

COUNTER-NARCOTERRORISM OPERATIONS IN THE EASTERN PACIFIC AND
CARRIBEAN OPERATIONS AREAS FROM 1970 THROUGH 1990

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Military History

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

COUNTER-NARCOTERRORISM OPERATIONS IN THE EASTERN PACIFIC AND CARIBBEAN OPERATIONS AREAS FROM 1970 THROUGH 1990, by LCDR Peter J Chaveriat, 101 pages.

The United States declared drugs to be a clear and present danger to the country and proceeded to wage a war on them that was both justified and temporarily successful from 1970 through 1990. Although not prepared for this mission at first, the United States Coast Guard would soon spearhead the efforts to prevent drugs from being shipped over water. Later, the entrance of the participation of the U.S. Military, especially the Navy, allowed the Coast Guard to shut down this smuggling route. The thesis also argues that the support of Latin American countries, which used American money to fight their own war, measurably contributed to success. This study examines the efforts of those involved with interdicting the flow of drugs to the U.S. during that time.

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of the crew of Venom 505. In pursuit of a suspected drug smuggler on the night of 13 December 2005, the crew of LT Chris Snyder, LTJG Nick Juron, and AW2 John Kaye were lost at sea.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
ACRONYMS.....	vii
ILLUSTRATIONS	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
Research Questions.....	4
Limitations	5
Significance	5
Literature Review	5
CHAPTER 2 THE COAST GUARD VERSUS THE DRUG SMUGGLERS	8
CHAPTER 3 ALLIED EFFORTS.....	31
The Early Years	31
The Middle Years	47
The Latter Years	51
CHAPTER 4 FOREIGN AID IS A TWO WAY STREET	56
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS	74
Areas for Continued Analysis and Research	83
Final Thoughts	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	87
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST	93

ACRONYMS

CDOPS	Counter Drug Operations.
CNTOPS	Counter Narco-Terrorism Operations
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency
EPIC	El Paso Intelligence Center
LEDET	Law Enforcement DETachment
NDEPB	National Drug Enforcement Policy Board
NDIC	National Drug Intelligence Center
NDPB	National Drug Policy Board
NNBIS	National Narcotics Border Interdiction System
NSDD	National Security Decision Directives
OCDETF	Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces
ONDCP	Office of National Drug Control Policy
SFTF	South Florida Task Force
SNO	Statement of No Objection ⁵
SSC	Surface Search and Coordination
USS	United States Ship
USCG	United States Coast Guard
USCGC	United States Coast Guard Cutter

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Figure 1. Coast Guard Districts	10
Figure 2. Coast Guard Sector Command.....	11

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is a war that the United States has been involved in continuously since 1970. The war started in America. Eventually this war would expand to become a multiagency, multiservice, and multinational effort against a common enemy. The enemy was drugs, the people who make them, and the people who transport them. Like all wars, it has had its wins, losses, and casualties on both sides.

The United States officially began the “Drug War” as a result of public outcry at the amount of illegal drugs that were entering the country in the late 1960s. Young people did not see the dangers inherent with drug use, and there were few social norms against using certain types of drugs then. According to Michael Ard, those who advocate legalization did so in an attempt to “normalize” the behavior of drug-taking, arguing that many people have tried drugs without experiencing significant adverse consequences. Some people saw drugs as way to make money, while still others saw using them as a matter of individual rights.¹ The American people were starting to see the connection between drugs and crime, though it would not become readily apparent until much later when more violent crimes were connected to the drugs.

The earliest efforts were small and were primarily concerned with the drugs that were coming over land from Mexico. It was not long before the drug smugglers figured that it would be easier to smuggle large amounts of illicit drugs on various types of ships that were hard to detect on the open ocean. Narcotics traffickers gambled that the US would not be able to interdict effectively these supply transit routes due to the sheer size of the ocean. As the smugglers found out, this was not the case. US efforts, and

eventually allied efforts, led to a virtual shutdown of the drug trade on the ocean. The US provided the money and the technology to make this happen. The US also spearheaded the efforts at sea with participation from the Coast Guard and eventually the rest of the Department of Defense. Meanwhile, a large group of organizations on the land, including the Border Patrol and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) were waiting for the smugglers on land, or close to it, in order to capture the smugglers and confiscate their products.

Once captured, either at sea or on land, the smugglers could expect a varied response. As the war went on the penalties for the smuggling of drugs increased. The American justice system initially instituted modest punishments and fines for those who violated the anti-drug laws of the time. These laws progressively increased the fines and punishments as the war continued. Changing public opinion led to demands for the government to make a greater effort to interdict the flow of illegal drugs.

Most Americans were not even aware that there a war was declared on drugs. President Richard Nixon was the first to refer to it as a War on Drugs in 1971.² President Lyndon Johnson, however, was the first President to attempt to do anything concrete, starting with various programs in 1968. The American public did not initially regard illegal drugs as a threat and it would be years until they viewed drugs in that manner. The leading drug at the time was marijuana, and most people considered it a recreational drug that did not pose any kind of danger.³ It was this kind of cavalier attitude that allowed the drug smugglers to flourish in the 1960s. They were able to ship large amounts of drugs over the US-Mexico border without fear of being caught or punished. The US drug laws

at the time did not scare the smugglers from transporting the product over the border; that fear would not be in place until years later.

Plenty of issues other than drugs occupied the thoughts of most American at the beginning of the 1970s. There was the ever present fear of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. There was a war in Vietnam, which was by then a very unpopular war with the American people.⁴ This war in Vietnam was also one of the leading causes of drug use. There were some Army companies in Vietnam that were reporting usage rates above 80 percent for the companies and a 90 percent rate of people who had tried it.⁵ Once these members of the military came back to the US, they not only continued to use drugs, but also introduced more people to them.

With a ready-made audience for their product, the early drug smuggling efforts were very successful and profitable for the smugglers. They found that it was quite easy to transport their product, originally using overland routes, with the use of the numerous Cubans and Jamaicans who were glad to find such work after immigrating to America. They were able to transport large quantities of drugs overland through Mexico. Enough drugs were getting through on this route to force President Nixon to take action, and this would directly lead to the War on Drugs.

The War on Drugs was a stark departure from conventional conflicts in which the US had been involved. There would be no large engagements of opposing forces. There would be no major reporting from the frontlines. There was little public knowledge that such a war was going on outside of those who fought it. Those who were aware of the efforts in support of the War on Drugs were mainly those in geographic locations that were either highly affected by illegal drug usage or locations where interdiction efforts

were played out: Washington D.C., California, and Florida. The only other people who were even interested in the War on Drugs were the ones who proposed to legalize drugs and gain money from the taxation and regulation of them. They argued that there were no real gains made against the drug flow and that the US was wasting time and money trying to stop it.⁶ It was not until the death of basketball star Len Bias of a cocaine overdose in 1986 that people began to wake up to the dangers of cocaine.⁷

The fight against drugs would end up becoming a total effort by the United States. Every branch of the military, the vast majority of federal agencies, and large numbers of local law enforcement would be involved in it. Their efforts, coupled with the assistance of the Latin American countries, were responsible for nearly halting all shipments of drugs over water, and seriously hampered the efforts to ship drugs over land and in the air. The combined effect of these entities involved in the War on Drugs was significant gains made against the drug trade, which would last until the U.S. government, under pressure from the public, reduced its support effort for the War on Drugs after the close of the Cold War.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this thesis is why did the US fight the War on Drugs in the first place? Was the military assistance given legal and necessary? Was the military able to take advantage of operations against the drug smugglers with potential real world application? How important was the assistance from the Latin American countries? Would the US effort against drug smuggling from 1970 through 1990 have been as successful without the Latin American countries participation?

Limitations

The author made a conscious decision to keep this thesis at the unclassified level. The techniques and tactics that were used against the smugglers from 1970 through 1990 are still in use today, as well as newer ones which are also classified. Keeping this thesis unclassified also prevented further discussion into legal agreements with Latin American countries as permissions granted to US forces involved in drug enforcement, as those documents are also classified due to the specific permissions given.

Significance

The US made a significant effort against the cartels and the drug smugglers. With a virtual shutdown of the drug smugglers sea routes, their efforts were effective.

Literature Review

There were surprisingly few books on the subject of the War on Drugs that were historical looks at the efforts expended and the obstacles that had to be overcome. There were numerous books available that attempt to refute the efforts and argue that the War on Drugs were, and continues to be, a failure. There were a large number of articles in the United States Naval Institutes *Proceedings*, which were very useful in relating personal accounts of efforts against the drug smugglers. The articles also provided some high level thought as to how the Navy and rest of the military were being employed against the drug smugglers and cartels.

The *Proceedings* articles represent the majority of the primary sources used for this thesis. The secondary sources included Charles M Fuss' *Sea of Grass*, which told the story of the efforts of the US, and to a lesser extent the Latin American, efforts against

the smugglers. Mr. Fuss argues that the War on Drugs was fought effectively with the assets on hand until the entrance of the military. At that point, he argues that there were sufficient assets to virtually close down the sea routes to the drug smugglers.

Another worthwhile secondary source was *Killing Pablo* by Mark Bowden. In this book, Mr. Bowden argues that the direct involvement of the US military in the Latin American efforts to bring the cartel leaders to justice was what made that possible. Taken with *Killer Elite*, they tell how the US provided secret eavesdropping equipment and the people to operate them which is what ultimately allowed the Latin American countries to track down and bring the cartel leaders to justice.

A final excellent source was the General Accounting Office reports on the efforts against drugs. The GAO had numerous reports which had valuable information such as amount of money expended versus actual confiscations and arrests. The GAO reports were highly critical of the efforts expended, and it was difficult to gauge the support that those reports gave to the efforts.

