as aviation gunners—when not deployed, they practice shooting. During actual missions, the aviation gunners can easily disable the engines of go-fast boats if required. During homeland security assignments, the same force could be used to stop a terrorist watercraft from carrying out attacks.

RC50s in use by HITRON are fitted with an L3 Communications EOTech holographic weapon sight, which displays a holographic reticule on a lens and is similar in appearance to a small version of a pilot's HUD. The Barrett M107 rifles are equipped with a more tradition-



Photo courtesy US Coast Guard

**HITRON Jacksonville aviation gunner takes aim with a Robar RC50 precision rifle from the cabin of US Coast Guard Agusta MH68A Stingray. A cabin-mounted FN M240 belt-fed machinegun can be seen in stowed position facing forward.**

al sniper scope produced by optics maker Schmidt & Bender. For night operations, both rifles can be fitted with an infrared laser designator. The laser device is bore sighted to the rifle, which allows the aviation gunner to place shots accurately by observing the laser signature on the target through night vision goggles.

Successes achieved by HITRON's airborne force operations have been widely recognized inside USCG and by other agencies. These successes and the increasing requirements for aviation assets in homeland security missions have resulted in additional aerial gunnery capability for USCG's fleet of newly modified Eurocopter HH65Cs and Sikorsky MH60Js. Armed Coast Guard helicopters now routinely fly air intercept and security patrol missions around Washington DC and other potential terrorist targets. HITRON has also assisted domestic and foreign law enforcement helicopter units with aerial training.

### **NYPD Aviation Unit**

Among the units to have trained with HITRON is the New York City Police Dept (NYPD) Aviation Unit. Although it's widely believed that the police agency was not equipped for airborne use of force prior to the attacks of Sep 11, 2001, the unit had been equipped with rifles as a result of being part of NYPD Special Operations. The semi-automatic Ruger Mini-14 rifle was standard issue for Special Ops—however, the Aviation Unit did not carry them or train for aerial missions on a regular basis. After Sep 11, the unit quickly replaced the Mini-14 with the 5.56-mm-caliber Colt M4 carbine—a

compact assault rifle capable of firing in full or semi-automatic mode. NYPD Firearms and Training Section's Special Weapons Unit conducted M4 training for members of the Aviation Unit.

The Bell 412s and AgustaWestland A119 Koalas of the NYPD Aviation Unit now carry the M4 aboard in special cabin-mounted racks. This means that, if airborne use of force is needed during a routine patrol, the crew chief can obtain the weapon quickly.

Crewmembers are required to qualify regularly on the M4 at the NYPD Rodman's Neck Range complex in the Bronx. The Aviation Unit has also adopted the Barrett .50-caliber rifle for use in its helicopters. Although not routinely carried aboard aircraft because of their size, the rifles are maintained at the unit's base at NY22 (NYPD Air Ops Heliport/Floyd Bennett, Brooklyn NY). The Barrett can be deployed quickly if needed. Under the direction of Special Weapons Unit instructors, Aviation Unit members conduct training with the rifle on land and in the air. Very much as it is with HITRON, the primary role of the .50-caliber rifle is to disable boats and light aircraft that might be used in a terrorist attack.

### **San Bernardino**

In California, the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Dept Aviation Division continues to use airborne force in a variety of missions. According to spokesman Lt Tom Hornsby, every time one of the unit's 6 Eurocopter AS350B3 AStars takes off on a law enforcement mission, it carries a 5.56-mm-caliber



**BORTAC marksmen aboard a Eurocopter AS350B3 (L) provide cover from a skid-mounted Tyler Special Ops Platform while operators practice fast roping from the accompanying Bell UH1H.**

M4 aboard. Hornsby says that San Bernardino upgraded to the Colt M4 carbine in 2005 after a lengthy evaluation of various weapons. Previously, the unit carried the Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun chambered for the 9-mm pistol cartridge. Each M4 is equipped with a Leupold optical sight and, for safety reasons, a brass catcher to mitigate any potential for FOD damage. The M4 provides more firepower and more accuracy than the MP5, says Hornsby.

Tactical flight officers (TFOs) assigned to the unit train in the use of the weapon and tactical support. Unit TFOs conduct firearms training every 4 months—this involves a qualification course on the ground followed by an airborne live fire qualification in one of the AStars. These helicopters feature sliding cabin doors on both sides, which facilitates firing from either. Department firearms instructors evaluate each TFO carefully on their shooting ability and safe handling of the weapon.

## US Border Patrol

Following the lead of agencies such as LAPD, the US Border Patrol has established an airborne force capability using selected marksmen

from the Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC) instead of regular air ops crews.

BORTAC is the primary special ops force of the US Dept of Homeland Security's Bureau of Customs and Border Protection. The unit conducts a wide range of missions, including tracking and intercepting illegal immigrants, drug smugglers and terrorists. BORTAC has been used in various other special situations, such as prison riots, manhunts and security for major events. Notable deployments include the 1992 Los Angeles riots and Hurricane Katrina relief operations.

Due to its vast jurisdiction, consisting of over 7000 miles of land bordering Canada and Mexico, as well as 2000 miles of ocean shores, US Border Patrol relies heavily on aviation assets. BORTAC personnel receive extensive helicopter safety and tactical training. Helicopter insertion by rappelling and fast rope techniques are practiced regularly, as BORTAC must be able to deploy quickly at the scenes of potential drug smuggling intercepts, terrorist attacks or hostage situations. During such insertions both the helicopter and descending personnel are vulnerable to hostile fire from suspects on the ground. For this reason, and other scenarios such as aerial


searches for armed fugitives, BORTAC operatives are prepared to use force if necessary.

Like many agencies, the Border Patrol uses the Tyler Special Ops Platform (TSOP) made by Tyler Technologies of Van Nuys CA.

TSOP is an externally-mounted cargo platform that lets a marksman carry out aerial gunnery effectively. It can be installed quickly on Border Patrol AS350B3s. While BORTAC operators deploy from their transport helicopter, marksmen aboard the accompanying AStar can provide cover fire.

During fugitive manhunts, if an assailant attempts to fire at the search helicopter or personnel on the ground, the BORTAC marksman can engage the threat quickly. The TSOP has become so popular that Tyler now offers the platform for the Bell 407 and MD500, in addition to the AS350/355 series. FBI has also selected TSOP for airborne use of force on the Bell 407s assigned to the agency's elite Hostage Rescue Team (HRT). HRT conducts airborne force missions in a similar role to BORTAC, but can also conduct aerial precision sniper operations in urban areas or over terrain that limits a ground-based sniper's field of fire.

Regardless of the choice of weapon, law enforcement aviation programs must conduct extensive, time consuming and expensive training programs to carry out airborne use of force safely and effectively. For this reason, routine day-to-day operations of this nature will most likely be confined to large or well-financed police units.

Some smaller units may find aerial gunnery useful and affordable in very restricted applications. No matter the size of the operation, though, airborne use of force is now an established and widely accepted law enforcement tactic. 



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