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## *A Reader's Digest*



# Sky Knight, the Heavenly Prowl Car

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This new police weapon is proving that, when it comes to fighting crime, the whirlybird is hard to beat



## Sky Knight, the Heavenly Prowl Car

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PATRICIA AND RON DEUTSCH

THE CONVICTED child molester drove warily down the back streets of Lakewood, just outside Los Angeles. Beside him sat eight-year-old Susan, believing she was being taken to the circus. Suddenly a patrol car raced from a side road to block the way. From behind, another car cut off retreat. In seconds the handcuffs snapped shut. "But how?" the dazed criminal wanted to know. One of the detectives pointed to a two-man helicopter circling above, the star of the Los Angeles County sheriff on its fuselage. "Saw you make the pickup."

Once again Lakewood's Project Sky Knight, the police patrol in the air, had shown how whirlybirds can help turn the tide of lawlessness.

Lakewood, population 84,500, one of 27 cities policed by the Los Angeles County sheriff, had been

plagued by a sharply rising crime rate before Sky Knight first took to the air in June 1966. But in its first year the chopper took part in 1100 police actions and helped bring about an amazing drop in crime.

Its effectiveness is shown by Susan's rescue from the molester. Deputy Sheriff Morris Helgeson and his observer were flying random patrol over the city. Though only 500 feet in the air, they were scarcely noticed—the chopper's special quiet rotors reduce its sound to a gentle buzz. At three o'clock the pair headed for the nearest grade school. They knew that several children had recently been accosted from cars while walking home. The city's three patrol cars could not watch all streets around all schools—but Sky Knight had a larger view.

As they flew from one school to another, the observer suddenly spotted two little girls backing away from a green sedan. Through binoculars, their faces looked apprehensive. The sedan quickly moved off, then stopped on another street, opposite Susan, who entered it. At once Helgeson alerted ground units. Then, as he trailed the sedan, he directed patrol cars into position, like chessmen, until the trap was set—then sprung.

Eye in the Sky. Flying day and night, Sky Knight's watchful patrol has brought new safety to Lakewood's streets. On the chopper's third day in the air, for example, there was a call from an auto show-

room. A man had stolen a car from the lot and disappeared into traffic. Patrol cars raced to the area, but it was rush hour and there was slim chance of spotting the stolen car from the ground. Moreover, high speed was dangerous. In less than a minute, however, the police radio crackled: "This is Sky Knight. We have the stolen vehicle in view and are following."

"Suddenly," says a deputy who was in one of the patrol cars, "my partner and I realized that the thief hadn't a chance. We slowed down and tailed Sky Knight all over town. Finally the guy was cut off by radio cars. We drove up right behind him. You should have seen his face."

As an eye in the sky, Sky Knight is peerless, combing backyards and inaccessible areas for lost children, quickly spotting accidents and fires, sometimes landing to handle emergencies. As a guardian of the roads, it can easily note the weaving drunk or racing hot rodder, pursue wild motorcyclists down dirt trails or lead fire engines around streets clogged with traffic.

It was in 1964 that the Los Angeles County sheriff first began to think of a helicopter for regular patrol. Up to that time, the few police forces which owned copters used them almost exclusively for rescue work. But that year there was a wave of burglaries in Los Angeles County's Antelope Valley, a desert region where hundreds of city residents had built weekend retreats. During mid-week the valley was almost empty,

an unguarded trove for thieves, who became so brash they used moving vans to strip houses at leisure.

An auto patrol of the huge area would have taken many cars and men. But what about the county's rescue helicopter? Sheriff Peter J. Pitchess decided to give it a try. Trucks parked near houses were easily spotted from the air, and anyone not on legitimate business was quickly arrested. In weeks Antelope Valley's burglary rate plummeted to zero.

**Pilot Program.** Intrigued, Sheriff Pitchess wondered what such an aerial patrol might do in cities. But the cost seemed prohibitive and Pitchess shelved the idea. Then in 1965 Watts exploded in riot; roofs became sniper nests, backyards and alleys turned into escape routes and rallying points for the looters and terrorists. Though the riot area was mainly the responsibility of Los Angeles' city police, Pitchess offered his helicopters. At once the roofs and alleys were in view. Police could move into dark corners without meeting unexpected bullets, and mobs were spotted even as they formed. The whirlybird patrol was an important factor in quelling the violence. Sheriff Pitchess now was sure that the choppers could help control crime in cities. But where would the money come from for a test?

Fortunately, proof of the aerial patrol's efficacy came at a time when the soaring national crime rate had led Congress to appropriate some

seven million dollars to seek new ideas to help local police. Sheriff Pitchess presented his evidence to Washington's newly formed Office of Law Enforcement Assistance and received \$159,000 to set up a trial program.