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first introduces the research questions and methods. Chapter 2 is about the Coast Guard efforts when they attempted to stop the smugglers mostly on their own. Chapter 3 discusses how the effort changed after the entrance of the military and greater funding. Chapter 4 discusses the participation of the Latin American countries and their value to the overall effort. Chapter 5 provides the conclusions and areas for continued research and analysis.

¹Michael J Ard, "The Kingpins of Drug Legalization: Investigating Their Role in the Culture War," culturewars.com, http://www.culturewars.com/CultureWars/Archives/cw_recent/legalization.html (accessed 5 May 2010).

²National Public Radio, "Timeline: America's War on Drugs," <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9252490> (accessed 8 May 2010).

³Charles Fuss, *Sea of Grass: The Maritime Drug War 1970-1990* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 3.

⁴William M. Hammond, "The Tet Offensive and the News Media," *Army History* 70 (Winter 2009): 6-19.

⁵Peter Brush, "Higher and Higher: Drug Use Among U.S. Forces in Vietnam," <http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/central/Brush/American-drug-use-vietnam.htm> (accessed 12 May 2010).

⁶Rufus King, *The Drug Hang-Up: America's Fifty Year Folly* (Springfield: Bannerstone House, 1974), <http://www.druglibrary.org/special/king/dhu/dhumenu.htm> (accessed 16 May 2010).

⁷Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001), 42.

CHAPTER 2

THE COAST GUARD VERSUS THE DRUG SMUGGLERS

The United States has had a drug problem from the very beginning. The flow of drugs into the country was allowed to enter virtually unchecked, or at least without any coordinated effort to stop it. The first such effort came about in 1968 when President Johnson directed the creation of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. He also created the Bureau of Drug Abuse Control, which primarily sought to use education as a way of getting people to stop using drugs.¹ Early efforts consisted of an education campaign as an effort to prevent potential users from starting and to convince current users to stop by showing them the costs of using drugs. While all of this was going on, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) was given the mission of stopping the flow of drugs at sea, from where most of the drugs entered the country at the time. The Coast Guard would take the lead in countering narco-terrorism (counter drug operations) in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific Ocean areas and would set the standard for joint interagency cooperation to stop the flow of drugs into the country.

The use of the term Counter-Narco Terrorism (CNT) is a recent change, as it was originally known as Counter Drug Operations (or CD OPS). The name changed, but the mission did not. The objective of CD OPS is the cessation of the flow of illegal drugs into the country as well as providing aid to other countries attempting to thwart the efforts of narco-terrorists in their country. By providing assistance to these countries, the United States hopes to prevent the drugs from leaving the original point of origin. Originally, this support came in the form of money and equipment, but later it involved training and in some cases direct support. The direct involvement is known as Foreign Internal Defense

(FID) and was primarily accomplished by Special Forces. The drug cartels would use their massive amounts of wealth to bribe members of the local government and use their influence to prevent the governments from interfering in their operations.²

The United States Coast Guard has been at the forefront since the US began its efforts to stop the flow of drugs. Originally formed as the Revenue Cutter Service back in 1790, the USCG's mission has always included preventing illegal goods from entering the country. "The first recorded narcotics seizure by a cutter occurred on 31 August 1890 when the United States Revenue Cutter *Wolcott*, stationed in the Straits of Juan de Fuca, boarded and discovered a quantity of undeclared opium on the U.S. flagged steamer *George E. Starr*. The cutter seized both the vessel and the opium for violations of Customs laws."³ There were no efforts to maintain records of such seizures after that, though they no doubt occurred. The Coast Guard did not make an effort to maintain records of such seizures until the 1960s when the number of drug seizures at sea increased. Coupled with the increase in the confiscation of drugs by other agencies, the United States' government recognized the problem and took steps to stop the flow of these drugs.

In order to most efficiently complete its mission, the Coast Guard is divided into several Districts. These Districts are set up along geographic lines and allow the Coast Guard to operate under a de-centralized command structure.

whether or not the Coast Guard can perform an interception at sea and if Coast Guard members are justified in boarding the vessels of another nation.

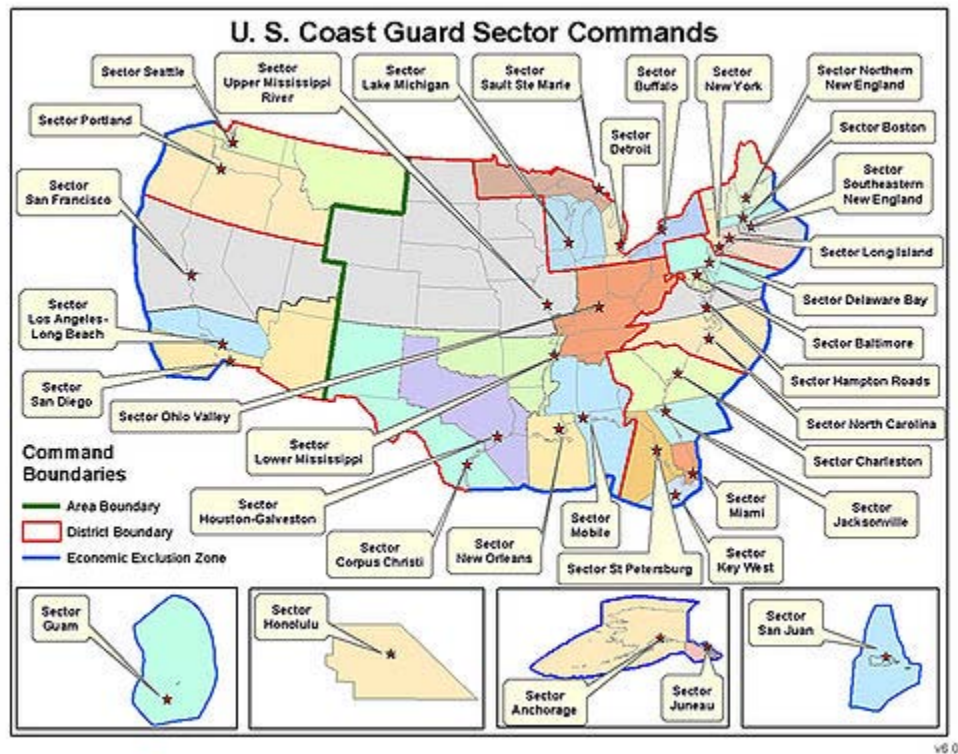


Figure 2. Coast Guard Sector Command

Source: Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, USCG Sector Map, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sector_Map.jpg (accessed 3 June 2010).

As shown earlier, the Coast Guard has been attempting to stop the flow of drugs into the country for most of its history. After President Nixon ordered Operation Intercept in 1969, the Coast Guard positioned itself to take the lead in drug interception efforts. Of the various US agencies and services, the Coast Guard was the best candidate to take control of this mission due to its vast experience in conducting interdictions at sea. The Coast Guard was empowered by Title 14 of the United States Code. It began as a military

organization in 1926, but Title 14 allows the Coast Guard to act as a law enforcement agency without violating the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878. The current Posse Comitatus Act states “Whoever, except in cases and under circumstances expressly authorized by the Constitution or Act of Congress, willfully uses any part of the Army or the Air Force as a posse comitatus or otherwise to execute the laws shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than two years, or both.”⁴ Title 14 authorizes the Coast Guard to assume several roles concerning interdiction of drugs including:

(a) The Coast Guard may make inquiries, examinations, inspections, searches, seizures, and arrests upon the high seas and waters over which the United States has jurisdiction, for the prevention, detection, and suppression of violations of laws of the United States. For such purposes, commissioned, warrant, and petty officers may at any time go on board of any vessel subject to the jurisdiction, or to the operation of any law, of the United States, address inquiries to those on board, examine the ship’s documents and papers, and examine, inspect, and search the vessel and use all necessary force to compel compliance. When from such inquiries, examination, inspection, or search it appears that a breach of the laws of the United States rendering a person liable to arrest is being, or has been committed, by any person, such person shall be arrested or, if escaping to shore, shall be immediately pursued and arrested on shore, or other lawful and appropriate action shall be taken; or, if it shall appear that a breach of the laws of the United States has been committed so as to render such vessel, or the merchandise, or any part thereof, on board of, or brought into the United States by, such vessel, liable to forfeiture, or so as to render such vessel liable to a fine or penalty and if necessary to secure such fine or penalty, such vessel or such merchandise, or both, shall be seized.

(b) The officers of the Coast Guard insofar as they are engaged, pursuant to the authority contained in this section, in enforcing any law of the United States shall:

(1) be deemed to be acting as agents of the particular executive department or independent establishment charged with the administration of the particular law; and

(2) be subject to all the rules and regulations promulgated by such department or independent establishment with respect to the enforcement of that law.

(c) The provisions of this section are in addition to any powers conferred by law upon such officers, and not in limitation of any powers conferred by law upon such officers, or any other officers of the United States.⁵

These provisions empowered the Coast Guard with the ability to catch smugglers at sea and arrest them under the laws of the United States. In order to do so, however, the Coast Guard was required to collect enough evidence to prosecute, which sometimes led to legal issues when the Coast Guard did not properly maintain the chain of evidence. In such cases, defendants could have the charges dropped against them if the Coast Guard could not prove beyond any doubt that the captured crewmembers had attempted to smuggle illegal goods into the US. In cases where the Coast Guard was not able to prove its case, the courts were forced to dismiss the charges and the drug smugglers learned valuable lessons on how to proceed in their trade without the possibility of being charged.⁶

The smugglers' preferred method of shipping drugs was to use vessels that would draw the least amount of interest from drug enforcers, primarily fishing boats and cargo ships. Additionally, the structural design of these ships provided useful spaces in which to store the drugs. The fishing boats presented the Coast Guard with its greatest problems, as they are difficult to locate, and the sheer numbers of them in use made it difficult to distinguish those vessels involved in smuggling drugs and from those that were not. Smugglers could easily disguise their true purpose by actually engaging in fishing and offloading their illegal cargo at the same locations where they offloaded their legal cargo.

