



Police Aviation News

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Metropolitan Police Anniversary Special 1980-2005

IPAR

Metropolitan

Police

25 Years



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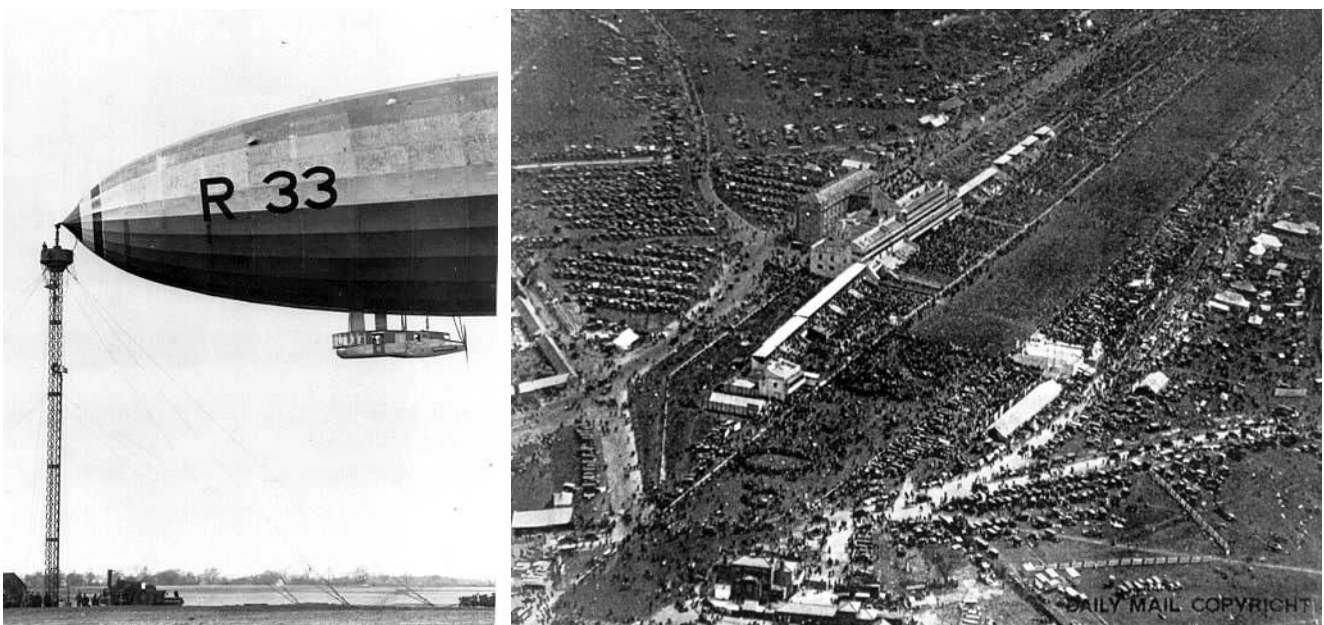
The end of November 2005 marks 25 years of the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit in London. This milestone does not mark 25 years of aviation in the Metropolitan Police, that stretches back to the years immediately following the Great War.

The Metropolitan Police had been flying experimentally since 1921 when ex-wartime airships the Government of the day was trying to find a use for were trialled in the traffic control role. In subsequent decades a whole range of aircraft were flown in trials invariable associated with traffic and crowd control. Many of these operations were at the leading edge of the technology—the first airship, the first autogyro etc— but none led to a permanent air operation.

The first use of a helicopter was in 1947—just after the Norfolk Constabulary undertook a World first in law enforcement air operations—but again it was a one off search of parkland in London and not the start of anything regular.

A decade of experiments later for a few years a small scale fixed wing operation saw the regular use of light aircraft on traffic control over London. This was swept aside by a Government requirement that banned the use of single-engine aircraft over the Capital.

Helicopters returned briefly with an Army trial operating Bell 47G Sioux over London for some weeks. That operation in turn led to the start of present day operations using Hughes 300 helicopters from 1970. For just under a decade single engine helicopters—all of them leased—held sway over London undertaking a widening range of traffic and crime patrols.



