

Fact # 22

Helicopters assume a crucial role in contemporary policing

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Introduction

In contemporary policing, helicopters assume a crucial role. When we consider the mainstream of the general public's understanding of policing, it is heavily informed by Television programmes, including but not limited to *The World's Wildest Police Videos* (1998-2012), *Police Interceptors* (2008 – present), and *Traffic Cops* (2003 - present). Within this context, police helicopters are often seen as taking to the skies as watchful sentinels -safeguarding the public and assisting in apprehending fleeing assailants across a myriad of urban and rural landscapes. Their functions span from the previously alluded to pursuing suspects, overseeing traffic patterns, and executing search and rescue operations- culminating in police helicopters emerging as valuable instruments in modern policing. Within this chapter, we will explore the intricate realm of police helicopters, uncovering their historical evolution, capabilities, and the pivotal contributions they make in augmenting the operational prowess of law enforcement in England and Wales.

Origins of The National Police Air Service

The origins of police helicopters in England trace back to the mid-20th century when law enforcement agencies recognised the potential of aerial surveillance and assistance in their operations. The inaugural employment of a police helicopter occurred in 1956 in Los Angeles, USA, as the Traffic Enforcement Division helicopter unit (McLellan, 2007). Nevertheless, the debut of such aerial assets within the United Kingdom was deferred until 1962 (Lloyd, 2021). This delay can be attributed to the substantial costs associated with procuring, upkeeping, and managing helicopters. Before establishing the National Police Air Service (NPAS), individual police forces operated their own helicopter units

or contracted with private companies for aerial support. These pre-existing arrangements consisted of various police air support units that operated independently, often serving specific regions or counties. The helicopters used by these units were utilised for tasks such as aerial surveillance, pursuit of suspects, search and rescue missions, and traffic monitoring (Brandon, 2020).

The creation of NPAS in 2012 marked a significant shift in how police aviation was organised and operated. The NPAS was established to provide a unified and more cost-effective approach to police air support. It centralised helicopter operations, allowing police forces to share resources, expertise, and costs, leading to increased efficiency and a more consistent level of service across the country. Presently, there are 19 police helicopters that are operational in the UK, predominantly comprising the Eurocopter EC135 and Eurocopter EC145 models (National Police Air Service, N.D).

The Roles and Responsibilities of the Police “Chopper”

The primary role of the NPAS is to provide aerial support to local police forces in various law enforcement and public safety activities. Perhaps most well-known is their role in providing real-time surveillance during ongoing incidents, investigations, and operations. Whilst this has been a core facet of the application of helicopters in policing activities since its inception, advancements in technology such as high-resolution cameras, thermal imaging, and night vision capabilities have further enhanced this inherent surveillance potential. For instance, when we consider the potential for high-speed pursuits for those not willing to stop when asked by traffic police on potentially busy and dangerous roads or motorways, helicopters provide a bird's-eye view of the pursuit area, allowing police to track the movement of the suspect and the police vehicles involved. This vantage point helps officers on the ground or, in most cases, in their vehicles, make informed decisions about the direction of the pursuit and potential risks. Given that NPAS helicopters cruise between 120-130knots (National Police Air Service, N.D), it also means that they can quickly respond to incidents and assist ground units in pursuits, tracking suspects, and locating vehicles. Regarding the tracking of suspects, one memorable incident that made the national news took place in the Upper Tooting Road area of London, where an NPAS helicopter was deployed to assist in the search of a burglary suspect. The suspect, who had so far eluded officers, was subsequently located by the helicopter team, who utilised the onboard thermal

imaging camera to spot the individual lying still next to a row of solar panels fitted to the property's roof. Upon communicating with the ground officers, the suspect was quickly arrested, and the NPAS social media account later jovially posted, “*They’ll never find me if I just lay here and pretend I’m a solar panel! Wrong!!*” (cited in Davis, 2023).

While The Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC) of the Coastguard reacts to appeals for assistance from search and rescue helicopters in situations where life is at risk, the NPAS also can play a vital function in search and rescue missions in demanding terrains or regions that are hard to reach using land-based vehicles. Specifically, The NPAS can provide additional support, advice, and communication links via the NPAS Operations Centre. Alongside this, the NPAS also provides search capabilities more generally, such as searching for high-risk missing people, injured people, and people where there is a serious concern for their safety and wellbeing (National Police Air Service, N.D). Beyond search and rescue operations, the NPAS can also be deployed in relation to public order operations. Public order operations in England and Wales refer to law enforcement activities and strategies aimed at maintaining peace, safety, and order during large gatherings, demonstrations, protests, and other events where there is potential for public disturbances or disorder. Given the inherent advantages of using such forms of aviation, they can help assess the size and density of crowds and inform the routing of foot traffic – this is achieved by providing live feeds of video to commanders on the ground (ibid). Concerning security provisions, the NPAS also enhances the capabilities of law enforcement agencies to prevent, respond to, and mitigate the impact of terrorist activities in the UK. For instance, in situations involving an imminent terrorist threat or attack, NPAS can quickly deploy helicopters to provide law enforcement with real-time situational awareness - this enables those officers to respond more effectively and make informed decisions. So, too, in the event of a terrorist attack, NPAS can also assist with coordinating emergency response efforts by providing an aerial overview of the incident scene, helping responders assess the extent of damage and identify areas requiring immediate attention.