In order to find these drug smuggling vessels, the Coast Guard employed all of its available assets. Aircraft such as the HC-130 or similar long-range planes would launch from bases in the United States (and later other countries) and scan areas of the oceans that the drug smugglers would have to transit through to reach their offload locations in the United States. One of the earliest smugglers, Ambrose Weldon, was able to defeat the

efforts of the aerial scouts by pointing his vessel to the South and allowing the currents to carry him northward.⁷ To an aircraft, it would appear that his vessel was traveling southward, and he even would make this look more believable by generating a wake behind him by increasing his throttle. This tactic proved effective on numerous occasions but fortunately, Ambrose did not share his tactics with other smugglers.

These search aircraft would fly from such places as Miami, Florida and Mobile, Alabama, in an effort to detect suspect vessels trying to transit to the United States. These aircraft were assigned sectors that were based on aircraft ranges as well as the information they would receive from “other sources”. The aircraft patrolled at a medium altitude, usually around 10,000 feet depending on weather conditions, and employed both visual and electronic sensors to locate vessels of interest. In the event that they found a contact of interest they flew at low level (several hundred feet) and gathered photographic evidence of the vessel engaged in illegal activity. The Coast Guard would also take pictures to add to their database of suspect vessels, which could be useful for tracking further trips by those same vessels. Once the smugglers figured out what the aircraft were doing, they would often broadcast false distress signals over their VHF radios in order to get the Coast Guard halt its drug interdiction efforts to render assistance to a supposed vessel in distress. Since the Coast Guard ranks a rescue at sea higher than intercepting a drug smuggler, they would stop tracking the smugglers and investigate the distress call. The smugglers knew that the Coast Guard did not have enough resources then to be able to simultaneously render assistance and continue on with the drug interdiction. Even more challenging to the Coast Guard, the smugglers would often have other vessels put out the distress calls for them so that the Coast Guard would think that it

was coming from somewhere else. When they reached the coordinates that were given, they, often found there were no vessels there and no longer had any hope of reacquiring the smugglers they were trying to stop in the first place.

Aircraft missions routinely ran between eight and twelve hours. The bigger the aircraft meant the longer the mission, but it also meant that more area was covered. The enormous geographical area covered by these scout missions necessitated that flight planning originated at the District level. The District Commander's staff could lay out the plan and then provide it out to the various squadrons to cover the missions. The Coast Guard made sure that it employed the planes to perform simultaneously multiple missions from drug interdiction to fisheries enforcement, so that they prevented overtaxing the fleet by having multiple aircraft in the air performing multiple missions. This also led to the Coast Guard having aircraft in a standby alert status to quickly launch on a mission if there were reports of certain activities occurring in their area. Opponents of the Coast Guard's counterdrug efforts attempted to show that the Coast Guard could not complete the rescue mission that they thought they should be completing if they were flying against the smugglers.

The Coast Guard also used a number of ships on both coasts for its search efforts ranging in size from small powerboats to the High Endurance Cutters that would form the backbone of the effort. The High and Medium Endurance Cutters also gave the Coast Guard the additional resources of helicopters, which it used to expand the amount of area the Cutters could scan. The Cutters communicated and coordinated their efforts with the long-range patrol aircraft. In some cases the ships would shadow the smugglers as they made their way along the coast in order to reveal the off load location to local law

enforcement. When the trap was sprung, the Coast Guard would block any attempts to escape back out to sea and the local law enforcement would capture the evidence and whatever smugglers were on shore.

The Coast Guard began to investigate ships at sea as soon as the President announced Operation Intercept. Unfortunately, at first the Coast Guard found itself ill prepared to take on that task. It did not have enough ships in the right locations to lead sustained interdiction efforts, and the ships that it did have had other tasks to perform which took precedence. These higher priority missions included the interdiction of migrants at sea that were fleeing such countries as Haiti and Cuba. The government chose to focus efforts at preventing the drugs from crossing the border over land, which meant that money that could have gone to the Coast Guard to strengthen its fleet was spent elsewhere. In addition, the Coast Guard crews lacked training in evidence recovery, which led to a vast majority of early cases being tossed out of court due to various technicalities. The courts would release the drug smugglers on these technicalities, allowing the smugglers to return to their country of origin and share the knowledge of how to defeat the Coast Guard's efforts to stop them. In each of those cases, the Coast Guard also learned valuable lessons, which they would share with the entire command. These lessons were created in conjunction with members of the Federal Courts and representatives of the Judge Advocate General Corps, and the result was a complete understanding by the Coast Guard of exactly what it was required to prove in court and what evidence they needed to collect in order to ensure a conviction.

The evidence that the Coast Guard needed to collect included navigational charts, which contained departure points, rendezvous points, and offload points for the

smuggling activities. Another important piece of evidence would be the radio frequencies that were being used, which could show if the ships were in contact with other suspects or with known drug smugglers on the shore. Not surprisingly, the single most important piece of evidence that they could collect would be drugs themselves. In the early days of the effort, the amount of prison time that the courts could impose was based on the type and amount of drugs seized, so the Coast Guard made every effort to recover as much of the drug shipment as possible. Once the smugglers learned this fact, their first reaction to seeing a Coast Guard ship closing in on them was to jettison as much of the drugs as possible and hope the Coast Guard could not get to them before they sank. To assist the smuggler in getting rid of as much of the evidence as possible the bundles made with extra weight to make them sink faster. Later on, the smugglers would take to setting their ships on fire and jumping in the ocean knowing that the Coast Guard would rescue them before they tried to recover any drugs. A further desperate measure they developed was to place scuttling valves on the ships, which they opened to sink the ship before the Coast Guard could reach it. This occasionally led to an unfortunate loss of life, as the smugglers would drown before the Coast Guard could rescue them.

With all of the challenges facing them in the early days of the War on Drugs, it is no wonder that the Coast Guard initially suffered setbacks. By 1973, it had only recovered six vessels and a little more than 20,000 pounds of marijuana.⁸ The Coast Guard took a critical look at itself and determined that there were ways to improve. Primarily, it concluded that increasing the number of ships that patrolled the regions frequented by smugglers was essential, so it shifted the homeports of several ships to Florida and California. This allowed the ships to spend more time in the areas of interest

rather than transiting to them from places as far away as New England and Alaska. The Coast Guard also increased the number of aircraft that were stationed in the areas of interest as well. This allowed a quick response to support ships that made contact at sea with smugglers and were unable to keep pace with them.

Starting in 1974, the smugglers began to use a new scheme in order to get their product to the United States. Instead of sending multiple smaller loads, they would now send large loads on cargo ships that could be offloaded at sea by small powerboats that would speed into shore and deliver the product. The small powerboats were crewed by locals, who knew where the best places were to offload the product, and they were also knowledgeable about local law enforcement capabilities. The cargo ships, with their greater range, could travel to the United States through longer routes further out at sea than the small vessels originally employed by the smugglers. At first, this technique allowed the smugglers to have less suspicion drawn by the vessels performing the smuggling. It was not until the Coast Guard figured out this tactic in the mid-1970s that the smugglers were unable to freely use this method. For the smugglers, one of the greatest benefits of employing the use of the cargo vessels is that, unless the Coast Guard caught them at sea, the smugglers would get off without prosecution. However, the people who brought the drugs the final few miles to shore were the ones who were most likely to be caught handling the drugs. The cargo vessel personnel also frequently escaped from prosecution since the Coast Guard could not prove the cargo vessels were being illegally used, at the time, without catching them with drugs onboard.

Another advantage of using the cargo ships is that the smugglers could choose to not associate their vessel with a country. In order for the Coast Guard to board a vessel of

another country they first had to get the United States government to petition whatever country the vessel claimed to be from in order board the vessel. This is what is known as a “statement of no objection (SNO).” “To obtain an SNO, a US Coast Guard cutter commander petitions the appropriate Coast Guard district or area command for permission to board what appears to be a foreign vessel to enforce US laws. The suspect in fact may be stateless. In the message requesting an SNO, the unit commander articulates his suspicion that the sighting is a possible drug smuggler. If the operational commander agrees, the SNO request is endorsed and sent priority to the commandant of the Coast Guard in Washington. This message is received in Flag Plot, headquarters operation center. If the commandant or his designee approves the request, concurrence is immediately sought from the Justice Department and other agencies for prosecution standards. The State Department is responsible for petitioning the flag state for permission to board and seize if drugs are found during the search.”⁹ However, if the master of the vessel consented to being searched, no SNO was required.

To counter this, when confronted by the Coast Guard, the master would often disguise himself as a member of the crew. The crew would then claim that the master had “just left before you came,” and that they were unaware of what the ship contained because they were just the crew and only the master would know something about the cargo. This happened when ships were far out to sea with no possibility of the master having left due to the ship being under surveillance. The masters of the vessels, if drugs were found aboard, were prosecuted to the maximum extent of the law because the government argued that there would be no way that the master was not aware of things such as departure point, cargo (and drugs) onboard, and the offload location. The Coast

Guard questioned the crew and attempted to get them to admit who the master was or that they did know what cargo was contained onboard. Often, the crews had already worked their stories out and if they were able to stick to them, they would all be prosecuted for lesser charges and lesser jail sentences.