London Police air operations date back to 1921 when experiments were undertaken at horse racing meetings to the west of the Capital using giant airships [R33 illustrated]

Cover photo: AS355N G-SEPC at Chigwell Police Show 2005 [Flight/IPAR archive](#)

By the late 1970's the Government had again decreed that the police air operations would also have to utilise twin-engine helicopters if they were to continue to operate police operations over the Capital City.

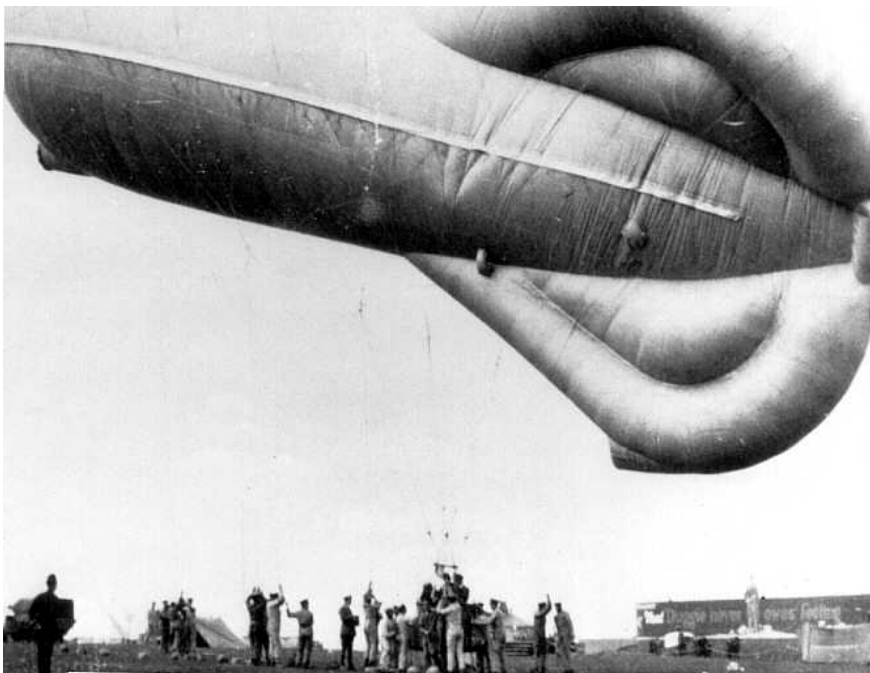
In spite of the dire financial shock waves it sent through New Scotland Yard, the use of helicopters with twin engines were not entirely a new concept in standard police work. Argentinean Police had employed examples of the Bolkow BO105 from 1975 and from 1979 the type was used extensively in Holland and Germany. Uniquely Qatar ordered the twin-engine Westland Lynx for police use in 1978. In the murky area beyond the Iron Curtain police were known to have been using the Mil Mi-2, but that was not a type of operation that many knew a great deal about even many years later. In many ways the late seventies became a watershed for many police flying units. It was a time when new equipment was sought to replace fleets equipped with the Alouette and Bell 47 with more advanced types of a newer generation.

In the late 1970s the range of twin engine helicopter types was quite restricted. Most of those that were already on offer were medium to large in size. The Metropolitan Police were presented with a situation that was in many ways to hamper their future development. Like many of the first in their field, others were to profit from mistakes they learned. The choice of type was soon reduced to six types of twin helicopter, three originated from Europe, one each from Agusta, Aerospatiale and Bolkow with two from Sikorsky, and one from Bell in the USA. Briefly the contenders were:-

Agusta 109. The sleek Italian helicopter was built like sports cars in its country of origin. First flown in 1971, and certified in 1977, the eight seat craft was powered by a pair of Allison engines. Although destined to serve in large numbers with the Italian Police, Carabinieri, Customs and police forces across the world, it seemed consistently destined to never made the break though in the UK.

Aerospatiale AS365. An eight seat twin powered by French Turbomeca engines, it had already undergone a major transformation by manufacturers unhappy with the styling of this Alouette III replacement. The revised model, larger and replacing a previous fixed tail wheel landing gear with a retractable nose wheel assembly was to underline the wisdom of the changes by becoming the finalist to the winning Bell 222.