Outside of these apparent instrumental advantages, police helicopters, like those employed by the NPAS, are easily noticeable due to their noise and visibility. They act as a continuous symbol of the

widespread presence and extent of law enforcement authority and evoke a modern and mobile manifestation of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon. The panopticon (simply put, "all-seeing") refers to, at its crux, the notion of constant surveillance and the potential impact this has on forms of control due to self-monitoring and regulation at the prospect of being observed (Bentham, 1791). As noted by Correia and Wall (2018), police helicopters contribute to deterrence and the prevention of further crime due to their visibility and, due to their widespread mobility, are able to stop crime before it happens - indicative of what is often referred to as predictive policing. It is important to note here that deterrence is often divided into both individual and general deterrence. While the former aims to prevent a person from committing a crime by making them fear the potential negative consequences that could result from their actions, the latter instead focuses on the symbolic expression of punishment and, more aptly, the demonstration of the criminal justice system's power to apprehend and penalise offenders. This approach to general deterrence supposedly works to deter others when they see the state apprehending suspects and subsequently punishing them. Police helicopters are arguably a powerful tool in this "symbolic expression" of criminal justice.

Critiques of the National Police Air Service

Despite the previously discussed instrumental and symbolic advantages of police helicopters, there have also been a number of criticisms levied against their use and, more specifically, towards the NPAS. First, with the cost per hour for flying NPAS aircraft being £3,200 (National Police Air Service, 2022), the overall cost-effectiveness of helicopters has been raised, despite one of the central rationales for the NPAS' inception being that of cost-cutting due to reducing duplication of services across the 43 jurisdictions. Second, the centralised model of the NPAS has been criticised concerning response time and reduced geographical coverage. These concerns were echoed in a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (2017), which determined that more than half of the forces had to wait beyond 30 minutes for a helicopter to arrive. The establishment of NPAS has also given rise to concerns regarding its influence on local policing priorities. For instance, it has been suggested that the centralised method could create a disconnect between helicopter units and local law enforcement requirements (ibid). This could diminish the grasp

of distinct local crime trends and concerns. This naturally then leads to another key criticism, that being resource allocation. Some areas might require more helicopter support due to higher crime rates or geographical challenges, ‘this leaves safer or more sparsely populated communities with lower levels of air support’ (pg. 61). HM Inspector of Constabulary, Matt Parr, who led the inspection summarised with:

“The number of bases being halved and the number of aircraft being cut by a third in the last 10 years, savings have primarily been made by cutting the service provided to forces rather than increasing efficiency. An inconsistent service means that many incidents requiring air support are over before a police helicopter can arrive. Moreover, we are concerned that the police service now operates insufficient aircraft to provide a consistently prompt response to incidents in all forces in England and Wales” (cited in HMICFRS, 2017).

Conclusion

In bringing this chapter to a close, it is evident that the police helicopter serves important instrumental and symbolic functions within the wider apparatus of policing and criminal justice. From hunting suspects from the sky to proving intelligence to officers on the ground, helicopters clearly provide an integral component of modern-day policing yet, despite this, have not been free from criticism. With the move to the more centralised and cost-efficient model brought forth by the advent of the NPAS, there have been increasing concerns related to cost, reliability, resource allocation, coverage, and response times. However, with the increasing implementation of drones due to further technological advancements and affordability, and with some forces purchasing these in light of the criticisms towards the NPAS (HMICFRS, 2017), we are perhaps witnessing a shift regarding the policing of the skies. This is not to say that helicopters are becoming obsolete, but rather, we are observing a further evolution of the panoptic powers of the police, in which drones now further enhance and reinforce the continuous symbol of the widespread presence and extent of law enforcement. While drones may alleviate or address some of the criticisms towards the reliance on helicopters, the use of this new technology has already raised concerns with civil liberties campaigners, given the surveillance

capabilities available (Davies, 2021). As is common with any development in policing, including technology, various parties, including policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and civil rights advocates, need to strike a balance between effective law enforcement and respecting citizens' rights to privacy and freedom.

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