Lakewood was selected as the site because of its progressive spirit and its physical similarities to many medium-size American cities. Numbers were painted on the streets as checkpoints for pilots, and merchants who wished to participate in the experiment installed rotating roof-top alarm lights with which to signal Sky Knight of trouble. Three helicopters were leased at cost from the Hughes Tool Co. The pilots would be experienced men from the sheriff's aero bureau, the observers Lakewood patrolmen who would take turns flying for three months at a time.

**Copter Cops.** From the first, one of the most reassuring things about Sky Knight has been the speed with which it can respond to police calls—usually within two minutes. Says one Lakewood housewife: "My husband was away on a trip when I woke to sounds at a back window downstairs. I called the sheriff's office, but I knew it might take ten minutes for a car to reach me. Then I heard glass break. Seconds later I heard Sky Knight, very close. Its special searchlight made the whole yard bright as day, and a voice from a loudspeaker ordered the prowler not to move. The helicopter just hovered there, holding the man outside



the window until radio cars came."

The chopper has also proved to be a potent backstop for the officer on the ground. One night Lt. Claude Cooper answered a call on a bar fight, watched the lone officer enter, and hovered above waiting for an all clear. But when the officer started for his car with the troublemaker, an angry mob formed around him in a vacant lot. Quickly Cooper radioed for help, then dropped to 300 feet and, through the public-address system, ordered the crowd to disperse. The mob didn't move. But when Cooper settled directly toward them, big blades whirling, they ran.

"We've used the same technique to break up a number of gang fights," says Cooper. "It isn't just fear of the blade. They know we can see each individual. There's no anonymity. And they know we are armed."

Sky Knight enables fewer men to handle risky or difficult situations. In a burglary call, for example, it can guard all exits from a building and check the roof, to which burglars often retreat. Once a suspect is spotted, it becomes the most effective "tail" the sheriff's men have known. In fact, it has never lost a suspect, not even in the dark.

Its exploits have impressed criminals as well. Once Sky Knight responded to an alarm at a downtown store. After radioing ground units, the pilot hovered above. Inside, deputies found the store manager stalling a passer of bad checks. Outside, they found two accomplices

sitting gloomily in a car. "You saw us drive up," said the surprised officer. "How come you didn't leave?" One of the men pointed at the hovering Sky Knight, said with a shrug, "Where could we go?"

**Knight Watch.** As Sky Knight's achievements became known, officers from Lakewood's neighboring cities asked for the bird's help. But this did not reduce the patrol's effectiveness. "The fact is," says Sheriff Pitchess, "Lakewood's nine square miles proved just a mouthful for Sky Knight. At the end of our first year, we added five more cities to its beat, making a total of 35 square miles, and still its ability was not taxed."

Sheriff Pitchess now uses three helicopters for the six-city patrol, keeping one always in the air. Equipped for police work, the copers cost \$40,000 each. The whole Sky Knight operation has added about \$160,000 a year to police costs for the six-city area—less than a dollar a year for each citizen guarded. "In more densely populated areas the cost would drop to pennies," Sheriff Pitchess says. "We now plan to patrol all of Los Angeles County's 4000 square miles and seven million people with just 14 helicopters in the air."

Los Angeles County will not be alone in its air war against crime. "Within ten years," says Chief J. T. Alley of Lubbock, Texas, one of many cities now planning or beginning helicopter patrols, "every major city will have its own Sky Knight."

Even the briefest use of a chopper seems to convince local police. Hughes, Bell and other helicopter manufacturers have offered craft free to cities for tests. In Kansas City, Mo., where a single chopper was used for six days, Police Chief Clarence Kelly was amazed at the results. "The helicopter handled everything from prowlers and accidents to a bank robbery, in a way no ground unit could possibly have managed. Every police force needs one of these aircraft."

Welcome to the "Rotary Club." Police from dozens of cities, from Honolulu to Trenton, N.J., have visited Los Angeles, studied Sky

Knight and put helicopters into their budget requests. Chicago has now completed tests and is preparing to add a small fleet of whirlybirds to the force. Says one Chicago official, "We expect the helicopters to restore to law enforcement the edge we have been losing."

Criminologist C. Robert Guthrie, evaluating Sky Knight for the U.S. Justice Department, summed up the opinion of many law-enforcement officials when he stated: "Sky Knight reduced crime startlingly in Lakewood, at a time when it was booming in other cities. The helicopter may be the best new police tool since the advent of the radio car."

**END**