By 1934 Autogiro operations were developing into dealing with crime operations as well as traffic.



1924 —A static observation balloon was used to provide a view across the racecourse and surrounding roads at the Epsom Derby. MP/IPAR archive



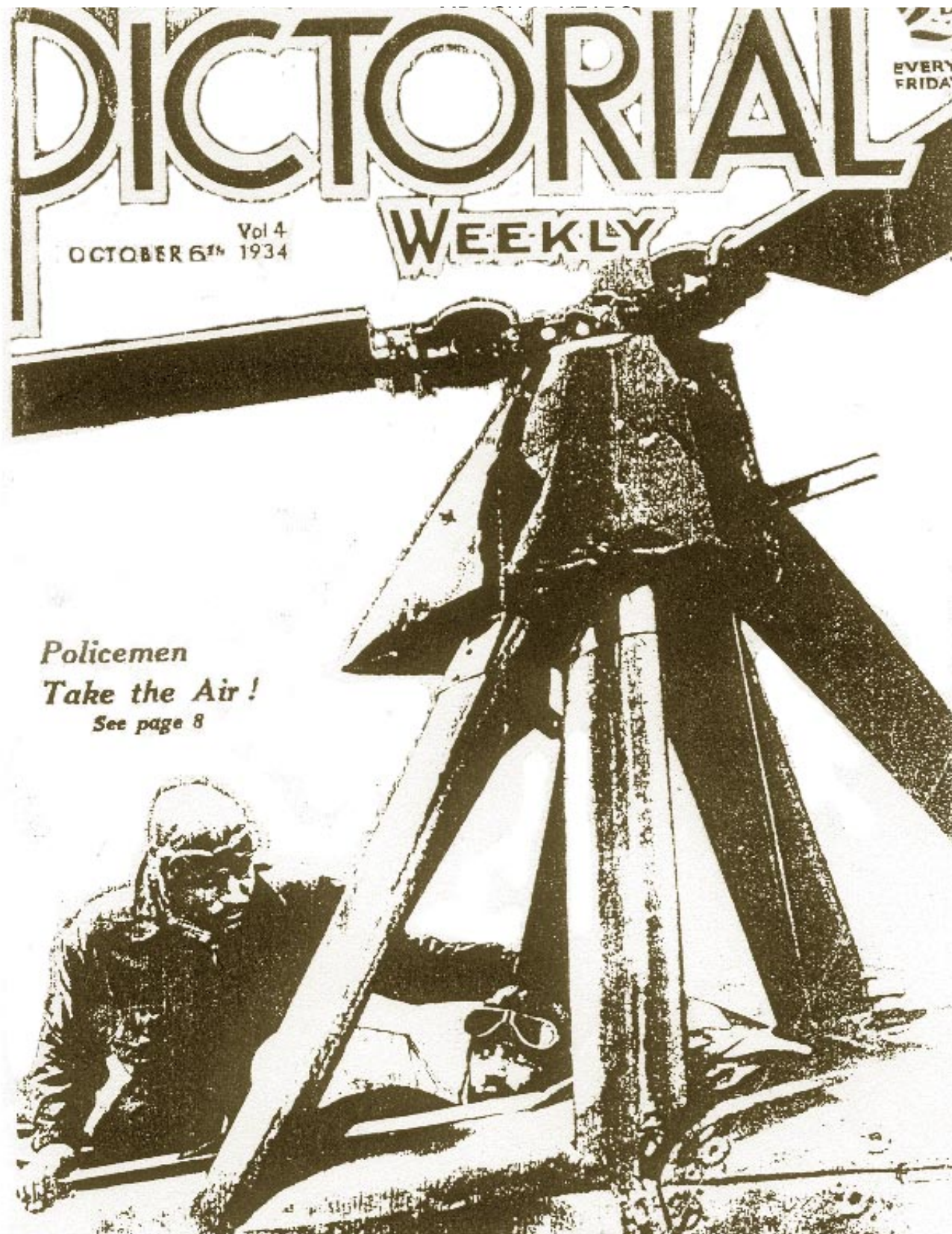
In 1932 Juan Cierva successfully promoted the Autogiro to Scotland Yard and for a few years various machines were operated at special events—including the Epsom Races. This was the first. IPAR archive

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Many aerial photographs were being taken—including this view of Trafalgar Square. IPAR archive





The new flying police caught the interest of the media and a large number of stories on their operations and aspirations appeared in a range of magazines at the time. Few reflected the true position of a continued flirtation with aircraft rather than a commitment to air operations.

