

The Florida Highway Patrol

FHP's pilots and aircraft help the agency honor its motto, "courtesy, service, protection"



Courtesy of the Florida Highway Patrol

Sgt. Domingo Torres, pilot of the Florida Highway Patrol's Troop E aircraft in Miami.

Aircraft are essential to the service of the Florida Highway Patrol (FHP), a division of the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. Although primarily used for managing traffic, FHP's aircraft also assist with recovering stolen vehicles and other activities of the Florida Highway Patrol.

Aircraft around the state

FHP has seven aircraft handling traffic throughout the state. These aircraft are fixed wing airplanes, Cessna 172s and 182s, and each one flies a region of several counties called a "Troop." One airplane is based in each of five cities—Tampa, Sarasota, Orlando, West Palm Beach, and Miami—and two airplanes are based in Tallahassee.

FHP also has one twin-engine aircraft for transporting passengers, such as staff members or top government officials.

FHP's pilots flew approximately 4,277 hours last year (fiscal year 2006/2007), and issued 48,718 citations by

way of aircraft. Most of these citations were for speed violations.

Checking speed

"We have one-quarter mile zones marked on the Interstate and state roads," says FHP's Captain Matt Walker. "The pilot uses a simple stop watch to check speed. The pilot starts the stop watch prior to the vehicle crossing the first line of the zone and stops the watch after the vehicle crosses the other line." This simple but effective method allows the pilot to calculate the average speed of the vehicle for that quarter mile. The pilot maintains contact with the speeding vehicle until it is stopped by a law enforcement officer on the ground.

In addition to speed violations, the FHP Aviation Section handled 7,609 other violations last year. The "other" category includes violations concerning seat belts, license tags, driver license charges, driving too closely, and drunk

FHP Aircraft Follows "Serial Speeder"

A south Florida motorcycle rider was arrested in 2005 after frequently driving at speeds up to 160 miles per hour and sometimes speeding through toll booths without stopping. "Serial Speeder" was difficult to identify because he had bent his license plate so that it was impossible to read. Eventually, however, his consistent habits were his downfall. Law officers knew his approximate route, so FHP stationed troopers on the ground at the exits and FHP's airplane followed him from above.

Serial Speeder knew he was being followed. He took one of the exits, and when he saw an officer, he turned around and drove against rush hour traffic at 100 mph. He drove his motorcycle all the way back home and drove right into his apartment. FHP's airplane directed officers on the ground to the apartment complex.

When officers approached Serial Speeder, he was washing his car, and he claimed that tire tracks leading to his door were from an all-terrain vehicle in his apartment. Another officer was walking around the back of the apartment when Serial Speeder's large dog pushed open the blinds, permitting the officer to see the motorcycle inside. The police found another surprise in the apartment—an application to join the Florida Highway Patrol. Serial Speeder was scheduled to take the exam the next month. Needless to say, FHP told him not to bother.

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driving. As long as a violation can be observed from the air, the pilot can report it to a law enforcement officer on the ground.

Last year the FHP Aviation Section apprehended 138 persons for misdemeanors and felonies not related to traffic. These individuals may have been stopped for speeding, for example, and were then apprehended because drugs were located [in the vehicle?] or because they were wanted for a bank robbery or another crime.

Recovering stolen vehicles

FHP aircraft help in several ways to recover stolen vehicles. "Sometimes joyriders dump stolen cars in a canal, river, or lake after they are finished with them," says Captain Walker. Vehicles in the water are much easier to see from the air than from the ground.

Occasionally when an FHP pilot spots a speeding driver, the trooper on the ground stops the driver and discovers the vehicle is stolen. Because an FHP aircraft was involved in stopping the

driver, the stolen vehicle recovery is recorded as part of FHP's aircraft statistics.

Another method of locating stolen vehicles is through a car tracking device called LoJack. If LoJack has been installed in a car and the owner reports it stolen, the police activate a transceiver located in the car. FHP's airplanes have a receiver that picks up the signal, and the pilot can search for and locate the car.

Last year FHP aircraft were involved in 11 recoveries of vehicles that had LoJack installed and 19 recoveries of vehicles that did not have LoJack. The reason for the higher number of "non LoJack recoveries," says Captain Walker, is that FHP sometimes finds several stolen vehicles in one place. Someone steals a car, for example, and holds it for a while before moving it to a "chop shop." FHP then finds the vehicle along with several other stolen cars.

For more information about the Florida Highway Patrol, see www.flhsmv.gov/fhp. ♦

FHP's Aircraft Statistics for 2006/2007:

- Flew 4,277 hours (all aircraft combined)
- Issued 48,718 citations by way of aircraft, 41,109 for speed violations and 7,609 other (673 of these 48,718 citations were aggressive drivers)
- Assisted 136 disabled vehicles (the pilot calls a trooper to assist)
- Assisted other agencies 7 times
- Recovered 11 stolen vehicles using LoJack
- Recovered 19 stolen vehicles not using LoJack
- Apprehended 138 persons for misdemeanors and felonies not related to traffic

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