Over in the Pacific Ocean the Coast Guard was having even less luck stopping the flow of drugs into the US. Through 1977, they only managed to catch a handful of vessels transporting mainly marijuana to the United States and the amount only totaled about 45,000 pounds¹⁰. The drug smugglers preferred the Caribbean route since it was shorter, but they were starting to notice that shipments made on the Pacific side encountered far fewer Coast Guard vessels and aircraft. Between 1975 and 1977, there was a fourfold increase in the capture of marijuana at sea.¹¹ Drug loads of 12,000 pounds were now being captured at sea, and many believed that even larger loads than that were slipping through. These larger loads were making the drugs more accessible in the United States while keeping prices reasonable. The amount of money the smugglers could make was limited only by how much they could transport successfully to America, which explains why they were willing to take the chances with larger loads.

In 1976, the first recorded case of cocaine seizure occurred at sea. The crew of the banana boat *Ea* was caught attempting to smuggle several packages dockside from a porthole. The Customs agents who observed the transfer took the crew into custody and the government prosecuted them and confiscated their vessel. The owner argued that the Coast Guard had no right to confiscate the vessel since it was an independent attempt by the crew to smuggle the drugs and the owner was not aware of any kind of drugs onboard. However, the government successfully prosecuted the crew and the judge

agreed that the vessel was legally confiscated. This would set precedence for future vessels, and now smugglers would have to add the loss of vessels to the cost of doing business.

With costs set at a reasonable amount, new users were being enticed to use drugs that the smugglers were ill prepared to keep up with the demand. As a result, the prices of drugs started to increase and the number of people that wanted them increased at a much greater level. In order to satisfy this greater demand, the smugglers had to start taking somewhat drastic measures to get their product to America. The capture of the vessel *Night Train* in 1977 best demonstrates the increased boldness of smugglers in light of the growing market in the US. In that case, the Coast Guard captured a then record of 52 tons of marijuana, which was a result of one of the first joint ventures between the Coast Guard and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA).¹² The DEA agents were able to infiltrate the organization and pass on the location of the vessel in question to the Coast Guard. The DEA was even able to pose as part of the offload crew and gave the Coast Guard the exact position for the transfer. Three weeks after this record bust, the Coast Guard attempted to intercept the *Calabres*, which was thought to also have marijuana onboard. When confronted by two Coast Guard vessels the crew of the *Calabres* attempted to scuttle the ship by setting it on fire. Despite efforts by the Coast Guard to save it, the vessel sank, but not before they were able to find what they believed was 120 tons of marijuana onboard.¹³ After gathering as much evidence as possible, the Coast Guard allowed the vessel to sink. When questioned, the crew the crew claimed that the master had left the ship and they had no idea what the cargo was. Unfortunately, for

them, the cargo was loaded in such a way that it would be impossible for them to not know that drugs were present.

As 1978 ended, the Coast Guard was seeing a disturbing trend. During the calendar year, the Coast Guard alone captured 3,000,000 pounds of marijuana coming from 115 vessels on both oceans.¹⁴ The reason for the massive increase in the amount captured is two-fold. One, the demand was increasing as the number of new customers steadily rose. Two, the Coast Guard was learning the habits of the smugglers and applying these lessons throughout the service. It helped that the smugglers were often able to assist the Coast Guard by drawing attention to themselves because of their ineptitude. The Coast Guard was starting to make it very painful for the smugglers, who were more than happy to pass on their losses to the customers in the form of even higher prices.

In 1979, the Coast Guard had a new problem to deal with. For the first time ever it made a drug seizure outside of the Pacific and Caribbean Oceans. Two vessels were intercepted at sea; the *Olaug* and the *Kristen Jane* were caught off the coast of New Jersey.¹⁵ The Coast Guard was unsure if the vessels were being sailed from the Caribbean much further east to avoid their patrols, or if the drugs were being routed through Europe to avoid the eyes of the Coast Guard. At the same time, the amount of seizures in the Pacific was starting to increase. The Coast Guard took it as a sign that their efforts in that region were starting to pay off.

A more disturbing development in 1979 that would severely affect the Coast Guard's efforts was the large number of refugees fleeing from Cuba. The Coast Guard could not conduct regular patrols of the Caribbean as the majority of their assets were

involved with rescue operations at sea. As a result, the Coast Guards drug seizure total dropped down to 2,600,000 pounds for the year with only 110 vessels involved.¹⁶ This represents the first negative trend for the Coast Guard since the commencement of Operation Intercept.

In 1980, while the Coast Guard was dealing with the refugee problem Fidel Castro decided to make things even more difficult. Beginning in April, he allowed people to leave from the port of Mariel if there was someone there to take them to America. Since the drug smugglers had enjoyed using Cuba as a staging and refueling point for some time at this point, the author believes a case could be made that the smugglers and kingpins paid Castro or someone in his government to allow the refugees to depart because they knew the impact it would have on the Coast Guard's ability to wage the War on Drugs. With the Coast Guard's attention focused on the refugees, the smugglers believed that they could get some large shipments to America and make up for any expense incurred. They would just have to ensure they avoided the area between Cuba and South Florida as this was where the Coast Guard was focusing all its attention.

The dawn of the 1980s saw an increase in demand for cocaine. Cocaine had been smuggled along with marijuana previously, but never in large quantities because the demand was still relatively low. Ships that were transporting cocaine and marijuana would also dump the cocaine first when intercepted as they knew that the courts would prosecute them more harshly for the cocaine than for the marijuana¹⁷. Some of the smugglers also viewed cocaine as a dangerous drug, and even the greater payouts for successful deliveries could not make them try their luck with transporting it. The

smugglers instead looked towards many of the recent Cuban refugees, whom they had employed in Cuba, to take up transporting the drugs for them.

Cocaine also lent itself to easy transport by air. Small planes, which could easily evade the radars of the day, would be loaded with as much cocaine as possible and flown to secret airstrips throughout Florida. There, they would distribute the cocaine to the sellers who would eventually get the product into their customers' hands. At the time, the Coast Guard had no reliable means to track and intercept these aircraft, which led Coast Guard to request more assets to assist them, which would ultimately lead to the military joining in their efforts.

The last significant event to occur during 1980 was the first use of disabling fire to stop a smuggler. Previously, the Coast Guard fired warning shots into the path of vessels who failed to respond to the order to stop their vessels. Usually the warning shots were sufficient motivation for the vessels to stop, but there were cases where vessels would continue on, and Coast Guard would have to place their vessels in front of the smugglers in order to get them to stop. There were even isolated occurrences where the smugglers would ram the Coast Guard vessels in an attempt to escape. The usual result for that tactic was that the smugglers vessel sank and the Coast Guard vessel had to paint over the scratch marks. Now the Coast Guard vessels could seek permission from the District Commander to fire into the smugglers engine room, after giving repeated warning over the radio and loud speakers, in order to force the smugglers to submit to inspection.

The first vessel that disabling fire was used on was the *Thomas E*, which was attempting to escape from the Coast Guard Cutter *Point Francis* by attempting to run to

the Bahamas.¹⁸ One would think that taking on fire from a Coast Guard vessel would be enough to deter great numbers of the smugglers from continuing to participate in what was becoming, for them, a dangerous business. It was not, and the Coast Guard would go on to use this tactic repeatedly. Since the majority of the scuttling valves were located in the engine spaces, by firing into the engine spaces the Coast Guard hoped to deter the ships from using them before the Coast Guard could board their vessels and seize drugs and other evidence. Not surprisingly, the boarding teams still received the “master has recently departed” excuse from these crews.

As 1981 dawned, the smugglers found another location where they could offload their product with little to no interruption. That place was the Gulf Coast along the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf Coast offered all kinds of hidden bays and swamps where their boats could offload their cargo without any chance encounters with law enforcement. The smugglers found plenty of assistance along the Gulf Coast, as there were people who were out of work and willing to work for the smugglers in order to make more money than they had ever seen. The locals were able to provide the smugglers with more locations to offload the product, often directly into their homes on the water where they would store the product for them at an additional cost.

The smugglers were also starting to learn some valuable lessons from the Coast Guard, and they used their newfound knowledge against them. The smugglers became aware that the Coast Guard and other agencies were starting to track them from the radio transmissions that they made. The leaders of the drug organizations back in South and Central America were notorious for not trusting the smugglers to make the trips to America without checking in on the radio. The smugglers would provide updated

positions and the leaders would watch them to ensure that the smugglers were not trying to steal their product for themselves. The leaders would also use the radio to arrange for transfers at sea or would inform the smugglers if the offload point had to change. The Coast Guard was using these transmissions in an effort to narrow down search areas, or to try to intercept these vessels while they were doing transfers at sea. The smugglers and leaders eventually figured this out, and they started to use code when talking over the radio. They would also use different names for the vessels on different days in order to throw the Coast Guard off the trail. As a further measure, the smugglers were starting to paint over the names of their vessels and their homeports. Sometimes this would entail them changing the name of the vessel multiple times on the same trips while using different names on the radios. In extreme cases, the smuggler vessels would complete the entire trip without using the radio. Those cases were rare, as the drug leaders could not get themselves to readily trust the smugglers.

Another tactic smugglers used was to not tell the masters where the final offload point was until they were about a day away from it. Using special code words and coordinate systems, the leaders would pass on the position to the vessel, which would then provide an estimated arrival time.¹⁹ The pickup team could also report to the vessels if the off-load area was clear, and if not then it could warn them exactly where the trouble was located. The smugglers also began to use line-of-sight radios to further prevent the Coast Guard from gathering any intelligence from them.

The use of motherships also saw an increase as the decade began. Now motherships were used to haul massive amounts of drugs, but they were also used to provide fuel to vessels that were taking progressively further eastward paths in order to

defeat the efforts of the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard quickly realized the importance of these vessels and started to focus efforts on capturing them at sea. The Coast Guard knew that capturing these vessels forced the smugglers to once again take closer routes that would increase the likelihood that they would be discovered and caught.