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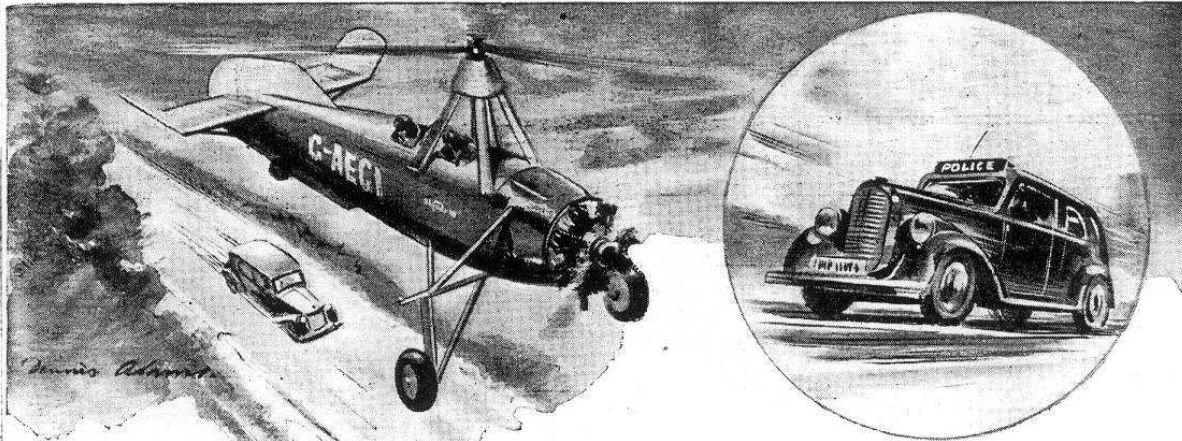
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September 17, 1938

FLYING

19

AERIAL "BLACK MARIAS"



Radio-equipped Autogyro

UNDER Lord Treachard the British flying squad and motor-car section have rapidly caught up with America during the past three years. The Chicago and New York police forces were the first in the world to have a really useful squad of police cars, and gangster warfare compelled them to have cars with bullet-proof glass and armoured bodies so that the "cops" would not get "bumped off" while effecting a catch.

In England we have not yet had to resort to bullet-proof glass, but some of the special "Q" cars used by the Metropolitan Police and Scotland Yard are specially built so that the bodies are bullet-proof, and the cars themselves can be rammed into almost anything on the road if necessary without fear of damage

By **CECIL BISHOP**
(Late C.I.D., Scotland Yard)

police when occasion arose. Mr. Beacher stated that he was enthusiastic, because he said that two of his own officers had taken pilot certificates and other members of the force were showing interest in flying—and not only because they hoped to get a thrill out of it!

These aerial police at Redhill will come in useful for providing rapid means of transport and also for photographic purposes. When the scheme gets going properly they may install radio.

