

Securing the Rotorcraft Style

by Jen McSkimming



As the first rays of sunlight touched the Chihuahuan Desert east of El Paso, TX, the remnants of the night's activity became clear. The low brush desert floor was covered with northbound footprints (known as "foot sign" to the US Border Patrol). Flying no more than a mile north of the Rio Grande and the US/Mexican border, some areas looked like a scattered herd of cattle had come through.

"It is a little deceptive today," called out Border Patrol pilot Kurt Melzer over the intercom, as he descended to 50 feet and slowed to look for fresh footprints. "Usually, it gets windy out here and the 'sign' from the day before gets blown over, making it easier to determine what is fresh..."

Melzer maneuvered the AS 350B3 east, watching the gauges, and for wires, towers, and foot sign. Spotting something, he dropped in for a closer view. Sure enough, four or five sets of footprints were visible, as the heat and sun had not yet bleached the dark earth that was uncovered. These tracks were fresh, and we followed them a mile north until they turned west suddenly, and disappeared on the asphalt of a restaurant parking lot. "They could be in Phoenix by now," said Melzer, as he


■ (main) The US Border Patrol received the first of 13 AS 350B3 AS350s on July 22nd, which it has deployed along the southern and northern borders of the US. For improved visibility, the helicopters are equipped with high-viz doors. The patrol also operates four AS-350BAs that are being converted to B2s.

■ (inset) The US Border Patrol is looking to add up to 105 new helicopters to its fleet, 37 of which will replace the Vietnam-era OH-6 ships.

photos by
Dan Megna

Border



A white helicopter with the registration number 'N604BP' is shown in flight over a desert landscape. The helicopter is viewed from a low angle, showing its tail rotor and main rotor. The background is a blurred, brownish desert terrain. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

"They're heading for the rocks up north. Once they get there, it is very hard to track them."

turned the aircraft back on the eastbound search. "As soon as it gets dark, they start across the border and head for pick-up sites. This restaurant, the freeway [I-10], the rest areas, and any of the side roads are all places where they could arrange to be picked up."

One thing about Melzer, and all Border Patrol agents, is that they are agents first. Even pilot candidates must attend the Patrol's academy and serve three years as a ground agent first. All agents must be able to execute the duties of the Patrol regardless of the tools they use. The Border Patrol's deputy chief of Air

Operations, Michael Hester, explained: "Our agents are in charge of the security of our borders. They perform the same duties whether they are in a Bronco, on a horse, flying a helicopter, or riding a snowmobile..."

Into our second hour, we found more promising foot sign, heading north to the freeway where many others had disappeared... but this set went under a bridge and continued. The adrenaline began to kick in as Melzer tracked what looked like five sets of footprints across soft ground. "They're heading for the rocks up north. Once they get there, it is very hard to track

them," exclaimed Melzer.

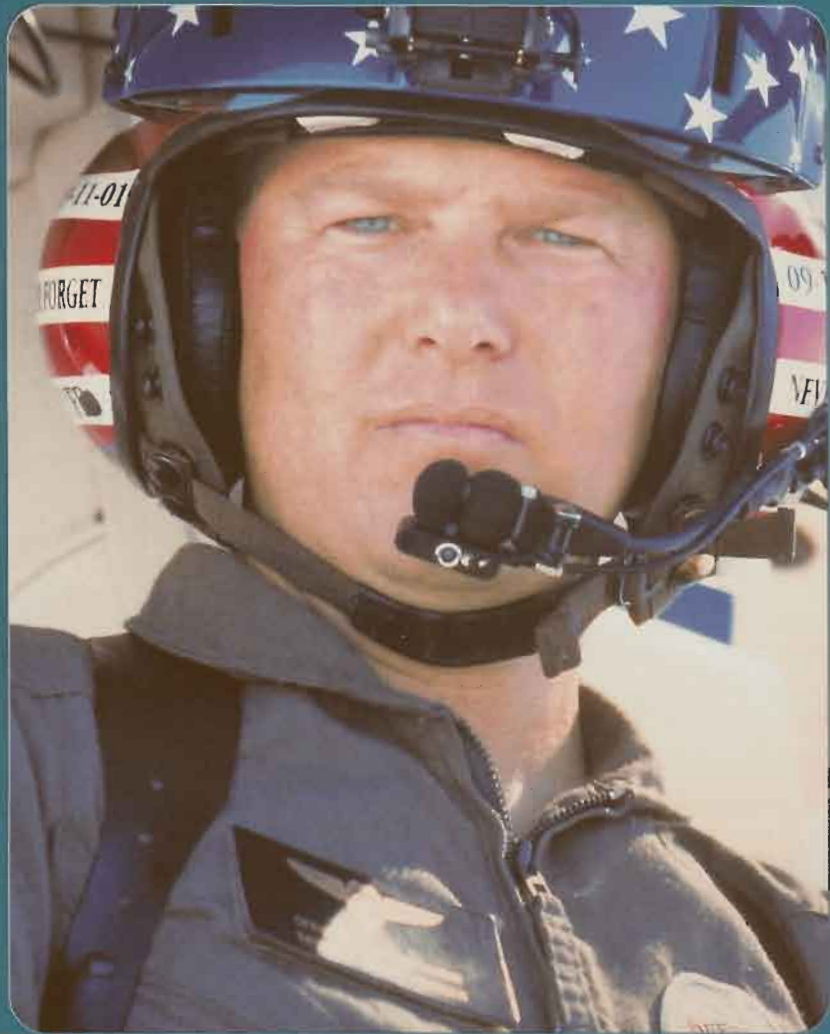
With every mile, the prints looked fresher. Melzer alerted ground agents that he was close and gave them our position. As the ground got harder, we slowed down and backtracked to reacquire the sign. Up ahead, in the middle of nowhere, was what appeared to be bundles of trash dumped in the desert brush. On closer inspection, the bundles turned out to be men. "Got them," said Melzer calmly. He flew to the intersection of two dirt roads just south of the migrants, read the road signs, then called in ground agents and began circling at 500 feet.



