

N.A.S.A.'s Earth angels

Precinct 8 Constables look after families, property

by Barbara A. Schwartz

Every patrol officer has performed residential vacation checks driving by and inspecting a citizen's home while they are out of town, out of state or on occasion out of the country.

Deputies with the Harris County, Texas Precinct 8 Constable's Office are no exception. Only these deputies check the residences of citizens who are, literally, out of this world. Precinct 8 constables have the most unique assignment in law enforcement – Astronaut Support.

The alliance between Precinct 8 and the astronauts resulted from the 1986 Challenger explosion. The families of the astronauts who perished in the accident endured intense media attention. The press camped out on their front lawns and shoved microphones in their faces every time they exited their homes.

Disgusted with the media's antics, long time Precinct 8 Constable Bill Bailey vowed to never let another astronaut, or their families, go through a similar ordeal.

Constable Bailey forged an agreement with the Astronaut Office. He established operating procedures to support astronauts and their families during and after each space flight.

"Before every shuttle flight, we receive a packet from NASA containing the names and addresses of each astronaut, photos of their homes, and personal data and schedules of spouses and children," according to Deputy Chief Phil Sandlin.

Warrant Division Sergeant Jeff Lamar then assigns a deputy to each family. The deputy meets with the family prior to the flight, reviews their travel plans for the launch and landing, gets the names of friends or neighbors who are going to watch the house or feed the pets, obtains descriptions of known vehicles to expect in the driveway and gets familiar with the family's daily activities.

When the astronauts return to Houston after a shuttle landing, they arrive at Ellington Field to a hero's welcome home ceremony. After the ceremonies, the Precinct 8 constables escort the astronauts and their families to their residences with full lights and sirens.

"We do that to recognize them and their accomplishments," Deputy Chief Sandlin adds with pride.

The constables also answer calls for service at the NASA center and provide perimeter monitoring of all fences and gates.

When Columbia fell from the sky



in 2003, Precinct 8 mobilized.

Within minutes of the accident, a patrol deputy arrived at each astronaut's residence.

"They stayed in front of the houses twenty-four-seven," Sgt. Lamar explained, "and established a perimeter keeping the media one yard away from the astronauts' homes."

"The Columbia families were not interviewed by the media, unless they wanted to be," Deputy Chief Sandlin added.

Last year proved interesting for the Precinct 8 constables. Aside from their support of shuttle flights, the arrival of Lisa Nowak – better known as the "diapered astronaut" – at her home after being released from a Florida jail created quite a media stir. Precinct 8 responded at the request of NASA and Nowak's neighbors.

Last April, the patrol deputies made the scene of the active shooter/hostage situation at a NASA office building. The deputies, along with other local and federal law enforcement agencies, recently received an award from the space agency for their actions.

"In addition to Astronaut Support, the Precinct 8 constables provide homeland security for the number two target in the United States," Sgt. Lamar explained. He added that the chemical plants and the entrance to the Port of Houston lie in their jurisdiction as well as the Fred Hartman and Jesse Jones bridges.

The constables maintain a large warrant division, serve civil processes and provide patrol and toll road support to Harris County.

Veteran Astronaut Chris Hadfield summed up his appreciation of the Precinct 8 support by saying, "Orbiting 250 miles up, I was glad to know Precinct 8 constables were solidly on Earth watching out for my family's well-being, and waiting there to help when I returned."

Barbara Schwartz writes exclusively about law enforcement from her home in Houston.