



SASKATOON POLICE SERVICE

“PUBLIC AGENDA”

TO: Jo Custead, Chairperson
Board of Police Commissioners

FROM: Troy Cooper
Office of the Chief

DATE: 2021 March 31

SUBJECT: Air Support Unit – 2020 Annual Report

FILE #: 2,012-2

ISSUE:

The Saskatoon Police Service (SPS) Air Support Unit (ASU) began as a pilot project in 2005; 2020 marks our 16th year in operation since ASU first took flight.

RECOMMENDATION:

That this report be received as information.

STRATEGIC THEMES:

This issue report supports the strategic theme of Crime and Safety.

DISCUSSION:

The primary goal of the ASU is to provide air support to our frontline Patrol officers. Secondary assignments include assistance to investigative units and special teams within the SPS. On occasion, the ASU also lends assistance to outside agencies such as RCMP, municipal police agencies, Saskatoon Fire and Protective Services, and Local and Provincial Emergency Measures Organizations (EMO).

Flying is scheduled according to a predetermined duty calendar, which follows a platoon format. The Unit primarily responds to dispatched calls and patrols all areas of the city for any suspicious activity. Compstat data and the Stats Mapping Report are also used to determine patrol priorities.

Traffic safety, such as the detection of aggressive drivers, continues to be a priority within the ASU patrol objectives. ASU also has provides video and photographic monitoring of environmental issues, such as slope failures in and around the City of Saskatoon that are of concern.

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The infrared capabilities of our camera system have proven to be an invaluable resource for day and night searches. In 2020, the ASU responded to 1941 calls for service; many of these resulted in criminal apprehensions. Below are just a few examples of those arrests.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- On 2020-05-03 at approximately 0132hrs patrol members spotted who they believed to be an active known drug trafficker near 11th St and Ave P. A vehicle stop was attempted at Ave W and 11th St; however, the driver failed to stop and evaded police.

ASU located the vehicle on 11th St near Montgomery allowing ground units to disengage. The vehicle drove west of the city during which time ASU monitored the vehicle. ASU spotted the driver throw a package containing 76 grams of methamphetamine in a ditch south of Highway 7 and directed Corman Park Police to recover it.

Eventually the driver drove into a yard in Corman Park just west of the city and attempted to steal a truck. ASU directed ground units (Corman Park Police and RCMP) to the yard and foiled the theft attempt. The suspect returned to his car and drove through the homeowner's yard into a forested area and exited the vehicle. The suspect opened the trunk and took property out and ran into the bushes. While running the suspect discarded a lot of property.

ASU was able to have the RCMP and Corman Park Police call the suspect from a safe location. The suspect gave himself up to police but not before hiding and discarding all his property. ASU directed SPS K9 to 8 locations in the bush where a total of 350 grams of methamphetamine, 69 grams of cocaine, cellphones and bundles of cash were located. A bulletproof vest and ammunition were located in the vehicle with scales.

- In the morning of 2020-07-05 a male was witnessed to have been taken against his will from his home and stuffed into a grey BMW. The victim had his ankle bracelet cut off his leg before being abducted (as confirmed by a blood trail from his house). Later in the day the victim showed up at home. At approximately 0034hrs on 2020-07-06 patrol spotted what was believed to be the suspect vehicle from the earlier abduction. The vehicle evaded police and ASU located the vehicle on 22nd St in excess of 160km/hr. ASU monitored the vehicle while it drove to the east side of the city eventually parking behind an apartment building in the 600 block of Hilliard St W. ASU tracked the two occupants as they left the vehicle and directed patrol units to their location where they were taken into custody without incident. ASU directed patrol units to an area where suspects had hidden property from the vehicle which was a sawed off shotgun and a machete.
- On 20-03-25 just prior to 0230hrs, ASU received information over the RCMP radio that a Honda Pilot and a GMC truck had been stolen from Hanley. ASU flew to the southeast corner of the city and located the two stolen vehicles on Highway 11. ASU monitored the stolen vehicles as they travelled together, exiting westbound onto Circle Dr. A traffic stop was attempted and both drivers accelerated to evade police. Both vehicles attempted to exit Circle Dr northbound onto Clarence Ave at speeds too high to negotiate the turn. The Honda became disabled and the driver fled from the vehicle on foot but was taken into

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custody near the retaining wall. ASU continued to track the truck; it was eventually abandoned behind an apartment building in the 600 block of Hopkins St. The two occupants ran a short distance into the entrance to a suite in a multi-unit dwelling in the 2600 block of Dufferin Ave. Ground units surrounded the suite and made a forcible entry. The two suspects were taken into custody, one of them with the assistance of a K9. A 12-gauge shotgun and a SKS semi-automatic rifle were recovered from the truck. Also, a significant quantity of methamphetamine was recovered from one of the two bags that the suspects were carrying.

