

# WHAT IS 'HIGH BIRD'?

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A missing airplane brought about a massive search and rescue operation for many units of Minnesota Civil Air Patrol. On 17 October, our airplane left Red Wing and flew to Brainerd. The weather was nearly perfect and nice sunshine, clear skies, and no wind made it a nice flight. After our briefing at mission base, we departed for our flying assignment: High Bird.

A large search area had brought together a number of ground teams and air crews from all over the state. Most of these sorties were searching in grids, or along highways located very distant from the communications center at Brainerd CAP headquarters. The VHF radio-equipped vans and airplanes were struggling to make contact with mission base COM center. The solution to the problem was to launch an airplane to be “ears in the sky,” and relay the messages between the search crews and mission base.

Mission base instructed us to fly about twenty miles northwest of Brainerd and orbit the area at 8,000 feet. At that altitude, the range of the radio would be significantly increased. Soon after we reached our position, the radio came alive with messages for us. We had no idea where most of the radio traffic was coming from, but we needed to be in the middle and concentrate on keeping things moving.

Much of the time we were relaying check-in calls, as every unit is required to make a call every half-hour. Other times, we had new instructions for a search team, maybe it was fly to another grid, or for ground teams, drive to another road. We were always looking out the windows for other air traffic and whenever possible, we were looking at the ground, wishing we could spot some clue to identify a possible crash site.

After nearly two hours of cutting circles in the sky, we requested a return to base. The air was smooth, we had some snacks and drinking water, and we returned from an easy flight. Some lessons learned from our sortie include: 1) Be prepared for a long sit in the airplane. Have some food and water available. 2) Make sure you are familiar with operation of the radio. Know how to manage and separate airplane traffic from SAR messages. 3) Have a pencil ready to write and keep a log of messages. 4) Insist that the messages you receive and pass are clear and concise. Don't relay a garbled message.

Flying the High Bird is not a glamorous job, but it is an important one. Good communications on a search and rescue mission are essential to keeping track of position, safety, and task of each unit, ground or air. Semper Vigilans.

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