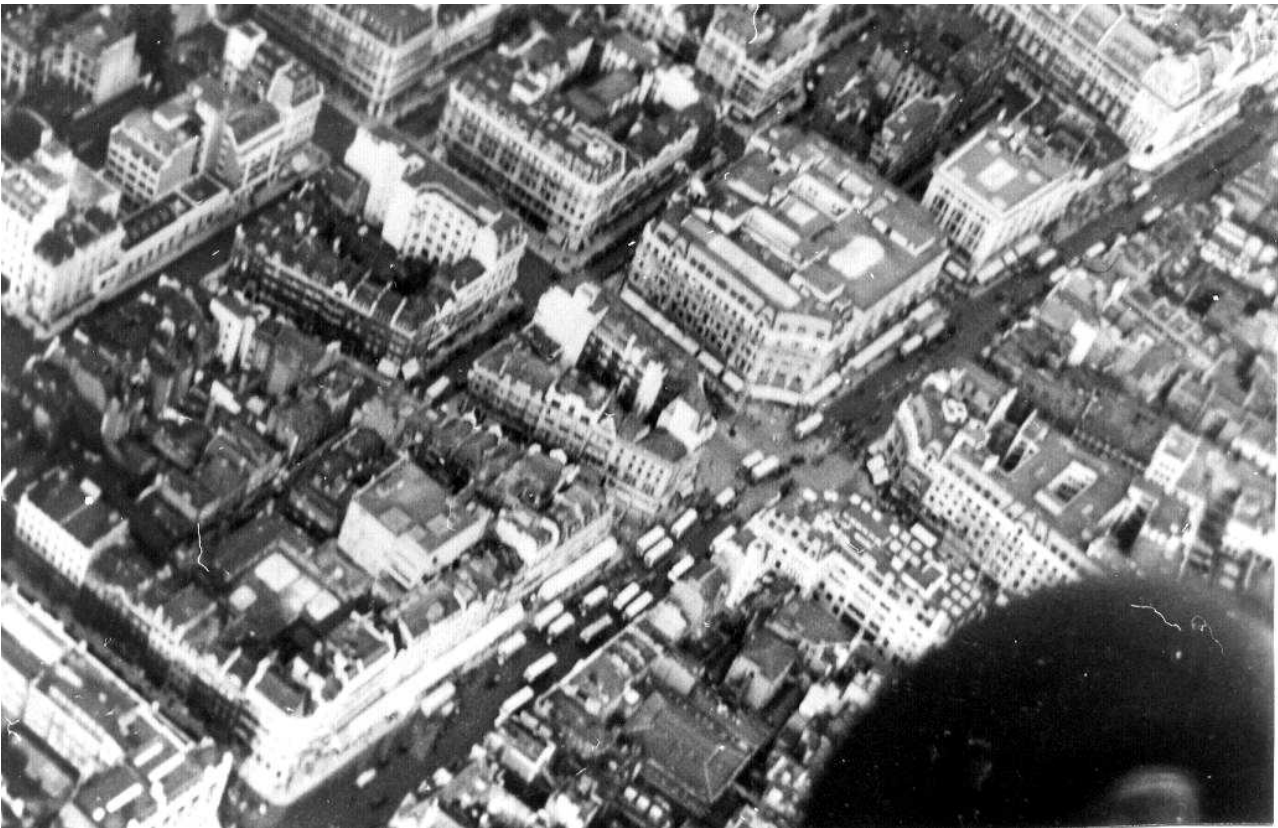
The first police official in England to use the radio link between an aeroplane and a police car was Captain C. E. Lynch-Blosse,

enabled to effect his "arrest." This was another successful test of what the British police can do.

£500 for Tests

Aerial "Black Marias" need money. I sincerely hope that the power which Parliament has given for the police to borrow up to £4,000,000 will provide plenty of ready money for police aviation. It may sound only like a drop in the ocean, but I am nevertheless glad to see that the Leicestershire Standing Joint Committee has given £500 to continue radio and aviation tests for the police. Two other flying men who have got together are Captain Duncan Davis (of the Brooklands School of Flying) and Major G. E. Nicholson, of the Surrey Constabulary.

They started an elaborate scheme of radio



Oxford Street 1934 from a Cierva Autogiro operated by the Metropolitan Police using civil pilots and flying from Hanwell in West London..[Sidney Chamberlain photo in the IPAR archive]

Bolkow BO105. The familiarity of the police with this type in operations might have given it a head start had it not also been one of the oldest types on offer. An early model, before a variety of cabin stretches were produced, it also appears to have suffered from its relatively small size in comparison with the opposition.

Sikorsky S61. Giving the appearance of being the Joker in the pack, this ten seat machine with origins dating from 1958 was the civil version of the military Sea King anti-submarine helicopter. In a search and rescue role, the type saw extensive law enforcement use with the US Coast Guard, and the police in Denmark and Thailand.

Sikorsky S76. Even larger than its S61 stable-mate, this 12 seat twin Allison helicopter was developed in the same time-scale and market niche as the eventual winner. Ultimately it was also to prove the more commercially viable of the two in the civil executive market. It was to serve with seven police forces across the world.