- In the early morning hours on 2020-01-24 at 0332hrs, SPS received a report of a male breaking a window of the Circle K in the 400 block of Russell Rd. ASU was quickly on scene observed the male entering the store through the broken window. Soon after, ASU observed the male exit the store and run eastbound down Verbeke Rd. As ground units turned onto Verbeke Rd, the suspect hid in front of a vehicle parked in the driveway on Verbeke. SPS then received a hold-up alarm from the store because the male had robbed the store of cash and cigarettes. ASU guided ground units to where the suspect was hiding. When a ground unit stopped on the street, the suspect got up and ran into a backyard on Verbeke while dropping the stolen items as he ran. He was subsequently taken into custody at this location.
- On 20-09-26 RCMP made a request for the assistance of ASU to assist with locating a stolen truck that was involved in the discharge of a firearm at a farmer's vehicle in the Battleford area. Upon our arrival over Battleford, ASU located a truck matching the description of the suspect truck in the trailer park and notified ground units. On the police arrival, the driver of the truck sped away from the trailer park and evaded police. ASU monitored the truck's movements so that ground units could disengage. ASU followed the vehicle as it meandered its way on rural back roads for a considerable period of time. RCMP successfully deployed a tire deflation device on a grid road. The truck continued southbound until it was travelling on its wheel rims. ASU noted the locations along the road where property was being discarded from the vehicle. As the front wheels began to smoke, the truck proceeded into a field. The five occupants exited the vehicle in a stubble field as the truck caught fire and were immediately taken into custody. With guidance from ASU, ground units were able to recover a .303 Enfield rifle, magazine and rifle rounds from various locations in the ditch. Charges included possession of stolen property, evade police, dangerous driving, drive while impaired, and numerous firearms related charges.

STATISTICS:

2015	1097 hours flown	1925 Calls	150 Arrests & 507 Charges	16 Evade Police
2016	803 hours flown	1173 Calls	129 Arrests & 394 Charges	18 Evade Police
2017	1041 hours flown	1392 Calls	221 Arrests & 726 Charges	38 Evade Police
2018	861 hours flown	1219 Calls	153 Arrests & 400 Charges	35 Evade Police
2019	856 hours flown	1423 Calls	205 Arrests & 561 Charges	33 Evade Police
2020	1115 hours flown	1941 Calls	251 Arrests & 879 Charges	44 Evade Police

In 2020, ASU responded to 1941 calls for service, which was up 36% from 2019; 8% of these calls enabled ASU to free up a ground unit from having to attend, thus allowing ground units to respond

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to other calls for service. ASU often cleared the call in a matter of seconds or minutes: a significantly shorter time than it would take for a responding Patrol car.

In addition to dispatched calls, ASU also initiated property checks (in areas of high break and enter activity), conducted river searches, and monitored traffic stops to ensure the safety of officers. These are not statistically included in the dispatched calls total.

The ASU logged 1115 hours of air time in 2020 (a 30% increase from 2019). Statistics were recorded for every flight and revealed the following:

- ASU was credited with the arrest of 251 suspects, which is a 22% increase from 2019. These suspects would have certainly escaped without having the aircraft on-scene;
- 879 criminal charges were laid as result of ASU involvement: a 57% increase from 2019 and a 120% increase from 2018;
- ASU was involved in 44 of the Service’s evade police incidents in 2020, which was up 33% from 2019;
- ASU assisted outside agencies such as the City, EMO, Saskatoon Fire and Protective Services, Saskatoon Search and Rescue, RCMP, Prince Albert Police Service, and Regina Police Service 19 times;
- ASU flew 131 hours, or 12% of our flight hours, assisting SPS investigative units’
- 25 fires were located and reported to the appropriate authority.

STAFFING & TRAINING:

The ASU operates with two teams, each made up of one Sergeant Pilot and two Constable Tactical Flight Officers (TFO or ‘observer’). The daily operational team is comprised of a Pilot and a TFO, with the second TFO reporting to the appropriate Watch Commander for Patrol assignment. Members are scheduled to fly both dayshift and nightshift. Non-flying duties include equipment maintenance and administrative tasks.

There were no changes to ASU personnel in 2020.

CURRENT INITIATIVES & CHALLENGES:

The ASU is currently researching cost effective additions to ASU that would deliver a value added service to the SPS and its civic partners. The ability to stream secure reliable live video to the EOC and decision makers on the ground would prove valuable. Additionally a moving target indicator or “(MTI)” would further enhance our searching capabilities including searching for vulnerable people.

Since 2009, the nature of policing in Saskatoon and Saskatchewan has changed. The role and capabilities of the ASU has also changed making it one of the most desired policing tools today.

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Following the recommendations of the most recent inquest to “expand aerial surveillance so that it is available to mitigate risk to public and officer safety to 24 hour service”. We are researching and identifying the costs and considerations in moving to 24-hour coverage and full time Air Support.

CONCLUSION:

This initiative continues to be seen by many of our frontline personnel as one of the best operational initiatives SPS has introduced in recent history. Support from the Saskatchewan Criminal Property Forfeiture Committee, the Saskatoon Board of Police Commissioners, and the community has enhanced the capabilities of the SPS Air Support Unit and has allowed it to become an internationally recognized police aviation program.

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Dated:

April 1, 2021
