- Yakov M. Hirschson

Eyes in the Sky

A Ride with Ohio's State Police Aviation Unit

They are not your typical state police traversing the highways and seeking speeding drivers. Rather, they are a division of the police that do their work from 1,500 feet or higher. Find out what a day in the life of an airborne Ohio traffic cop is like, how they work and what type of driver behavior may trigger a ticket.

The black and gold Cessna that flew 2,200 feet above Route 23 in Circleville, Ohio, was no ordinary private plane, and the pilot who flew it was no ordinary pilot. He was no less than an on-duty Ohio state trooper named Scott Hartge.

Scott kept a watchful eye on the motorists below, on the lookout for one who drove too fast or too aggressively so he could send the driver a ticket. Scott watched both the cars and the white markers painted every quarter mile for one full mile along the side of the highway, which allowed him to gauge the speed of the cars.

One green car that was passing every car on the road caught Scott's eye. Instinctively, he noted the line marker it was passing and pressed the button on a stopwatch. However, less than 14 seconds had passed by the time he remarked, "He's doing 65 in a 55 mile zone—not worth my time."

Just then he noticed a red pickup with a white van next to it speeding below him. After clocking them for 13.2 seconds, he called over the radio, "There's a red pickup doing 68, and a white van is tailgating him, just two cars' length behind. Time to pull him over."

Half a mile away, an officer in a white Crown Victoria was waiting for Scott to send him a "victim." Scott described the scene approaching the officer's car: "First you'll see a yellow commercial (an 18-wheeler truck), then two black cars and then the red pickup—he's about eight seconds from you now, seven, six, five—there's the white van, right behind the truck! Get him!"

"10-4," the officer on the ground responded, as he turned on his flashing lights and stepped out of his car. He signaled with his hand to the pickup to keep on going, but as the white van approached, he raised his hand, signaling the van to stop. The driver was smart enough not to try any tricks, and he immediately pulled over. Over the radio, Scott confirmed that the trooper had stopped the correct vehicle.

The driver of the red truck will probably never know that he was in fact

clocked doing 68 in a 55 MPH zone—an offense that could have landed him a $130 fine—and he was only released because the police were after a bigger fish, the van driver who was traveling at the same speed as him and tailgating him as well. The trooper wrote a ticket for tailgating but decided to let the driver off with just a warning for speeding.

As the officer wrote out the ticket, Scott circled overhead, lower and lower, until the van's driver began to get nervous that the plane was about to crash into him. Scott wanted to be sure that he was not dealing with a drunken driver or a driver with a prior criminal record who might be tempted to try to escape while the officer sat in his car writing the ticket and making a computer search for the driver's records. He made sure the van's owner was fully aware that there was nowhere he could escape.

While the officer was busy down below, Scott carefully jotted down the details of the crime, including the facts that only he had witnessed: the exact time and location, the weather, the vehicle model, which direction and lane of traffic the driver was in, etc. All these details could make the difference in case the driver tried to fight the ticket in court. In fact, only about 2% of drivers bother trying to fight a ticket once they know a police pilot, who watched everything from overhead, is involved.

When the officer returned to his car after handing over the ticket, Scott knew that everything was settled, and he returned to patrolling the area from the beginning of the marked mile. He watches as an ambulance speeds by below, noting its speed as it progresses along the highway. If it is not carrying a patient, it is subject to the same speed regulations as any other driver on the road.

Scott has a difficult job: He carries a special stopwatch with two buttons, allowing him to clock two vehicles simultaneously. At the same time, he must maintain control of his plane, stay in contact with ground control and give clear information to the officers on the ground with whom he is coordinating.

The Patrolmen's Aviation Division

Scott is actually just one of 15 Ohio State Police who fly a fleet of 14 Cessnas maintained by the Ohio Police. They take off every morning from OSU Airport near Columbus, Ohio, which became famous after a Boeing 707 landed there by mistake in 1967. Then they head in different directions to help patrol the various highways around the state.

Once they are in the air, the pilots follow instructions about which highway to patrol that day. Usually they are sent to a highway where traffic is particularly heavy or where the accident rate is higher than average.

The Patrolmen's Aviation Division was founded in 1948. Over the years, the unit suffered two fatalities, both in the 1970s. The first incident occurred when one airplane crashed during a violent rainstorm, and the second resulted from a policeman flying too low while observing an accident caused by cows that had escaped from an Ohio farm. Since then, the police pilots have amassed over 156,000 hours of flying time with no further accidents.

The police pilots are at their job seven days a week, as long as weather conditions allow them to see five miles ahead and 1,500 feet down. When visibility is down, the pilots will strap themselves into a car seat and patrol on the ground alongside their more conventional colleagues.