Bell 222. First flown in 1976, the winner of the Metropolitan Police contract was an eight seat machine powered by two Lycoming LTS101 engines that were to prove its Achilles heel in British police service. It will go down in history as the first helicopter Bell built for the civil executive market. The London police were among the first customers and Bell were naturally cock-a-hoop. The police machine was to be delivered only six months behind the lead customer. There were to be proposals for a military derivative, but it was not itself a type derived from a military project and it failed to sell to the military.

One notable absentee from the list was a helicopter that might have been assumed to have been one of the leading contenders had it been available a little earlier - the AS355 Ecureuil, TwinStar or Twin Squirrel. This came onto the scene marginally too late for consideration by the New Scotland Yard planners. The AS355 flew for the first time in September 1979 and still had to make an impression on the market. There remains a suspicion however that the planners were thinking big in choosing their first helicopter. It may be that



the Squirrel, like the 105, was considered too small at that time.

According to a confidential police report, the competition was down to a choice between the AS365 and Bell 222 by December 21, 1978.

Up until the delivery of the new helicopter fleet all air operations were undertaken by commercial contractors. With the change to a fleet of police owned

twin-engine helicopters pending Alan Mann Helicopter's lost the Metropolitan Police contract when it was renewed in 1980. Their successor was British Caledonian Helicopters, which offered the Bolkow BO105 temporarily. The prime craft was the BO105 G-BFYA, a machine still serving UK police today with the Norfolk Constabulary. A number of back-up machines included similar Bolkow's leased in from their owner, the electronic giant, Ferranti.

The contract was one of high stakes and high rewards for the successful negotiator. Finally the die was cast. To be delivered seven months apart, two examples of the new Bell were ordered at a cost given as £500,000 each. In addition to the basic cost role equipment was to cost a further £250,000 each airframe and a further cost was to be the erection of a substantial hangar, workshops, offices and control room at Lippitts Hill. In addition to a paint scheme that mimicked the accepted standard for road vehicles at that time - white with red and yellow -'jam sandwich'- stripes, the basic role equipment helicopters were to include sky-shout speakers a powerful searchlight and rescue winch.

Items that were to enjoy less prominence from delivery day were the external rescue winch fitted over the starboard door and an under-slung cargo hook. The London police were





Lippitts Hill 1967

IPAR archive

guided by Bell in the purchase of these items and reflected US practice. The manufacturer was aware of numerous instances of rooftop rescue in other countries where its products were operated by police. In the event they were not used in London.

A major feature of the London Bell 222 fleet was to be the fitting of the Mark 2 version of the Marconi Heli-Tele. This heavy television camera system was a straight graft from a military security system developed for the British Army in its war against the Irish Republican Army in Ulster. Although it had its limitations it was a World leader in the technology and was to greatly enhance the capability of the new air unit.



'The Job' IPAR archive

Before delivery of the new Bell was affected, the unit was involved in a major international event - the dramatic Iranian Embassy siege. In June 1980 the Iranian Embassy was taken over in an incident which proved worthy of a few books. Employing the probing eye of Heli-Tele, the yel-



