

BLAZING A TRAIL IN SOUTH DAKOTA:

State's First Female Pilot, Unit Manager & UAS Leader

By Lisa Wright, Air Beat Editorial Director



Somewhere above the 77,000 square miles around Sturgis, SD, Trooper Pilot Sarah Schumacher received a complaint. She was 18 miles from her destination, the last leg of a 302-mile round trip flight, listening to the radio and monitoring traffic stop chatter. Below her, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally was in full swing. During the first week of August, the population of Sturgis swells from 6,900 residents to accommodate the rally's annual 400,000 to 750,000 visitors.

The traffic complaint was for a suspected impaired driver heading southbound on Highway 79 near Bear Butte.

Impaired drivers, along with writing up crashes and working traffic, are the bread-and-butter of a South Dakota Highway Patrol (SDHP) trooper's life. Working as a trooper on the ground, Schumacher had seen the effects of impaired driving firsthand.

Looking north on Highway 79, Schumacher saw a vehicle stopped at a traffic light that matched the vague description she had received. The vehicle made a wide left turn onto another highway, accelerating to 65 miles per hour. Almost unconsciously, Schumacher positioned her Cessna, HP500, behind and to the right of the vehicle, just as she had on so many other calls.

The vehicle continued eastbound, crossing the centerline several times and driving on the shoulder. Traffic was light. Schumacher thumbed the push-to-talk on her law enforcement radio. "Northern Hills, HP500, eyes on, suspect vehicle continuing eastbound past 9 Mile Road," she said. "All over the road. Driving on the shoulder."

A few minutes later, a fellow trooper caught up to the vehicle and initiated a traffic stop. Schumacher watched and circled overhead during the field sobriety tests. Several minutes later, the driver was in custody, suspected of driving under the influence.



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Historically, SDHP has been an assist agency. The department operates the only law enforcement aircraft in the state, the vast majority of which is rural, with the rugged terrain of the Badlands and scenic Black Hills National Forest on the western side and plains and farmland on the eastern side. South Dakota’s two largest cities, Sioux Falls (population 175,000) and Rapid City (population 75,000) are positioned on opposite sides of the state approximately 350 miles apart. The capital city of Pierre, where the highway patrol aircraft is stationed, is roughly in the center of the state.

STRAIGHT TO THE TOP

South Dakota’s climate varies wildly, with temperatures reaching over 100 degrees F in the summer and plummeting to 30 or 40 below zero in the winter. Wildfires and dangerous thunderstorms with hail, wind and tornadoes, as well as blizzards capable of shutting down the whole state for days, are commonplace.

Being a state trooper in South Dakota requires tenacity and grit. Fortunately, Schumacher and her team of three tactical

flight officers, including a fellow female trooper Paige Erickson, have plenty. One of only nine female SDHP troopers, Schumacher was the first female pilot to join the agency and has been leading its aviation unit since 2017.

A relatively new trooper, Schumacher first became interested in law enforcement through her job as a dispatcher.

“I loved dispatching, but I wanted to do more,” she said. “I wanted to be the one out there taking the calls instead of sitting behind a desk.”



When she had an opportunity to meet with Colonel Craig Price, Schumacher used it to ask about aviation. "I told him my pilot qualifications and said I wanted to be a pilot for SDHP," she said.

Soon after the meeting, the department reached out to her and encouraged her to apply. She applied to become a trooper, and after completing the academy in 2017, she took over the SDHP Aviation Unit.

AN HISTORIC AGENCY

The SDHP Aviation Unit was launched in the early 1960s as a unique way to perform traffic speed enforcement. The unit expanded and changed over the years as SDHP's priorities shifted. In the 1980s, the highway patrol acquired an OH-58 helicopter through the 1033 military surplus program and used it mainly for drug eradication until its retirement in 2016.

In 2007, SDHP purchased a 2004 Cessna T206, a heavily modified Turbo StationAir the patrol has operated ever since. The T206 has proven ideal for South Dakota's topography and demographics. Outfitted with TKS anti/de-ice on the leading edges of the wings, a hot prop, short takeoff and landing kit, extended range 117-gallon fuel tanks and Garmin G1000 Avionics, few missions over the South Dakota skies are outside the airplane's capabilities.

The SDHP Aviation Unit in 2014 purchased its first FLIR, a SAFIRE 230 HD. The system simultaneously changed how the aircraft worked missions and increased its range of use from basic traffic enforcement to more specific law enforcement missions and operations. Since Schumacher started leading the unit, she has helped grow its TFO ranks and deployed the aircraft for more mission types and more hours per year.

"The purpose of a law enforcement aircraft is to get it to the guys in the field when they need it," she said. "I am always trying to come up with ways to make their jobs safer and easier."

A MODERN AGENCY

Schumacher also leads SDHP's unmanned aircraft unit, which recently increased in size from two drones to eight with the purchase of DJI Mavic Enterprise Dual units for enforcement and DJI Mavic Pros with Pix4D for crash reconstruction. Schumacher said her knowledge as a certified flight instructor comes in handy for the drone operators who are less familiar with the aviation world. She also has a knack for ensuring the unit's Part 107 drone operation waivers are approved by the Federal Aviation Administration.

For Schumacher, law enforcement flying

can be challenging, with frequent call outs, unpredictable weather, and dynamic and sometimes dangerous situations. But it can be rewarding, as well. "If I can use my training, skills and experience to make a difference for even just one person, it is worthwhile," she said.

Between operations, Schumacher takes the department's airplane to local fly-ins and other aviation events.

"I like engaging with the public, showing them our capabilities and explaining how we do our jobs, whether it's in a patrol car or in the air," she said. "It's cool to work with kids and especially show girls who may be interested in law enforcement or aviation that there are women in this field doing these jobs. Hopefully, I can empower other girls to follow their passions and pursue a career regardless of what other people say or think."

SOARING OVER SOUTH DAKOTA

The South Dakota Highway Patrol currently operates a Cessna T206 aircraft for various missions to assist troopers on the ground, including:

- Traffic enforcement (hazardous moving violations, speed, move-over law, reckless driving, DUI, motor carrier).
- Law enforcement missions.
- Aerial surveillance.
- Relays, emergency and routine transportation.
- Task force and SWAT missions.
- Search and rescue.
- Game and fish missions (poaching, spotlighting operations).

