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Budget Cuts Put Crimp in State Patrol Pilot Program

By Venessa Miller, Reporter



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CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa - Buzzing about 4,500 above ground on a 100-degree day in June, Iowa State Patrol Trooper-pilot Jon Degen banks his Cessna to the left and eyeballs a car apparently speeding on Interstate 30.

His suspicions are confirmed when, using a stopwatch, he clocks the driver going 83 mph in a 65 mph zone. Degen radios down to Trooper Jim Trainor on the ground: check out the blue car in the left lane heading west on the bridge east of Edgewood Road.

"I got him on my radar at 80," Trainor reports back to his airborne counterpart.

Moments later, Trainor pulls over the car and has an update for Degen. He believes the driver — identified as Eugene Sadler, 45, of Chicago — has a suspended license and an open container in the car. The troopers also discover, after running his name, that Sadler is wanted on a \$13,000 warrant out of Illinois for charges related to cocaine possession.

"That's a good one to get off the road," Degen said.

Had he not been patrolling from above that afternoon, Sadler might have breezed under the ground trooper's radar, Degen said.

"The citizens of Iowa deserve to have an asset like this to help protect them," Degen said.

But resources for the Iowa State Patrol's Air Wing have been fading. The division, established in 1956, boasted 16 trooper pilots in 1996. Today, there are seven.

Receding staffing levels in both air and ground troopers have, among other things, resulted in

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fewer traffic tickets. Trooper pilots in 1996 flew a combined 5,922 hours and helped issue 20,670 citations. Last year, trooper pilots flew 2,151 hours and called down just 4,046 citations.

The cost to operate a State Patrol aircraft fluctuates between \$83 and \$141 an hour, and the department in recent years has budgeted between \$124,000 and \$235,000 annually for the Air Wing.

Degen, who has been piloting a State Patrol Cessna for 18 years — longer than any other Iowa trooper — said the staffing reductions and corresponding drop in pilot-issued tickets stem from budget woes.

“If we are down in numbers of our back bone, which is the State Patrol, then we can’t be up in numbers of our specialty groups,” he said. “If we don’t have enough road troopers, we can’t fill those positions in the specialties either.”

Having fewer ground troopers makes the Air Wing’s traffic enforcement less effective, according to Degen. In fact, he said, trooper pilots won’t even go up unless they have two to five troopers working beneath them who are available to pull over violators caught from the bird’s eye view.

“And right now, with the numbers we have, we really work to try and get that many,” he said.

But, according to State Patrol Lt. Randy Jones, aerial traffic enforcement is one of the simplest and most effective ways to catch traffic violators on the ground.

“From several thousand feet up, they make great big lazy ovals around a zone,” Jones said, explaining how pilots can easily call down descriptions of vehicles they observe speeding, following too closely or breaking other traffic laws. “You use the naked eye, and it’s actually easy to see for miles and miles down the road.”

And the Air Wing does more than catch bad drivers. It helps in missing person searches, fugitive manhunts, organ transportation, Hawkeye game day patrols and even hunting and snowmobiling enforcement with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, according to Degen.

“The citizens of Iowa pay their taxes for a service that’s provided, and they’re still paying the same amount of taxes,” Degen said. “So they should have the same amount of services they’ve had before, if not more.”

The Iowa State Patrol last year received 16 requests for help from its plane-mounted infrared camera equipment for things like searches for lost people or fugitives. Through the end of June this year, the Air Wing division had received 14 requests for its infrared equipment.

“I’ve talked to parents who’ve had kids that have been missing, maybe got lost in a cornfield or something, and there’s no greater satisfaction — besides finding that child — than knowing that everything possible is being done to find that child,” Degen said days after the division helped search for a pair of missing girls in the Evansdale area. “Part of that is having an airplane over top.”

Sgt. Dana Knutson, State Patrol aircraft administrative officer, said that with funding reductions and rising fuel costs, the division has had to justify continued use of trooper pilots and patrol aircraft and stretch the limited resources.


Knutson said he thinks the trooper pilots — even with their limited resources — have done that.

“It’s a highly effective enforcement tool,” he said. “We are the only agency in Iowa that has airplane and helicopter capabilities,”

To make the most of its shrinking pilot personnel, Knutson said, the Air Wing has combined trooper pilots assigned to neighboring districts for special enforcement projects — like one aimed at catching violators via land, water and air troopers on the Fourth of July.

Troopers also have used the Air Wing’s surveillance equipment to help the Iowa Department of Natural Resources catch violators of public land policies and hunting and snowmobiling laws.

“A couple of years ago there was a high number of alcohol incidents involving snowmobiles, so we were able to put the planes up and see where they were running,” Knutson said. “That was a very effective couple of weekends catching intoxicated snowmobilers.”

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The DNR covers fuel expenses for those special projects with the Air Wing, including efforts to catch hunting law violators.

"Those are hard cases to build from the ground," Knutson said.

The State Patrol has two Cessna 172s, four Cessna 182s and one Cessna 206 airplane. The planes log 8,000 to 10,000 hours of airtime in their life span, Knutson said.

The State Patrol is transitioning to the 182 aircraft because they can transport more people and supplies, and Knutson said he's hopeful the State Patrol will retain the staff needed to continue manning those aircraft.

"I think we are as low as we can go."

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Would have to disagree with Jeff. Seems to me these aircraft are an important tool that should be kept active. It saddens me to see programs such as these being cut, due to lack of funding, yet they can find the money to cut up concrete that is less than 1 yr old to install a curb in the middle of the road, cause someone thinks it's pretty.

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Jeff Van Der Millen

We don't need this program anymore. We need more traffic cameras. C.R. eliminated the helicopter program and I think did great adding the cameras.

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You will get more cameras. Unfortunately, they won't be traffic cameras. They will be cameras watching you 24/7.

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