MP/IPAR archive

Elstree 1976

Battersea 1974

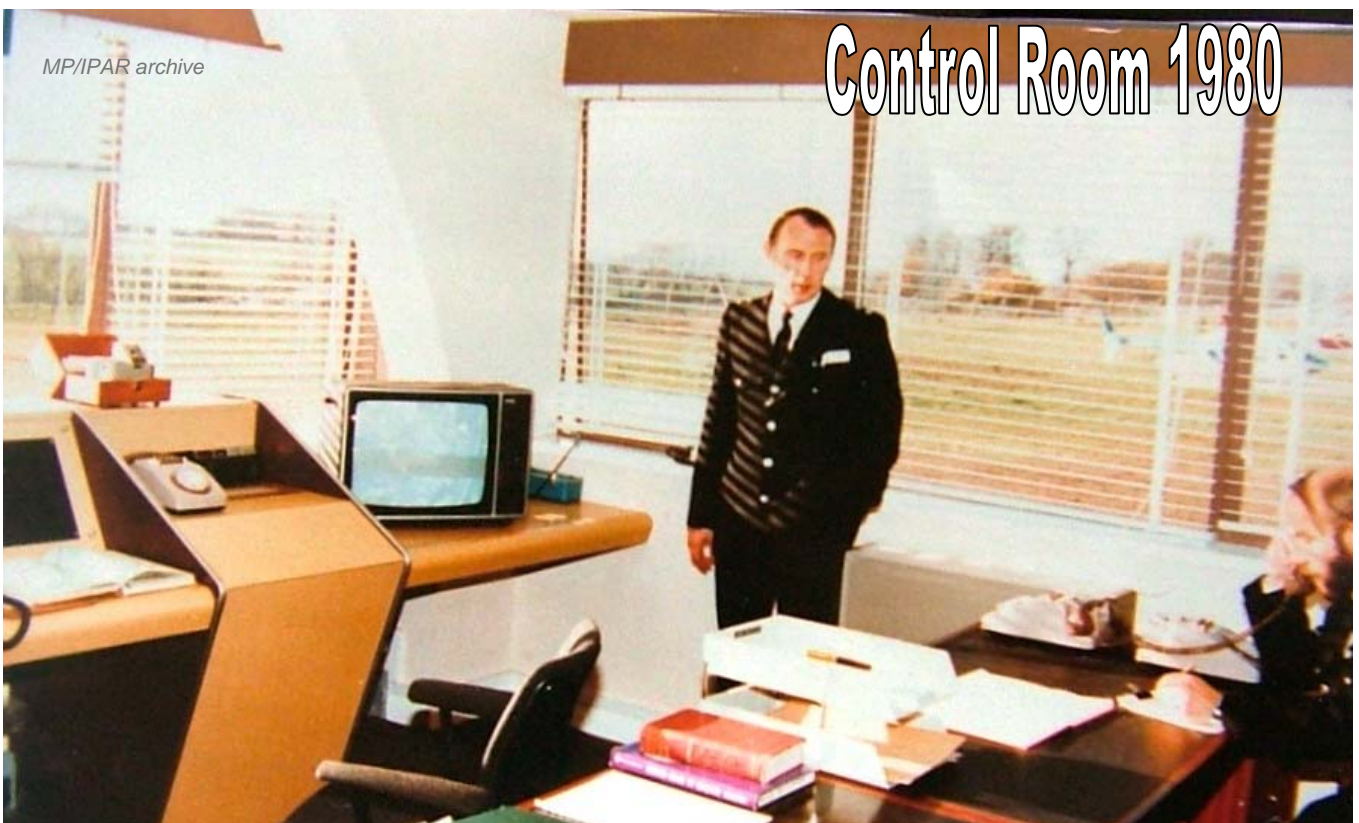
Marconi/IPAR archive

low police Bolkow was used to provide an aerial monitor of the scene and spent many hours hovering above Hyde Park observing the building. It was on hand to record the final minutes of the assault of the building by members of the SAS. It was reported that more than one television reporter got carried away and mistook the large spherical sensor ball for a 'remotely controlled gun turret.'

In the US the Bell 222 picked up the nickname 'Triple-Deuce', a title that did not travel across the Atlantic to the base of the new operators. Although the appellation was used on a number of occasions by the UK press in their reports on the type, the name did not get used by the police themselves. Most, if not all, crew members wholly disliked the Americanism. Throughout its British police service the type was known as the 'treble-two', with individual aircraft being identified by a phonetic alphabet rendition of the last letter of the registration. The first aircraft was therefore 'Alpha'.

MP/IPAR archive

Control Room 1980





November 1980

The first Metropolitan Police Bell 222 helicopter was re-registered from its temporary US marks to G-META on August 1, 1980. At that time it was still at sea. The helicopter arrived at Southampton Docks on August 24 and flew to the Bell agents at Oxford, CSE Aviation Ltd., three days later for fitting out with role equipment.

The first full time police air unit with its own aircraft in the UK was duly officially launched at Lippitts Hill on Wednesday November 26, 1980. A fleet of visiting Bell helicopters descended upon Lippitts Hill with official guests.

