

Duty, Honor, Country

As a counterdrug officer, Fisher '76 helps curb trafficking at the border

By David Bitton • Photos by Ryan Hall



The steel border wall between Mexico and the United States cuts across the landscape. (Photo by Alan Fisher)

On an October afternoon, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Alan Fisher '76 guides his single-engine Cessna 182 south from the small Las Cruces Airport.

Below, creosote bushes, mesquite trees and an abundance of red soil dominate the desert landscape. Fisher points out the Aden Lava Flow Wilderness — one of the few landmarks in the barren landscape — while quickly passing by.

After about 15 minutes, the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) aircraft steers east to follow along the U.S. and Mexico border. The 18- to 30-foot, steel border wall stands as a visible dividing line between the two countries.

At this point, Col. Fisher would typically settle in for one of Las Cruces Squadron's twice-weekly, roughly four-hour drug interdiction flights where he,

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Alan Fisher '76 in his pecan orchard.

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— Lt. Col. (Ret.) Alan Fisher '76



Lt. Col. (Ret.) Alan Fisher '76 prepares to fly a Cessna 182 out of the Las Cruces Airport.

a mission observer and a scanner would look out of the aircraft for unusual activity below. But on this day, Col. Fisher is flying with *Checkpoints* magazine team members while describing his role.

“We patrol and pass that information to law enforcers on the ground through the onboard communications,” Col. Fisher explains. “We assist authorities to eliminate illicit drug use, production and sale to keep it off the streets. CAP does not get involved in law enforcement activities.”

For the past 15 years, Col. Fisher has been participating in the counterdrug program along the U.S.-Mexico border between Arizona and Texas.

Col. Fisher, who served as the Las Cruces CAP Squadron commander for more than a decade during the 1990s and 2000s, has served as the New Mexico CAP Wing counterdrug officer for the past seven years.

“I’ve helped stop several hundreds of pounds of drugs along the border, but stopping human trafficking has been our biggest activity lately,” he says.

Col. Fisher explains that the Civil Air Patrol, the Air Force’s civilian auxiliary, assists with a variety of aviation mis-

sions from search and rescue to the efforts on the southern border.

“The Air Force auxiliary works with other resources of the military to back up law enforcement agencies,” he says.

According to a 2021 Drug Enforcement Agency report, most drugs including heroin, methamphetamine and fentanyl enter the United States illicitly across the Mexican border.

Col. Fisher schedules the semiweekly flights and occasionally flies the missions, looking for illegal crossings into the United States from Mexico.

“My main reason for being involved is to help enforce the law and to protect the southern border,” he says. “We’re all doing this out of a sense of duty for our country.”

For the past 30 years, Col. Fisher has also volunteered with the Civil Air Patrol cadet program. He helps provide cadets with opportunities to lead and learn while sharing his love of aviation to inspire the next generation of leaders.

“Civil Air Patrol is a great avenue to expose young people to the aerospace environment,” Col. Fisher says. “We show them the military and civilian opportunities that exist.”

Nearly one in 10 cadets entering the Air Force Academy got their start in the Civil Air Patrol.

Col. Fisher enjoys taking CAP cadets airborne above the cactus-covered Southern New Mexico desert, where students learn the basics of controls, instrumentation and maneuvers over multiple flights in a Cessna 182 or 206.

Once cadets start feeling comfortable behind the controls, the 69-year-old with bright green eyes and a wiry mustache throws them a curveball.

“One of my classic lines is, ‘Oh, my heart feels bad. I might not make it. You have the controls.’ That’s a great learning opportunity,” he says with a wry smile. “If it could mean your life, you better listen and learn. That’s one of the best motivators I can think of.”

Col. Fisher and several other senior adult squadron members attended a weekly squadron meeting in late October where cadets, aged 12 and up, spoke about what they learned at a conference in Santa Fe and how they assisted during the Las Cruces Air & Space Expo at their local airport.