The motherships were also used in conjunction with the introduction of the go-fast. The go-fasts were appropriately named as they were designed to operate at speeds approaching 50 knots in calm seas. To get that much speed they were built very light and were overpowered with several outboard motors. The go-fasts were also small, which made them difficult to spot, and would travel mostly at night. During the day, the operators relied on the fact that their hulls were painted the same color as the water and allowed the vessel to drift to reduce the chance of being spotted. The go-fasts would take multi-ton loads of cocaine, and sometime marijuana, from places like Colombia and transport them to Florida. A line of motherships would be strung out along their path and they would rendezvous with the go-fast and give it enough fuel for the next leg. The motherships could provide fuel from their own tanks, or they could carry fuel in drums on deck. The Coast Guard grew wise to these go-fast fuel storage methods, and began to check for them stopping a vessel. The Coast Guard also began to check for how much use the equipment onboard appeared to have seen. The most often used motherships were former fishing vessels, and if the gear did not look like it was in use then the Coast Guard knew that the vessel was most likely acting as a mother ship. The Coast Guard would then shadow these vessels with radar from beyond visual range and wait for the go-fasts to show up. Once the go-fasts came alongside the motherships for refueling the Coast Guard could sneak up on them and make the capture.

As 1980 ended, the Coast Guard would claim only 2,500,000 pounds of marijuana captured on the seas. The Mariel boatlift had seriously stretched their resources and prevented them from reversing the previous year's trend.²⁰ Fortunately, for the Coast Guard Castro once again closed his borders after the boatlift, so the Coast Guard could refocus their efforts back to trying to stop the smugglers. Additionally, the smugglers were starting to implement tactics that would make it even more difficult for the Coast Guard to stop them.

In 1981, the Coast Guard would start to see their capture rate begin to increase. They were able to seize roughly, 2,600,000 pounds of marijuana in the Caribbean and Pacific Oceans and they added 40 pounds of cocaine as well.²¹ Despite all the tactics that the smugglers were using, it was obvious to the Coast Guard that the efforts to stop the flow of drugs were starting to pay off. Prices for drugs were continually increasing, which they viewed as a victory, since it was hoped that soon drugs would become unaffordable.

As 1982 began, things were starting to look up for the Coast Guard. President Reagan, bowing to pressure from Americans who were sick of dealing with the problems of drug use, began a series of steps that would ultimately culminate in a modification of the Posse Comitatus Act. The modifications allowed the United States military to assist the Coast Guard in its efforts at drug interdiction. The military could bring a wealth of resources to help, which allowed the Coast Guard to take the offensive against the smugglers. With the military also came a modest budget increase, which the Coast Guard would use to develop several key programs. The President also directed several other

organizations to join with the Coast Guard, or to provide the Coast Guard with their assistance.

Since the beginning of Operation Intercept, the Coast Guard had fought the War on Drugs at sea almost entirely by itself. It had learned valuable lessons on how the smugglers did business and it constantly adapted its tactics to counter them. While the Coast Guard did not stop the flow of drugs to the United States, it was instrumental in preventing a flood of drugs from entering the country. In addition, the Coast Guard's efforts made the drug business costly for the smugglers and leaders, which made purchasing drugs more costly for the consumers. As we shall soon see the Coast Guard was only getting started, and its greatest successes were yet to come.

¹Charles Fuss, *Sea of Grass: The Maritime Drug War 1970-1990* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 5.

²Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001), 24, 52, 69, 268.

³U.S. Coast Guard, "U. S. Coast Guard: A Historical Overview," http://www.uscg.mil/history/articles/h_USCGhistory.asp (accessed 5 December 2009).

⁴Cornell University Law School, "US Code: Title 18, 1385. Use of Army and Air Force as Posse Comitatus," <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/18/1385.html> (accessed 12 December 2009).

⁵Cornell University Law School, "US Code: Title 14, 89. Law Enforcement," <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/14/89.html> (accessed 12 December 2009).

⁶Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 14.

⁷*Ibid.*, 20.

⁸G. O. W. Mueller and Freda Adler, *Outlaws of the Ocean* (New York: Hearst Marine Books, 1985), 28.

⁹Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 33.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 39.

- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Hank Messick, *Of Grass and Snow* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 89-102.
- ¹³Ibid., 102-104.
- ¹⁴Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 61.
- ¹⁵Ibid., 66.
- ¹⁶Ibid., 68.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 69. This information was related to Mr. Fuss during a series of prison interviews he conducted with smugglers who were incarcerated.
- ¹⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁹Ibid., 72.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹Ibid., 80.

CHAPTER 3

ALLIED EFFORTS

The Early Years

By 1982, Americans were beginning to tire of the impact that illegal drugs were having on the country. Leading the charge were citizens of Florida, where the majority of the drug related violence was occurring. “The lobbying by Miami citizens against Crime got President Reagan’s attention.”¹ Reagan realized that as President he could allow the United States military to take on a much greater and more public role in the war against drugs. The military could offer unique resources to ease the strain on the Coast Guard in its role of interdicting the flow of drugs at sea, mostly in the form of ships and aircraft. President Reagan also realized that there were other governmental agencies that could assist the efforts of the Coast Guard and the Border Patrol in their fight against drug trafficking. In some cases, these organizations had been providing support to the Coast Guard already, albeit without the public knowing about it. As we shall see, these organizations allowed the US to take the offensive against the cartels and force them to find other means of transporting their products to the US.

President Reagan sought to form a unified effort to take on the cartels, and to that end he created the South Florida Task Force (SFTF) and placed Vice President Bush at the head. This was the first step towards uniting efforts at a federal level, as previous efforts were all at the local law enforcement level. It is important to note that this alliance was set up to coordinate efforts among involved organizations, and did not participate in the direct control of assets. It initially conducted operations from the federal building in Miami with a coordination center. The Task Force’s purpose was two-fold: Intelligence

gathering and Interdiction Operations. It could assimilate intelligence gathered from various sources and pass it onto the organization that could best utilize it. Prior to the SFTF, information was compartmentalized, as the various organizations did not trust each other to keep the information safe. In some cases, some organizations had released information that revealed other organizations' sources. With the cartels, if there was a suspicion of an insider providing information any potential leaks were disposed of.

One of the first organizations that the South Florida Task Force approached was the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC). The El Paso Intelligence Center charter is to "provide overall intelligence on drug movements by land, sea, and air throughout the world as they relate to the United States; to provide time-sensitive information on drug movements; and to support other programs of interest to EPIC's participating agencies."² The EPIC was organized into two sections: the Watch Section and the Analysis Section, with the Watch Section providing location reports on suspected smugglers and the Analysis Section developing information based on smuggling routes and organizational precedents. Created in 1974, the El Paso Intelligence Center was administered by the Drug Enforcement Agency and received intelligence from organizations such as the Customs and Border Patrol and various other federal agencies. Prior to the creation of the SFTF this information was closely held by EPIC and not normally available to local law enforcement. Now the SFTF could pass on the information and ensure that sources were not revealed.

One of the most important functions that EPIC provided was the Vessel Watch List. Vessels in this list were referred to as "contacts of interest," and these contacts were routinely sought after by the Allies as they were suspected of transporting drugs. EPIC

maintained a watch on all vessels that were heading towards the US and could match that information with bits of vague intelligence in an effort to narrow down the search areas for the ships that were trying to intercept them. EPIC correlated this list against already known smugglers in an effort to do trend analysis and determine likely routes and methods. Now that new agencies had access to this list, they were able to feed EPIC valuable information that they did not already know. EPIC had a twenty-four hour watch set up to provide intelligence to other agencies and to receive and correlate new intelligence from them. Once the agencies, such as the Coast Guard and Navy, realized the usefulness of EPIC they petitioned for the DEA to get a larger budget in order to allow for more analysts which in turn lead to greater amounts of actionable intelligence for them to use.³

While much of the focus of the anti-drug efforts was placed on the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific areas, President Reagan also sought to make gains in other locations. To do so he set up the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces. The Attorney General was placed in overall charge of these task forces and their mission was to investigate the major organizations that provided the funding to bring the drugs into the US. Each of the task forces was placed under the control of the local United States Attorney. The task forces did not provide much in the way of actionable intelligence, but they were able to interfere in the efforts of some of the larger smuggling organizations. The work that they performed prevented the drug smugglers from using larger cargo vessels as transports and mother ships. In the few cases where captured smugglers were able to provide intelligence about ongoing transports, this information was obtained as a result of the smugglers making deals for reduced sentences.⁴

After enjoying some early successes, the President decided to up the ante and expand the Vice President's role. In March of 1983, President Reagan formed the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS) with the express goal of interdicting narcotics. It was a board that was chaired by the Vice President and included the Secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury, and Transportation, the Attorney General, the counselor to the President, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and the director of the White House Drug Abuse Policy Office. Much like the SFTF, the NNBIS was set up to coordinate efforts and did not have the power to directly impact ongoing operations.⁵ Unlike the SFTF, the NNBIS was not limited to focusing on just one geographical area but rather any area that had potential to be employed for narcotics shipments. The Vice President was in charge of ensuring that the various agencies were working well together and were providing information to each other in a complimentary way. Eventually the board was expanded to include representatives from the State Department, Drug Enforcement Agency, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Army.⁶ This organization remained in place until dismantled in 1989, when it was incorporated into the Office of National Drug Control Policy.⁷

Among the federal agencies that assisted the Coast Guard it was the Department of Defense that had the greatest impact on the War on Drugs. Primarily this assistance came from the Navy and Air Force, though the Army did become involved but to a lesser extent. The Navy and the Air Force provided assets to be used in Law Enforcement, but due to the Posse Comitatus Act, military personnel were prohibited from actually arresting anyone that was found in the act of transporting drugs. Instead, the Coast Guard, or a similarly empowered organization, would have to provide personnel to perform the

actual arrest. The Army provided training for some of the countries where the drugs were produced. Each of the services eventually provided both overt and covert support to help stop the flow of drugs north.