■ The US Border Patrol has a love/hate relationship with its 11 MD 600Ns. It had options to acquire 34 more to replace the OH-6, which it did not exercise.

Five men lay on the ground wrapped around the bushes. Melzer noted that they were harmless – a welcome change from the occasions when he goes to apprehend smugglers, who often scatter, making the helicopter & ground agents set up chase. These men looked tired, and after five minutes, stood up and waited for the ground agents to arrive. Ten minutes later, ground agents pulled up on a road about 200 yards from the men, who walked peacefully to the Patrol. "Luckily, this is how most of our apprehensions go," explained Melzer as we headed back to the border to start another search.

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Finding Their Place

For Melzer and the more than 110 other pilots in the Patrol, this effective routine is what allows the Border Patrol to average two arrests and US\$1,600 in narcotics busts every hour. In 2003, the Patrol flew 44,125 hours at an average cost of \$260 per hour. "Not a bad return on investment," said Hester grinning.

However, the patrol faces a number of changes and challenges as it settles into its new role in Homeland Security. Formerly a part of the Department of Justice, they, along with the US Coast Guard and Customs, have been thrust into the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS). These three agencies, together, possess all of the new department's aircraft assets. The challenge, of course, is sorting out each agency's role, and possibly even integrating assets to streamline operations, improve focus, and cut waste. Hester mentioned that the possible outcomes of this could include the creation of integrated training facilities, a central warehouse for all aircraft parts, and pilot cross-training.

The Department of Homeland Security Aviation Management Council was formed with high ranking members from each agency to determine just how to approach this monumental task. As a member of the council, Hester is actively involved in drafting its recommendations. He stated: "What we're trying to do is come up with the roles and responsibilities of aviation within DHS. There tends to be a bit of mission muddle. Agencies that used to do different things were in different departments with different roles. New bureaus are now forming within DHS. The Border Patrol is now Customs and Border Protection [CBP], responsible for border security. Legacy Customs Air and Marine Operations is now Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], responsible for such activities as interior investigation, detention, and removal..."

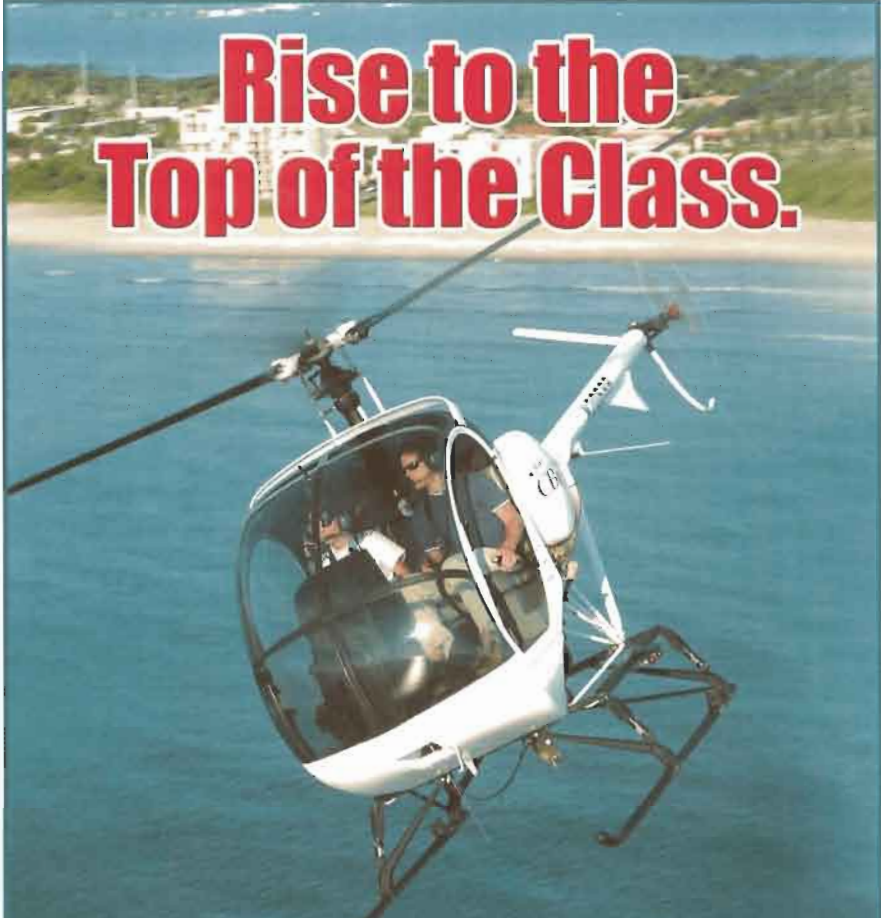
El Paso, the home of the Border Patrol's flight operations headquarters, is an example of where this overlap is causing confusion. The Patrol (now CBP) and ICE have bases in this town, but both operate under entirely different philosophies.

