

May 30, 2008

Ocean County Black Sheep scout the shore at sunset

By *ALEX RUDINSKI*
Staff Writer

As the sun sets on the shoreline, the Ocean County Black Sheep are 1,000 feet in the air, circling the coastline to keep the shore safe. They are the Ocean County Sheriff's Department's eyes in the sky — small, single-engine planes humming through the clouds as the sun dips below the horizon.

The Ocean County Black Sheep, officially known as the Ocean Air Support Squadron, is a volunteer aviation surveillance organization. Their colloquial moniker comes from their departure from the Civil Air Patrol, the official civilian auxiliary air patrol of the United States Air Force.



"They called us the Black Sheep because we left (the Civil Air Patrol)," said Mike Maino, the safety and public relations officer for the Black Sheep. The squadron no longer has any military ties.

The squadron flies missions over the coastlines of Ocean County and southern Monmouth County, working hand in hand with the sheriff's Office of Emergency Management to assist in rescue operations and criminal pursuits. The squadron also aids in communications relays during emergency operations, and helps to direct emergency vehicles to their targets from an airborne vantage point.

"They give us the capability of doing something we couldn't do otherwise," says Captain Michael Osborn, one of the deputy coordinators for the Office of Emergency Management. Without the volunteer efforts of the squadron, he says, the office would not have the air surveillance capabilities it has today. "I have nothing but the utmost respect for the squadron," he says.

"We offer the sheriff an air arm," says Maino. "It's possible we could be called out for missing persons, or a car jacking."

Mostly, the squadron patrols the coast looking for disabled boats, tracking pollution sources and monitoring traffic patterns.

"It's more than just looking out for bad guys," Maino says.

The Black Sheep's chief duty during the summer is the Sunset Patrols — short surveillance loops along the shore. From Memorial Day to Labor Day every year, the squadron flies the weekend patrols along the coastline, heading home as the sun goes down.

"It's what makes flying fun," says Maino.

Every Friday, Saturday and Sunday between May and September, two planes, Ram 1 and Ram 2, take off in the early evening from the Robert J. Miller Airpark in Berkeley Township. From there, the planes separate and scout the shoreline, heading as far south as Mystic Island and as far north as Brielle. If they find something, like a boater in distress or a group of ATVs in a prohibited area, they radio the sheriff's office.

"We spot things in the air, and we'll tell other people about it," says Maino. "Then, they'll take care of it."

The squadron consists of about 30 to 35 members during the summer, with 12 planes among them. All the planes are owned by members of the squadron, but the sheriff's department helps by covering fuel and oil costs on flights for the county.

"Our pilots have huge expenses with their airplanes," says Maino, "but we all still volunteer."

While one-third of the squadron flies the airplanes on patrol, another third works as observers. The observers occupy the chair next to the pilot in the cramped cockpit, taking pictures and looking for anything unusual. The remaining members of the squadron make up the communications staff, staffing the towers and the radios to support the planes in the air.

"We're giving back a little bit," says Maino. "It gives us the chance to help out other people using our assets."

The 8-year-old squadron was born out of a volunteer spirit in an effort to slash red tape and help people more efficiently.

The Ocean County Support Squadron formed about 30 years ago as an outgrowth of the Civil Air Patrol, or CAP. According to Maino, CAP would fly informal patrols of the bay from Route 37 north to the Manasquan Inlet. Pilots would scout for stranded boaters and monitor the shoreline. However, if the CAP's planes and pilots were needed for another reason, such as a criminal pursuit, orders would have to be relayed through the Pentagon. This process would delay the planes' deployment by four to five hours — an incredibly long time in an emergency situation. To circumvent this sluggish process, the Black Sheep split from CAP in 2000 to create a special unit that would work directly with the sheriff's department. With this system, response time has dropped from several hours to 40 minutes.

The pilots in the Black Sheep come from different backgrounds. Some, like Maino, have prior military experience. Others are commercial fliers or private pilots. They're always looking for new members, especially those with flight experience.

"We look for a military mindset," says Maino.

The squadron does operate in a military fashion, an echo of its past relationship to the Air Force and its continuing relationship with emergency agencies. The squadron is run much like an Air Force wing, and all members have an informal military rank used to delineate the chain of command. This is especially important when the squadron works with other agencies, like the Coast Guard or police department, when communication channels can be crowded. It gives the squadron a clear leader, and provides a ready-made system for orders and support.

When working with another department, the squadron's pilots try to stay out of the way "until we can help," says Maino. When that time comes, they can be instrumental.

Maino recalls a time the sheriff's office asked for the Black Sheep's assistance in apprehending a fleeing suspect. The suspect, who had allegedly wounded a man with a knife at a local bar the night before, had fled into the woods when the police came to arrest him. The squadron's planes circled the woods, looking for the suspect, while police officers surrounded the perimeter with patrol cars.

"They were trying to flush him out," says Maino.

Then, surprisingly, the suspect emerged from the woods with his hands on his head. "He got down on his knees and surrendered to the planes," Maino says. The suspect, seeing the planes, thought he was on the television show "Cops," and that the planes were sent to record his pursuit and capture.

"He's kneeling on the ground," says Maino, "and the cop is standing in front of him and looking up at me like, 'That's pretty good.'"

Aerial photographs from the Ocean County Support Squadron's Sunset Patrols are on display at the Lacey Library continuing through May 31.

The library, located at 10 E. Lacey Road in Forked River, is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday and Sunday.

For information, call (609) 693-8566.