Not surprisingly, the largest assistance came from the United States Navy. The Navy was practically chomping at the bit to join the Coast Guard in trying to stop the flow of drugs at sea, as it realized that it could only benefit from participating in the effort.⁸ By being an active and public participant, the Navy would be able to point to tangible results that could come in handy during budget discussions. The Carter administration reduced the funding of the Navy to a low priority and the Navy suffered terribly for it. When President Reagan was elected, part of his campaign promise was to increase defense spending to win the Cold War and the Navy wanted to justify the amount of money it stood to gain.⁹

President Reagan wanted a large Navy to combat the fleet of the Soviet Union on the high seas. The President was not content to just have parity with the Soviet Union, he wanted flat out superiority in both quantity of ships and technology. The Navy needed trained men to crew the ships that he wanted built, which meant that the Navy needed targets of opportunity to train its personnel. Tracking drug smugglers at sea was an ideal way to train aviators and surface warfare officers in the complex task of Surface Search and Coordination (SSC). The Navy also knew that they could use the mission of counter-narcotics to accomplish valuable training as the skills the crew would gain on that mission could also be used against the Soviet Navy.¹⁰

Tracking narcotics smugglers had real world application for the crews that the Navy sent to the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific. The challenge of finding the smugglers

at sea was no different than trying to find a warship at sea. Smugglers, much like warships, want to remain undetected at sea, and will employ various methods to ensure that they are not detected and tracked. In both cases, Navy ships and aircraft were required to search vast areas at sea in an effort to pinpoint a small single contact. The crew of the Navy ships could hone their skills at attempting to find elusive targets using the same methods and sensors that they would employ to locate the Soviet Navy. Through the use of radar, sonar, and visual searching the crews could locate suspicious vessels and pass on that information to the Coast Guard district they were operating in to coordinate the interdiction effort.

The Navy ships had a greater range than the smaller Coast Guard ships. As a result, the Navy ships allowed the Coast Guard to redistribute its assets to cover the largest area possible. The Coast Guard cutters normally patrolled either close in to the shore or along the most traveled smuggling routes, as the amount of fuel they carried allowed for nothing else. Smugglers could avoid the Coast Guard if they were willing to travel further out to sea than the Coast Guard patrolled, though this would entail a longer trip for them and a reduced profit margin for their bosses. However, thanks to the Navy, the areas west of the Galapagos Islands and east of the Barbados chain would now have assets in place to intercept any smugglers trying to avoid the Coast Guard. The Navy also sent underway replenishment ships to the area, which allowed vessels to refuel at sea for the first time. Previously, vessels had to pull into friendly ports in the area in order to take on fuel and supplies. Now the replenishment ships allowed them to refuel and take on stores while remaining in the same geographical area.¹¹

The Navy ships also brought another unlikely weapon to the fight which most people were not aware of: passive sonar. Passive sonar is the use of sensitive microphones, or arrays of microphone sensors, to pick up the sounds of the ocean and relay those sounds to crewmembers that are specially trained and can interpret them. The technicians are so well trained that they can distinguish the type of vessel they are tracking, the bearing of the vessel, and can sometimes determine an estimated range, course, and speed of the vessel. The distance that the sound will travel through the water is a function of depth, water pressure, temperature, and salinity.

One of the interesting properties of sound waves in the water is that they will be reflected or refracted depending on the water conditions. This means that the sound waves can travel over great distances in what are known as convergence zones. These convergence zones can translate into ranges in the thousands of yards, and only a trained operator can differentiate a convergence zone signal from a direct path signal, where the sound wave is not reflected or refracted.¹² As a result, a contact could be detected beyond visual ranges and a ship would have to plot an intercept course and close on the contact.

Most people associate the use of sonar with detecting submarines, but the use of sonar to track smugglers proved to be very effective. Especially helpful to participating sonar technicians was that the go-fast type boats (often zodiac type) that the smugglers used made a very distinct noise that was easy to detect at long ranges. If there was another Navy ship in the area that also had the same contact on sonar the two sensors could both take the bearing and cross it to get a rough ellipse for the contacts location.

Until the contact was gained visually or with radar, sonar could keep the surveillance platforms informed as to contact location.

In order to get the most out of the sonar system as a detection platform, the Navy provided several of their most advanced sonar ships for detecting drug traffickers at sea. Outwardly, these ships did not look like any ships the Navy normally used, so they were able to loiter in certain key areas without raising suspicions. These ships trailed miles and miles of sensitive cable arrays behind them in order to listen to the sounds of the oceans. As previously mentioned, the go-fast type boats made a very large amount of noise that was easy to detect at very long ranges. Upon sensing a go-fast vessel, the Navy surveillance ships would pass the contacts information onto the coordination centers, which determined the proper asset to intercept the contact. Additionally, naval warships carried smaller versions of these arrays. Colloquially they were known as “tails.”¹³

In addition to the surface ships, the Navy also provided patrol aircraft such as the P-3 Orion and the S-3 Viking to monitor the transit areas. The Coast Guard had previously employed HU-25 Guardian and C-130 Hercules aircraft to perform those missions. The Coast Guard planes were similarly configured as their Navy counterparts, but were unable to match their range or endurance. The Navy aircraft, built to hunt Soviet submarines, were incredible assets to have in the war against drug smugglers. Their long range and endurance (12 hours on station time), coupled with their advanced sensors, meant that the drug smugglers could expect to be detected and tracked by an aircraft until a ship could be vectored to them to take the crew into custody. Conversely, ships could call upon aircraft to maintain contact with go-fast ships that they could not keep up with in the hope that the go-fast would run out of fuel before reaching its destination. Friendly

countries in the area allowed some of these aircraft to make use of their runways, which meant that the aircraft could spend more time on station than if they had to fly out of the United States.¹⁴

One of the least appreciated methods that aircraft used to find the smugglers was through visual methods. The aircraft, flying at various altitudes, could easily spot the wakes of go-fasts as they sped along on their way. The aircraft also had infrared imaging systems, which would allow the aircraft to pick up the heat signature of a vessels engine(s) against the relative cold of the ocean.¹⁵ The aircrews were trained to spot periscope feathers from Soviet submarines travelling at periscope depth. Switching to hunting go-fasts was simply a matter of scale. The infrared system could be used during the day or night, but night produced the best results. The aircraft even had recording devices hooked into the system so that they could record the action of the vessels such as transferring drugs to another ship, or attempting to ditch the drugs at sea once they were spotted. This evidence could be used against the smugglers during court cases, but was utilized most as a training tool to show other crews what they could expect the smugglers to do once caught. The tactics were adapted such that trailing Coast Guard or Navy ships were vectored to come up from behind the contacts, if the intercept geometry worked right, so that they could recover any jettisoned drugs after being told where to find them. Cases where physical evidence was collected almost always resulted in a conviction.¹⁶

In employing the infrared detection systems, the users found that it was a useful device to detect the presence of drugs. Large loads of marijuana would generate amounts of heat (due to the heat generated by the biological breakdown in the harvested plants) that the system could detect. The smugglers somehow managed to find out this fact and

began to reinforce their cargo areas with concrete and other materials in an effort to block the detection of their cargo.¹⁷ The smugglers used their own system of lessons learned in an effort to devise counters to every method that was used to detect their cargo. In this case, the smugglers were showing a lack of understanding as to how the detections were taking place. However, their efforts in this case caused them to expend extra resources which drove down their profit margins. In addition, the smugglers were able to determine that some of their smuggling fleet was incapable of being retrofitted with the means to avoid detection of cargo by infrared. Those vessels now had to rely on other tactics to avoid detection, such as the aforementioned longer trips.

In order for the Navy ships to carry out law enforcement tasks they were required to have onboard members of the Coast Guard, since only the Coast Guard was empowered to actually arrest someone at sea. Once the Navy ships joined in the fight, the Coast Guard quickly moved to set up Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDETS) which would be specially trained to board ships at sea and carry out searches for contraband. These detachments came from the Tactical Law Enforcement teams (TACLET) and were based in San Diego, Miami, and Chesapeake.¹⁸ The individual teams that went out to ships consisted of eight personnel with an officer placed in overall charge of the team. The teams were assigned to ships in the area and were integrated into the crew for the length of their attachment. Ships often rotated through several teams during the course of their deployments to the area, and aggressive teams were highly prized.