The Home Secretary of the time, the Rt. Hon. William Whitelaw, later Lord Whitelaw, accompanied by the Commissioner of the day, Sir David McNee QPM, and a gathering of senior police and officials from the Home Office, proudly presented the new aircraft and facilities to the gathered media. The ceremony to officially launch and name the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit was held inside the hanger and consisted of the Home Secretary removing the force flag and unveiling the force crest on the flank of the Bell, and a ceremonial handing over of the aircraft keys to the chief pilot.

With the official hand-over completed there followed a brief period of operations relying upon the Bo105 as the crews set about learning how to operate the new helicopter type





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and its new tools. Despite the fact that the duties of the unit had expanded considerably in the years prior to the arrival of the Bell 222, the number of personnel remained almost the same as it was in 1975, an inspector, John Saville, three sergeants and sixteen constables. During this same period flying times had risen to average at around 1,200 hours annually. Following the model of US practice, the unit undertook a respond and patrol flight cycle rather than respond only. It was to be well over a decade before the economics of this policy were called into question. Normal availability of the helicopters remained restricted. Overall it was initially available on a Monday to Friday basis and then the crews only worked a leisurely 0800hrs. to 1600hrs. or 1400hrs. to 2200hrs. Although the Bell's were equipped to fly in bad weather on instruments there was a tendency to go home if the conditions got particularly 'dirty'.

One result of this operating style was that the unit was not always available when major incidents occurred. Probably the most memorable being the collision on the River Thames between two vessels.

In the early hours of Sunday morning, August 20, 1989 up to 150 young party goers were dancing the night away and admiring the view of night time London from the 90 ton River Thames pleasure boat Marchioness as they celebrated the 26th birthday of Antonio de Vasconcellos. Without warning the Tidal Cruises owned vessel was struck from behind by the





Seen on the River Thames in 1980 is a vessel thought to be the Marchioness [extreme right]. The police Bell 222 and the vessel were to meet again in less tranquil surroundings nine years later. [MP/IPAR Archive]

1,800 ton ocean going dredger Bow Belle as it passed under Southwark Bridge. The crowded pleasure boat tipped over on its side and sank quickly. Fifty five, mainly young, people were either thrown from the vessel or dragged below its dark waters in the twisted wreck to their deaths.

Not far away, the Information Room at New Scotland Yard was first alerted, at 0149hrs, by one of the River Police launches. Within two minutes an orange alert had gone out to some of the best accident and emergency services in the world. The last location was attended by all types of rescue craft. Earliest on scene were more police launches but all types of craft were put to use in a frantic effort to save as many as possible from the murky waters.

At the time the duties of the Metropolitan Police helicopters remained unduly civilised with the unit only normally operating until 2200hrs each evening, then relying on the call out of a duty crew of three. Extracted from their warm beds the duty officers and the pilot returned to Lippitts Hill and flew to the Central London to assist the searchers to look for survivors with the aid of the high powered searchlight. The extended time elapsing between the accident and their arrival precluded any realistic chance of finding survivors. The same applied to the calling in of the Coastguard helicopter from Lee-on-Solent in Hampshire and a military ASR Sea King. Although the Bristow Sikorsky S-61N was equipped with a heat seeking FSI FLIR 2000 unit the sheer distance that each of these helicopters had to cover from its base to London resulted in the rescue helicopters also arriving far too late for life saving.

In later years, when police air support came of age in the early 1990s, many acknowledged that the standard of early operations was a bit too laid back and 'flying club' in nature. Eventually operational pressures were to change things and a six, then seven, day rota was imposed.

Today that has all changed and the air operation has become a true 24/7 operation using

three Eurocopter AS355N helicopters. These are due to be changed for Eurocopter EC145 from 2006. The anniversary of the unit - marked by a 'Black Tie' Dinner and Dance event in a London hotel—provided a suitable opportunity for the Airborne Law Enforcement Association [ALEA], the US based professional organisation for police flyers, to meet up with their British and European counterparts.



IPAR archive

The Directors and Staff at



Congratulate the Metropolitan Police Service Air Support Unit on its 25th Anniversary
And wish it well in the next 25

IPAR archive