How They Know

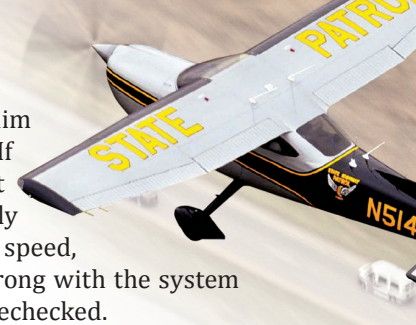
The pilots are trained to time the drivers on the roadway below them by measuring how long it takes the vehicle to pass the quarter marks painted along the highway. For example, in a 65 MPH zone, it should take a car between 13.64 and 13.84 seconds to cover a quarter mile. If the pilot presses the stop button on his stopwatch as the car reaches the quarter mark in 11.25 seconds or less, he knows the car is doing 80 MPH, more than enough to be stopped for speeding.

To catch tailgaters, the pilot must first clock the speed of the lead car and then the interval between when the rear bumper of the lead car passes a marker and the front bumper of the second car reaches the same mark. At 65 MPH, a single car length (an average of 13 feet) between the cars would take only 1/14 of a second—faster than the pilot can press the two buttons in immediate succession. The pilots are trained to stop cars that are less than 1/5 of a second from each other—about 50 feet at 65 MPH—but many drivers are actually far closer than that.

Speeding for just a quarter mile on the highway is sufficient to earn a ticket, but the pilots usually wait for ¾ or more of a mile to be absolutely certain they are dealing with a speeder.

The pilots follow white marks painted along the roadway by Ohio's Highway Department. These marks, which are clearly visible from the air, are painted along the center of the road on a two-lane highway or on the concrete median of an interstate highway.

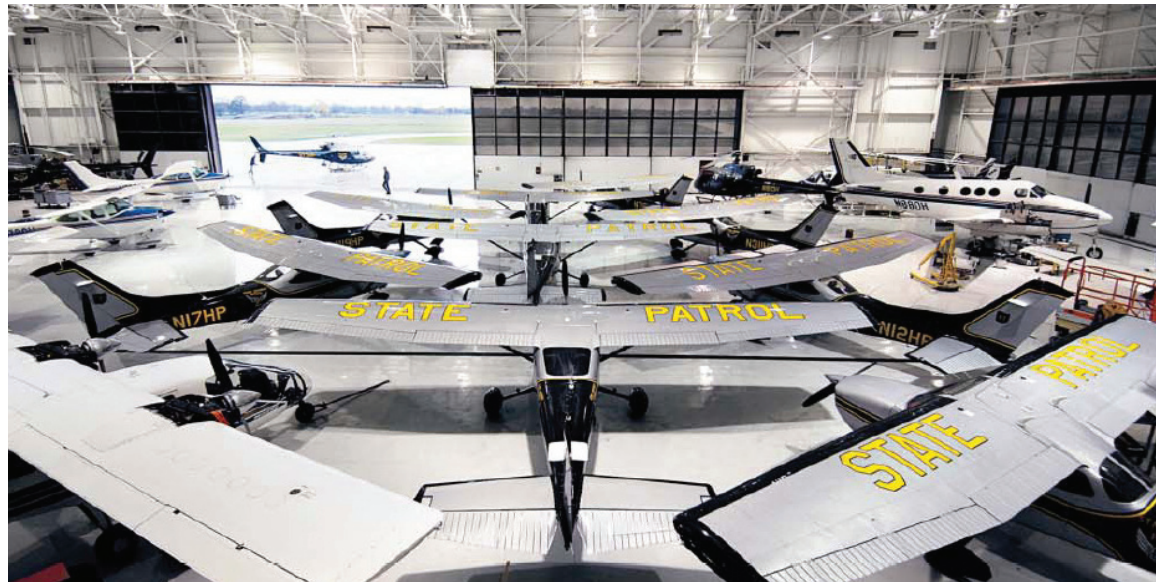
Before the pilots begin patrolling a new area, a policeman must walk along the entire mile on foot, measuring by hand that the markers are correctly spaced at intervals of exactly 1,320 feet. Next a police car drives the entire mile while a pilot follows him from the air. If the pilot cannot gauge correctly the patrol car's speed, something is wrong with the system and it must be rechecked.



Interesting Excuses

The flying police are more concerned with stopping wild or aggressive drivers than with catching speeders. Drivers who

While flying his plane, Ohio state trooper Scott Hartge must track violations with two stopwatches, keeping in contact with air traffic control and with troopers on the ground, as well as writing reports on the violations he observes.



Squad cars with wings. The Ohio State Police maintains 14 such planes.