Once the teams came onboard they worked with the watchstanders on the ships in an effort to train them in identifying smugglers at sea. They also brought with them the most up to date information on ships that were operating in the area as well as any new

tactics that were being used by the smugglers that the Navy crews might not be aware of. The LEDETs were usually given their own area of the ship to work from, which would often be a secured space (off limits to the majority of the Navy crew) with limited access. This also doubled as the location where the ship would store whatever drugs were confiscated. Whatever equipment the detachments needed that they could not transport onboard by themselves was provided by ships force, including the ship's boats and a crew to man them, food, access to radio communications with their headquarters, and access to the ships satellite phone. While the detachments sometimes would transfer between vessels at sea, the preferred method would be to have the team transfer while the ship was in port.¹⁹

On ships where helicopters were embarked at least one member of the LEDET was onboard the helicopter whenever it was in the air to act as an aerial spotter. The members were often very experienced USCG petty officers who could quickly recognize if a ship appeared suspicious at sea. They were trained to look for certain characteristics such as the amount of wear and tear on the fishing equipment, which would indicate whether the vessels were primarily out to sea to fish or to support smuggling operations. The spotters would also look for other telltale signs such as an abundance of radio antennas, which would indicate that a vessel was probably acting as a mother ship and using various radios to coordinate the operation. Sometimes these spotters were even able to see bales of marijuana that were stacked on deck awaiting transfer to the go-fasts. The spotters would also bring with them video recording equipment to have a record of what they observed should the vessel be found to be in violation.²⁰

The Navy crews and the LEDET crews were able to work together quite easily; after all they spoke the same language. The LEDET members constantly made themselves available to the Navy crews to help process, and in some case provide, any intelligence that they recovered from the vessels. The detachments also worked with the crews of the small boats to help hone their skills. Attempting to board another vessel from a small boat at sea requires quite a bit of skill, and the Navy coxswains were not used to approaching small vessels. A good portion of the detachments had experience driving the Coast Guard small boats and they shared their expertise with the Navy crews. The Navy ended up learning valuable lessons from these operations that were used to improve training for the future crews. The Navy also learned that it needed a vessel faster than a motor whaleboat to catch up with the smugglers and it began to equip its ships with the same small boats that the Coast Guard had already successfully used.²¹

In the first recorded assistance of the Coast Guard after President Reagan ordered the Navy into the War on Drugs, the Navy ship USS *Farragut* (DDG-37) took control of two vessels that a Coast Guard cutter had detained and escorted them into Puerto Rico. The second instance would be more impressive as the USS *Clifton E. Sprague* (FFG-16) assisted in the capture of a freighter by joining in the chase and refueling the Coast Guard cutters who started it, thus allowing them to complete the capture. Word began to spread among the smugglers that the Navy ships were no longer to be ignored and that they presented a direct threat to the smugglers.²² These events inspired a Tom Clancy novel *Clear and Present Danger*.

The first time that the Navy took a direct role in an interdiction was in November of 1982 when the USS *Mississippi* (CGN-40) was used to launch a successful interdiction

at sea. *Mississippi* was operating as part of the USS *Nimitz* battle group, which was in the Western Caribbean conducting exercises in preparation for its upcoming deployment. Since *Nimitz* was not assigned to deploy to the area, the only LEDET was on the carrier (*Nimitz*) and only there for the off chance that they happened to come across someone suspicious while they were in the area. The detachment was transferred to the *Mississippi* after aircraft from the *Nimitz* spotted a ship that was not where it was supposed to be and acting strangely. *Mississippi* then raced to the ship's position and proceeded to shadow the vessel. The detachment commander requested a SNO boarding from his superiors, which was granted after the country of Venezuela (where the ship claimed it was from), could not prove that the ship was properly registered in that country. *Mississippi* ordered the ship to heave to and prepare to be boarded, at which point the detachment rode over and conducted a search of the vessel. The ship was found to have almost 51,000 pounds of marijuana onboard and the crew was arrested.²³ The crew went on trial and their lawyers attempted to submit a motion for dismissal due to a violation of the Posse Comitatus Act. The defendants argued that it was illegal for the Navy to transport a detachment of Coast Guardsmen, but the court refused their claim and instead ruled that the Navy did not violate the amended Act and therefore it was completely legal for the Navy to transport the detachment to shore for prosecution. A jury would go on to find all members of the crew guilty for transporting narcotics and they received prison sentences.²⁴ The first challenge to the Navy's involvement in the drug war was met and successfully defeated. Even better, the courts approval of the Navy's actions would ensure that this defense tactic could not be used during trials in the future.

As the smugglers became increasingly aware of the efforts against them they turned to new ways to try and keep themselves in business. Somehow, they were able to determine the frequencies that the anti-drug forces were using at sea and began to monitor them. They would find patterns in the transmissions and correlate them with perceived activity in their area. Even though the anti-drug forces were using secure communications, the smugglers at least knew that there was activity on those frequencies. The smugglers also realized that their communications were under scrutiny and so they began using code words if they chose to communicate over the airwaves. For the most part the smugglers attempted to do as much work as possible without using radios (in Navy terminology “zip lip”), which meant that they had to have precise planning for pickup and drop off points as well as rendezvous positions for the go-fasts to offload or refuel. The smugglers even went so far as to send people to the bars in the vicinity of the bases where the anti-drug forces operated from with the hope of gleaning some intelligence about ship movements or ongoing operations. The smugglers also sent out false distress signals, knowing that the Coast Guard had no choice but to investigate the distress signal since rescue at sea maintained a higher priority than anti-smuggling operations.²⁵

Another tactic that smugglers started to rely on were hidden compartments. In 1983 alone “over seventy vessels with hidden compartments were seized that year. Nearly forty percent of all vessels intercepted by the Coast Guard and Customs had concealed contraband.”²⁶ This was a tactic born out of desperation, as the smugglers were forced to undertake this expensive proposition in order to pass inspections by boarders, which was becoming a common occurrence. In order to build a hidden compartment on a

vessel one had to be willing to sacrifice something else to make room for it. In some cases it was fuel, in some cases it was water storage, and in others it was cargo area. The first two would mean a loss of range and endurance, and the third would lead to suspicions if the vessel was boarded and searched. After determining which of those capabilities the boat owner was willing to give up, the type of narcotics that could be carried in the allotted hidden compartment was driven by the space available. In the early days of hidden compartments, it was primarily marijuana that the smugglers sought to hide, but later it would expand to all forms of narcotics. To make a really good hidden compartment it was necessary to make it as inaccessible as possible, so for the most part these compartments were built around the engine area and bilges of the ship.

At the point of origin, the ships would have their cargo loaded and then fabricators would build false walls and decks around them. In some cases they would build false tanks inside the areas so that the spaces could be explained away as being there for legitimate reasons. Better still, if the searches took samples from the tanks they would find nothing more than the appearance of fuel or water in those tanks. As soon as the fabricators were done the covers were welded in place and the crew attempted to divert attention from the area by spilling fuel oil and attempting to make it appear the same as any other area of the ship.²⁷ The best that the anti-drug forces could do at sea was to drill a hole and place a boroscope inside a tank or void that they suspected of having narcotics in it. Sometimes a vessel would have to be brought into a friendly port in order to further search the vessel. In cases where narcotics were found, the crew was arrested and charged, however if no narcotics were found the crew was given an apology and sent on its way.

The only way to be sure that there were no drugs onboard was to do full space accountability checks of each vessel that was intercepted. That meant accounting for every cubic foot of a ship, as well as the amount of fuel that she had onboard. The process was boring, time consuming, and often done in uncomfortable conditions. It was also necessary to ensure that there were no narcotics onboard. Even if the crew accounted for every space that they could check, some vessels were still sent in to port in order to allow the anti-narcotics teams to tear them apart in order to search for the narcotics.

Some smugglers preferred to try their luck and run from the anti-narcotics forces. The smugglers knew that it would take time for the forces to get the necessary permissions to board their vessels, and even if permission was granted there were maneuvers that the smugglers could use in order to prevent the forces from boarding their ships. The only way for the forces to get the smugglers to stop was to disable their engines. The first time that the Navy used this method was in 1983 when the USS *Kidd* (DDG-993) used her .50 caliber machine guns to stop the M/V *Ranger* after receiving permission from the Coast Guard Headquarters.²⁸ *Ranger* had refused to stop and allow the search teams onboard after receiving an order to do so from *Kidd*. Once the *Ranger* was stopped the LEDET proceeded to search her and after finding over 57,000 pounds of marijuana onboard, they arrested her crew.

It is important to note that Navy ships conducting these types of operations fell under the control of the Coast Guard during any actual seizures. Prior to commencing a boarding the Navy vessels are placed under the Tactical Control of the Coast Guard, which allows them to assist the Coast Guard forces in any actual seizures. This also allows the Navy vessel to order ships at sea to stop and prepare to be boarded just as if it

were coming from a Coast Guard vessel. Failure to heed this order was usually enough to receive permission to use disabling fire or warning shots to bring suspected smugglers to a halt.

The last method that the smugglers used to prevent their capture was to simply abandon their cargo. In those cases, the smugglers would often be in the midst of transferring their cargo to go-fasts type boats. As soon as they spotted the anti-narcotics forces they quickly sped off in the go-fasts while dumping the narcotics over the side. The smugglers knew that the anti-narcotics ships would not be able to keep up with them and that all the helicopters could do was shadow them and report their position. The anti-narcotics forces would still recover the drugs, but the crews would escape to try again at some future point.²⁹

By the end of 1983, the United States had seized over three million pounds of marijuana, with 75 percent of it coming from the Florida-Caribbean region. Cocaine seizures came in at only 46 pounds, and that was mostly from crewmembers for their personal use or sale.³⁰ The vast majority of cocaine, at this point, was still being smuggled by aircraft. It was a slow beginning for the interagency effort, but things were on the upswing and the President could point to some successes in the first year of these organizations working together for the first time.

