

This mission was excerpted from the book "First to Deploy" by Gene Robinson

Tijuana Kidnap and Ransom – Mexican Department of Public Safety

As we have mentioned earlier, we have a technology research partnership with the San Diego State University Visualization Lab (VizLab) and they have continually generated interest in the development and use of small UA in many areas. Their research activities in homeland security has interested law enforcement and civilian agencies on both sides of the border. A continuous stream of students participates in their Homeland Security Masters program and we have had the opportunity to present and fly for many agencies and groups we normally would not have access to. The initial meeting with the Baja State Department of Public Safety was scheduled as a typical UA/IC technology operation simulation which evolved into a very real mission. The presentation was to be explanation of the aircraft, videos of past missions, and the usual PowerPoint slides to a group of Mexican law enforcement officers. The officers walked into the VizLab very late, and nearly every one of them was talking in rapid Spanish on their cell phones. It was apparent that something of importance was breaking. Very quickly into the meeting we were asked if we would rather assist Mexican law enforcement in place of a static demonstration of capabilities as scheduled. We had a Spectra on display, ready to fly, with imagers and an onboard video system. With little more to discuss, we found ourselves heading south to Tijuana, Mexico.

There were three of us from the VizLab in one vehicle, Mike Hennig, research coordinator, myself, and another young man that appeared to be no more than 20 years old and the quintessential computer geek who was going to assist with the video capture. This young man had developed some video processing software that was of interest and was there to actually get a sample to run through his process at later date. He was invited to go to see how we actually collected the video in the field to give him a better perspective of those operations, and he got significantly more than he bargained for!

When we cleared the border we were met by a group of plain clothes officers. We were briefed that they had a tip on a human trafficking operation that involved the kidnapping of two teenage girls. We were asked to help by providing aerial imagery. The first area we were taken was a university parking lot that provided approximately one half mile of standoff, but still comfortable visual distance for the aircraft and pilot. The flights were smooth and the officers could easily view a clear feed of live video while in flight from the on board camera. However, the first flights were disappointing in that the suspect and vehicles were not in the area they were initially reported. We were asked to fly another area that was deeper in the city, but a known hang out of the kidnapers.

It took us awhile but we found a small school soccer field nestled in between the barrios. We began our preflight checklist. This area of interest put us within sight of the main flight path of the major airport in Tijuana so we would have to watch closely so as not to interfere with inbound traffic. Luckily the airport approach was a bit north of our position and I instructed six of the plain clothes officer to keep a watchful eye out for other aircraft. The launch was uneventful and the land marks they gave me to fly to were excellent. The next area of interest was a little further away and was really a push to maintain solid visual on the Spectra. The Spectra's color scheme of light top and dark bottom on the wings was a great aid to maintain orientation. As I circled the area the interpreter kept telling me to go 50 meters further, 50 meters further. Not understanding the language didn't help, but working through an interpreter made it even more difficult to get a confirmation as to my position and whether I was on target or not. Three times the Spectra was brought in, landed, and the SD card changed out. I could hear aircraft approaching the main airport, but the alarm was never sounded so I flew on. I will admit it was disconcerting to look back

occasionally and discover that all of my "observers" were actually "observing" me and the Spectra and not looking for inbound traffic!

After each landing was made and camera cards were changed out, the conversation seemed to be getting more and more animated. On the third flight the interpreter called me in to land and told me that we had more than enough information. As we reviewed the images we collected, the conversation led me to believe that we had some significant results. The images had captured not only the kidnapers and their two vehicles, we also imaged a uniformed police officer "on the take" and working with the traffickers. With this final image viewed, about half of the dozen or so plainclothes officers bolted from the area, jumped in their vehicles, and headed toward the market we had just flown over.



Tijuana convenience store parking lot



Mission Conclusion

1. The officers could view the video real time and assist in the placement of the aircraft
2. While slow at times, the language barrier was overcome and successful flights were conducted
3. Urban noises completely camouflaged the Spectra's own noise signature
4. High resolution images were a significant aid in identifying perpetrators.

Mission Summary

This set of images was one of the most exciting I had ever taken. These had been collected using a line of sight (VLOS) aircraft flown manually and because of the background noise of the city, the UA was never detected. It was unlikely that anyone noticed us except for the few kids that were just outside the dirt soccer field. The high resolution images gave the officers the information they needed to apprehend all parties involved and the girls were freed.

Personal Note - (operating in foreign countries)

The grateful commander of the operation insisted that we visit one of the taquerias in a major traffic circle in the center of town and it was difficult for us to refuse as insistent as he was. When we entered the traffic circle his vehicle stopped and several officers stepped out armed with M16 rifles and stopped the traffic, so that we could pass easily to the waiting parking places in front of the taco stand. As we got prepared to feast on handmade

tacos, our alpha video geek was visibly shaken and did not really know what to do next. Mike and I know enough to order our food but our geek kept refusing, insisting that he was not hungry and was beginning to look a little wild eyed. It did not help that Mike and I started pointing out the gun shot monitors on the light poles and that everyone seemed to have arms except us. By the time he got his one taco he was looking a bit ill and more nervous by the minute. Given the current climate in Mexico, it could have been considered "hazardous duty" for the entire team of "gringos" there. Subsequent missions were flown in Mexico for various agencies and indeed, circumstances began to make even me start looking over my shoulder. But that night we did manage to enjoy our tacos and nod our heads a lot as we didn't understand hardly any of the conversation that was swirling around us, but it was not soon enough for some that we said our "adios!" and got an escort northbound.