

Eyes in sky keep watch over coast

Published in the Asbury Park Press 9/14/03

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TOMS RIVER BUREAU

BERKELEY -- On a cloudless early Friday evening, Ken Maxwell stares out the window of an aircraft tower, scanning the sky and waiting for the radio to crackle with the voice of a pilot.

Within a few minutes, the pilot radios in that he has spotted his target -- Check Point 7 -- better known as the Barnegat Lighthouse on Long Beach Island.

Acknowledging the pilot, Maxwell and his partner in the tower that night, Larry Space, carefully write down the time and location, and wait for the next pilot to radio his location.

It's an unusually slow night for Maxwell, Space and the other pilots of the Ocean County Black Sheep Squadron, who are more accustomed to spotting boat fires, sharks, stolen cars, forest fires and other incidents from their view above the county's coastline.



PETER ACKERMAN photo

Herman Hulse of Lakewood and Diane Colangelo of Brick fly over Barnegat Bay past Barnegat Lighthouse during a recent Friday patrol.

"You never know when you're up here," said Maxwell, a 59-year-old retired chemical factory worker and a lifelong flying enthusiast. "Sometimes, you're up here and there's three or four things all going at once, and sometimes it's like this."

For three years, the squadron, with 30 members and a dozen privately owned planes, have flown early evening air patrols out of Robert J. Miller Airpark in Berkeley, traveling north to the Shark River Inlet and south to the Mullica River.

Every weekend, from mid-May until two weeks after Labor Day, the all-volunteer squadron keeps an aerial patrol of the Ocean County's shoreline, working with the Ocean County Sheriff's Department and the Coast Guard's Barnegat Light Station, looking for any emergency situation that may arise.

When the squadron does locate an emergency, it contacts either the sheriff's department or the Coast Guard and will circle the area until additional assistance arrives.

The Black Sheep Squadron, which has its roots in the Civil Air Patrol, has begun a campaign to let more emergency service agencies and county residents know it can and does provide a vital service.

The Civil Air Patrol is the civilian division of the Air Force, and has assisted the military since the 1940s with ground and air patrols throughout the country.

The squadron, a nonprofit organization, also is looking to increase membership and interest in the group.

"Right now, we are exploring possibilities with other groups," said Russ Boyko, a squadron member from Island Heights who is spearheading the effort. "We want anybody who might need us to know that there is an aerial service that they could use."

With a modest fund-raising goal of \$10,000, the squadron wants to update its radio equipment, much of it almost 30 years old, dating to the days of the Civil Air Patrol, as well as to purchase an air-to-ground television relay to provide real-time images.

To raise the money, the group is offering charity plane rides, as well as seeking donations through direct-mail and word-of-mouth solicitations, Boyko said.

Once the squadron purchases the equipment, the volunteers want to offer their services to other Coast Guard stations as well as the state Forest Fire Service and other emergency service groups.

"They are unique in New Jersey," said Undersheriff Wayne R. Rupert, who works with the squadron. "We do rely on them for air support. They are all volunteer and we appreciate the work they do for us."

In the past, the sheriff's department has used the squadron for a variety of missions, from search-and-rescue to spotting stolen cars hidden in wooded areas.

"Depending on the year, we've found as many as 12 stolen cars," Rupert said.

As for the future of the sheriff's department and the squadron, Rupert added: "As they are needed, their role may increase into something that we don't see right now."

The squadron has worked with the sheriff's department for the last three years, after a group of private pilots branched off from the Civil Air Patrol.

Under their agreement with the county's freeholder board,

squadron members are reimbursed for gas and oil. All the other expenses, which can total anywhere from \$300 to \$500 for one trip, are paid for by the volunteers.

The squadron works from an air tower at the airpark that members share with the Experimental Aircraft Association of Ocean County. Members come from various backgrounds and experiences.

Space and Maxwell are both retired, others have their own businesses. Several were with the Air Force.

Squadron member Russ Reinertsen of Toms River has been with the squadron for a year and flying for the last 30 years. Reinertsen, who manages the Quinn-Hopping Funeral Home in Toms River, said of the Black Sheep: "It's volunteering for a good cause. It's a good outfit, and we're helping out the sheriff's department and the county."

For additional information about the group, visit its Web site, or call (732) 539-5987.

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