“We try to be involved in the community as much as possible, allowing

cadets the chance to provide community service while building their civil responsibilities,” Col. Fisher says.

With Spaceport America about an hour’s drive north, the Las Cruces squadron also supports an annual intercollegiate competition where rockets — some 12 feet tall — are launched up to 30,000 feet in the closely controlled White Sands Missile Range airspace.

AIR FORCE CAREER

Col. Fisher studied bioenvironmental engineering at the Academy and attended flight training at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, where he met his future wife, Melissa, a nurse and fellow second lieutenant.

He learned to fly the T-37 and T-38 and stayed at Laughlin as an instructor. During that time, he was part of a program that trained military personnel from Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Kenya and Iran to pilot export versions of American planes.

“It was incredible to fly with different students from all over the world,” Col. Fisher says.

Next up, he flew KC-135 tankers and traveled the globe out of Castle Air Force Base, California.

From there, he earned a master’s degree in zoology at Texas A&M, before returning to the Academy to teach in the biology department while also flying the Cessna T-41.

In the early 1990s, Col. Fisher was a KC-135 flight commander at K.I. Sawyer Air Force Base in Michigan. He deployed for Operation Desert Storm and flew 60 combat support missions over Saudi Arabia during seven months of conflict with Iraq.

His final assignment came in 1993 when he commanded the Air Force ROTC program at New Mexico State University while teaching aerospace studies courses. He was also asked to start a Civil Air Patrol squadron at the university, which led to decades of service after Col. Fisher retired from the Air Force in 1996.

Wanting to establish roots for his fam-



Lt. Col. (Ret.) Alan Fisher '76 has volunteered with the Civil Air Patrol for 30 years, which includes attending weekly meetings with cadets from the Las Cruces Squadron in southern New Mexico.

ily, which by now included two young children, the Fishers bought a home on a four-acre pecan farm in Las Cruces.

PECAN FARM

Col. Fisher's parents grew up in farming country in Iowa and he was taught not to be afraid of a hard day’s work. He and his wife raised their son and daughter the same way.

He’s now passing that knowledge and work ethic to his grandchildren. His 6-year-old grandson loves riding a tractor through the rows of trees.

“The pecan farm lets kids be kids, but it also helps them learn about equipment, economics and biology,” Col. Fisher says. “I have a small farm and thankfully I’m not living off it, but it did help send the kids to college.”



Lt. Col. (Ret.) Alan Fisher '76 has served as the New Mexico Civil Air Patrol Wing counterdrug officer for seven years.

The four acres have 160 mature trees and Col. Fisher is hoping they produce roughly five tons of pecans during the December harvest.

Col. Fisher explains that he plans to harvest roughly the first 2,000 pounds of pecans and sell them in the community market. Then he'll have a larger company come in with their big shakers, sweepers, harvesters and trailers to collect the bulk of the pecans and haul them to a cleaning plant.

From there, the pecans are shelled and weighed, a certain percentage of nut meat is established, and the commodity market determines the price.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, New Mexico is the coun-

try's second-largest pecan producer, behind Georgia. In 2022, New Mexico produced 79 million pounds (in-shell basis) of pecans, or 28.7% of the 275 million pounds nationwide.

Southern New Mexico — including the Las Cruces region — is a good place for pecan trees to grow due to the sunshine, climate and soil.

"Las Cruces has more than 200 nights that are frost-free, which is needed to allow the nuts to reach maturity," Col. Fisher says. "The 320-plus days of sunshine a year doesn't hurt either."

Col. Fisher enjoys sharing the farming lifestyle with others.

"I love farming and I got the opportunity because I went to and taught

biology at the Academy," he says. "I'm happy to be able to use my Academy background to support future generations."

During harvest, Col. Fisher hires young people — including Civil Air Patrol cadets — willing to work hard.

"While they are raking and picking up nuts, I tell them this is why they need to get an education," he says. "I come back to farming by choice because it is a nice lifestyle." 