Customs' pilots are pilots first, they've never tracked foot sign from the ground, and are trained to interdict airborne drug traffickers. However, here, they fly along the Rio Grande in Blackhawk helicopters attempting to do Border Patrol duties.

"There are a lot of dedicated men and women in Legacy Customs [ICE] who find themselves in a new mission and situation, trying to do the best they can," explained Hester. "This is an example of an interdiction asset being used in an investigation bureau. These are the kinds of duplications we're trying to identify and there will

need to be a lot of new mission parameters outlined. One option is to move ICE missions, assets, and personnel to CBP; or move ICE to the interior where they can secure the country's central infrastructure and support investigations..."

In Hester's mind, the Border Patrol is in the best position. They were moved, en masse, to the DHS without losing any of their parts, unlike Customs. However, if Customs' aviation assets are integrated into the Patrol, their pilots will need ground training to work alongside their fellow Patrol pilots. This could mean an



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abbreviated academy, and a short assignment in ground patrol. However, these details are just ideas and suggestions at this point.

Beefing up

While the details of the DHS are in the works, the Border Patrol is beefing up its presence and assets. Before 9/11, there were four airplanes and four pilots on the northern border, and all were east of Grand Forks, ND. Immediately after 9/11, the Patrol added four new sectors, bringing in helicopters and personnel from other parts of the country. The goal is to have half of the Patrol's aviation assets on the northern border with Canada.

Stated assistant chief Patrol agent David Taylor: "If someone intends to harm our government, coming from Northeast Canada is the fastest way into the country. By increasing our presence around metropolitan areas, where it is easier for these groups, who intend harm, to congregate and blend in, we are better able to conduct border security."

In the meantime, other sectors are short-staffed as aircraft and human assets are spread further, Taylor stated. "It isn't just ground agents and pilots we need. We also need those experienced and skilled mechanics who can make sure the aircraft stay airworthy."

Currently, the Patrol's fleet consists of 80 helicopters and 35 fixed-wing craft. All of these belong to El Paso Flight Operations, the Patrol's aircraft headquarters, and are assigned to Patrol sectors around the country. All flight training and check rides are organized out of this office, which also houses the parts warehouse for the entire Border Patrol fleet.

The fleet, however, is aging. Some 60% of the helicopters are Vietnam-era aircraft.

(starting from top)

- The AS 350B3s are equipped for night-time operations, including NVG friendly cockpits.
- The patrol operates four MD 500Es from its San Diego Sector (which covers 7,000 square miles).
- The Patrol likes the hot/high performance of its AS 350B3s.
- The UH-1 is typically used for the insertion of agents, enabling them to operate in areas heavily used by alien smugglers (seen here running under the helicopter).
- It won't be long before this group, which was apprehended by agents, tries to re-enter the US again.

In fact, the US Border Patrol is the world's largest operator of the OH-6, with 37 of these ships currently flying (and parts getting scarcer all the time).

In an effort to decrease overall costs, the Patrol has begun a Fleet Recapitalization Plan which would bring in 105 new helicopters (37 of which would replace the OH-6s and 10 UH-1H ships, while the rest would allow for increased Patrol coverage). "By updating our fleet, we're getting new technology, lower inspection criteria, higher TBOs, and larger parts availability..." stated Hester.

The new aircraft fall under three categories: 55 small, light sign cutters, 20 FLIR equipped aircraft for night operations, and 30 twins for SAR, coastal patrol, and tactical operations. The bidding process for the light helicopters and twins is nearing completion. Once a budget is approved, the orders will be placed, said Hester. The RFP on the FLIR ships is expected sometime next year.

The Border Patrol had also received approval, in late April, to double their pilot resources by the end of 2004. They will offer positions to qualified Border Patrol ground agents and ICE pilots first, then recruit from other federal law enforcement agencies before advertising for pilots from outside the government. For this immediate pilot increase, the requirement for three years of ground patrol will be waived, and for current Patrol agents and federal law enforcement pilots, academy time will even be abbreviated. Pilots that are new to law enforcement, though, will attend the Patrol's full 19-week academy.

The Road Ahead

Back on the hunt near I-10, Melzer saw tracks that went under the freeway, but didn't come out. He landed the AS 350B3 to investigate. Ten minutes later, he returned empty-handed.

"This area used to be very popular with the smugglers," he said, pointing to the desert around El Paso. "That's why the Border Patrol started here. Our presence is definitely a deterrent, but they are looking for areas where we are weak. We'll be able to do a lot more once we're up to capacity."

