

SKILLS TO SURVIVE

Lifesaving knowledge taught at National Air Training Center

By Paul Koscak, photos by James Tourtellotte

After departing a lonely airport near the U.S. southern border, the Cessna 172 steers to Nebraska. It flies low and long. The small plane makes two stops along the way, but only at desolate airports.

That profile is typical of drug-running aircraft, but just as typical of how pleasure pilots fly. When the Cessna reaches its destination, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine agents may question the pilot and search the aircraft to see if their suspicions are correct.

Training to handle those encounters safely and professionally is provided at CBP's National Air Training Center in Oklahoma City. The center is

where new aviators learn the tactics and procedures that will shape their careers and where seasoned fliers return to keep those skills sharp.

Training the largest law enforcement air force

With more than 650 pilots, CBP's Air and Marine Operations keeps the center busy. Aviators come to the center each year for three days of intense one-on-one refresher training in helicopters or fixed wing aircraft. Survival, ground tactics and sensor operator training is also offered. Center staff conduct interviews and flight evaluations for new pilot positions, as well.

The center is really two buildings. There's a main building with classrooms, conference and planning rooms and administrative offices, nicknamed "The Castle" for its two turret-like structures, and a 67,500 square-foot hangar. The hangar holds the center's nine aircraft, as well as its maintenance facility, multimedia training center and briefing rooms.

The center's mission is to strengthen and standardize procedures, and that improves proficiency and safety, said Tom Salter, the center's director.

"Standardization is the key point we drive home here," he said.

Something just broke

Standardization begins when pilots arrive for recurrent training. They review aircraft systems such as hydraulics, electrical and fuel. They revisit flight performance, weight and balance, and maneuvers. What's reviewed on the ground is later applied in the air.

Pilots also get to practice emergency response scenarios not authorized at their duty stations to stay current with those tasks. "Some of these maneuvers are higher risk," explained instructor John-Paul Ayubi. "That's why we limit who can do them."