The Middle Years

In 1984, the United States sought to go on the offensive against the smugglers and thus Operation Hat Trick was born. Operation Hat Trick was designed to be executed in stages with the ultimate goal of shutting down the transport routes from the Colombian region to the US and took months to plan in secret. The first phase represented the setup,

where several Coast Guard and Navy ships took station along a line extending from the Yucatan to Puerto Rico. In phase two, the line would be moved to the south and end up in the territorial waters of Colombia off the Guajira Peninsula. The desired outcome of Operation Hat Trick was that drugs would stockpile on shore while the smugglers waited out the ships and that the Colombian police and military could move in, confiscate the drugs, and make arrests.³¹ Operation Hat Trick produced mixed results and finished the year off with 169 tons of marijuana seized and 37 vessels captured.³²

By the end of 1984, 3.7 million pounds of marijuana were seized at sea. The Coast Guard alone took credit for 2.5 million pounds. Cocaine seizures jumped to 14,000 pounds, of which 2000 pounds came from Coast Guard seizures. Nearly half of the seizures by the Navy came from the use of speedy hydrofoil ships that were faster than the fastest of the smugglers go-fasts and could out distance them at the same time. The smugglers came to fear these vessels above all others because they knew they could not escape them.³³

By the end of 1985, the amount of drugs seized plummeted to 962,274 pounds of marijuana and 46 pounds of cocaine.³⁴ The anti-drug forces were having an effect on the smugglers and forcing them to find new ways to get their drugs to America. At the same time the people of the United States were starting to wake up to the threat that drugs posed to their country and the numbers of users decreased. This was partly due to the increased prices for drugs that were a direct result of the efforts of the anti-drug forces. Additionally, people were beginning to realize the harm drugs caused, not just in terms of bodily harm, but rising crime rates as well.

By the end of 1986, seizures were back up and 2.3 million pounds of marijuana were confiscated.³⁵ The increase was partly due to a shift to Pacific sources, but it was also due to the increase in production of marijuana in Mexico. There were no reported seizures of cocaine at sea, which meant that the smugglers used alternate means to get cocaine to their customers in the United States. The one thing that was becoming a constant was that prices were going up for drugs and this was causing problems for more than just the suppliers.³⁶

People clamored for a military response to the problem of drugs, recognizing that if the country was truly at war with drugs as President Reagan frequently informed them then this war should be fought by the military. Articles debating the role of the military in the Drug War began to be seen in magazines such as the *United States Naval Institute's Proceedings*.³⁷ Eventually the Department of Defense decided that it did not have the assets or the budgets to have an all out war against the drugs. Any shift of defense forces would lead to reduced military readiness in other areas of the world.

In April of 1986 President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 226, titled "Narcotics and National Security." It stated that drug trafficking was a threat to the United States' national security. It also declared that the drug trade financed insurgent and terrorist groups and their activities. Vice President Bush, in announcing this policy, stated it was necessary that "US Policy to aggressively join with other nations to halt the production and flow of illegal drugs, to reduce the ability of terrorists to drive support from drug trafficking, and to strengthen the ability of individual governments to confront and defeat this insidious threat."³⁸

In 1987, new legislation was enacted to assist the anti-drug forces by the federal court system which instituted mandatory minimum sentences for smuggling drugs. Smugglers transporting five or more kilograms of cocaine and 1000 or more kilograms of marijuana could expect to spend at least ten years in prison. Rule 11 of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure allowed them to have their sentences reduced if they cooperated with investigators before the trial commenced. Rule 35 gave them the opportunity to have their sentence reduced after conviction provided they were willing to provide testimony at a trial or actionable intelligence. Whatever intelligence was gleaned from the informant was quickly passed out through the NNBS to the various agencies to act on.³⁹

By the end of 1987, the anti-drug forces seized 1.2 million pounds of marijuana and 14700 pounds of cocaine.⁴⁰ Cocaine was on the rise as the smugglers were being forced back to using boats to ship enough of their product to the United States to make up for what was being confiscated through overland routes. Another reason for the reduced seizures was that there was confusion as to who was leading the overall mission of stopping the drugs from getting to America. In March of that year, President Reagan transformed the National Drug Enforcement Policy Board into the National Drug Policy Board and gave it increased responsibility for all aspects of drug reduction policies. The Drug Policy Board took control of efforts and directed forces through the use of committees. At the same time, it instigated numerous studies in order to find which organization was best equipped to be designated as lead agency for the overall effort. This would lead to infighting as organizations sought to make themselves appear to be the best equipped to take that role.⁴¹

The Latter Years

Throughout 1988, the seizures dropped to new lows. Only 867,000 pounds of marijuana were confiscated at sea that year. Cocaine seizures were on the rise and nearly 80,000 pounds were taken at sea.⁴² This was proof of two things, one that the US tactics were working and that the shipments were being effectively interdicted at sea. Two, that Americans were decreasing their use of drugs more and more each year. The highlight of the year was when the Coast Guard Cutter *Boutwell* made a record capture of 144,000 pounds of marijuana from the M/V *Encounter Bay* after using disabling fire on her when she refused to embark boarding parties.

Finally, in 1989 the seizures hit all time lows as only 425,000 pounds of marijuana were recovered at sea. The cocaine seizure jumped to 32, 896 pounds, which held with increasing from years past.⁴³ As if the seizures themselves were not hurting the smugglers enough, domestic production of marijuana was steadily increasing and was able to provide for the majority of demand when coupled with Mexican production. While no one would call this an outright victory for the anti-drug forces, it was obvious that they were successful in their efforts to decrease the amount of drugs that were being shipped to the United States.

While the Navy did much to help the anti-drug efforts of the time, they were not the only armed service to assist in the fight. The United States Air Force provided aircraft to detect and intercept ships and aircraft that were thought to be carrying narcotics.⁴⁴ The United States Army provided training to any country that asked for it to teach that country's forces to eradicate drugs at the source. The next chapter contains further information on Army participation, to include technical assistance. Of course, the biggest

assistance that the military provided to the War on Drugs came about during the invasion of Panama where one of the justifications was to stop drug trafficking through Panama.⁴⁵ The leader of the country General Manuel Noriega had already been charged with drug trafficking in February of 1988. He was found guilty of letting the Colombian cartels use his country as a transshipment point and of trying to distribute drugs on his own.⁴⁶ The invasion of Panama would force them to seek other routes to Mexico.

The decade of the 80s ended on a high note for the anti-drug forces. Through the use of new allies and new tactics they greatly reduced the flow of drugs reaching the United States on the water. The assistance of the military was paramount to these successes, but could have been even greater if they had been able to dedicate more resources to drug interdiction. Future defense cutbacks prevented the possibility of this level of participation from the military again. Had the amount of effort that some advocated been possible, it is highly likely that the anti-drug forces could have shut down the oceans completely as a way of moving their product to the United States and beyond. That does not change the fact that the military answered the nations call, performed its duties admirably and made a lasting, real contribution to the War on Drugs during this timeframe.

¹Charles Fuss, *Sea of Grass: The Maritime Drug War 1970-1990* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 92.

²*Ibid.*, 93.

³*Ibid.*, 207.

⁴Department of Justice, "Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force Fusion Center and International Organized Crime Intelligence and Operations Center System," 1 June 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/opcl/crime-taskforce.pdf> (accessed 23 May 2010);

also discussed in Charles Fuss, *Sea of Grass: The Maritime Drug War 1970-1990* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 95.

⁵“Announcement of the Establishment of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Archives, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/32383c.htm> (accessed 7 March 2010).

⁶Charles Fuss, *Sea of Grass: The Maritime Drug War 1970-1990* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 109.

⁷*Ibid.*, 110.

⁸Jeff Benkoe, “Navy awaits OK to flex muscles in War on Drugs,” *Miami News*, 30 June 1982.

⁹Online Highways, “Ronald Reagan’s Military Buildup,” <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1957.html> (accessed 23 May 2010).

¹⁰John Fritz, “Navy finds new missions for P-3s,” *Florida Times Union*, January 30, 1996.

¹¹Military Sealift Command, U.S. Navy’s Military Sealift Command Fact Sheet, *Underway Replenishment Oilers*, <http://www.msc.navy.mil/factsheet/t-ao.asp> (accessed 23 May 2010).

¹²Federation of American Scientists, “Sonar Propagation,” http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/navy/docs/es310/SNR_PROP/snr_prop.htm (accessed 23 May 2010).

¹³Norman Friedman, *US Naval Weapons* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 137-39.

¹⁴Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 98

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 220 .

¹⁸David Helvarg, *Rescue Warriors: The U.S. Coast Guard, America’s Forgotten Heroes* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2009), 103.

¹⁹Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 191.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 178, 237.

- ²¹Ibid., 118
- ²²Ibid., 169.
- ²³Ibid., 96-97.
- ²⁴Ibid., 98.
- ²⁵Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 113; “Law Enforcement Monograph One,” U.S. Coast Guard, Seventh District, Miami, 10 May 1984, 1.
- ²⁶Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 113.
- ²⁷Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 114; “Law Enforcement Monograph One,” U.S. Coast Guard, Seventh District, Miami, 10 May 1984, 2.
- ²⁸Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 116.
- ²⁹Sue Landry, “Officials expect more drug activity off coast,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 14 April 1987; Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 146.
- ³⁰Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 120.
- ³¹Jennifer Schenker, “U.S. Plans Drug Blockade,” *Miami Daily Herald*, 17 November 1984; Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 120.
- ³²Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 132. The author recalled this information from a post operation briefing.
- ³³Roger D. Watkins, “PHM’s: Ships Prematurely Put Away,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* (August 1993): 88; Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 169.
- ³⁴Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 169.
- ³⁵Schenker, “U.S. Plans Drug Blockade.”
- ³⁶Robert Lindsey, “Marijuana Drive Reduces Supplies and Raises Prices,” *New York Times*, 4 October 1986; Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 198.
- ³⁷Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 174-1752. Some of the articles were John E. Lacouture, “Isn’t It Time to Declare War on the Drug Invaders?” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* (December 1986): 84-85 and countered by G. Stephen Duca, “The Ad Hoc Drug War,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* (December 1987): 85-91 where Capt Duca argued that if a war was fought against the Drug Dealers it would be a war of attrition that would take years.
- ³⁸Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 176

³⁹Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 172; Charles Fuss, "Lies, Damn Lies, Statistics, and the Drug War," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* (December 1989): 65-69.

⁴⁰Charles Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 201.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 234.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 230.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 270.

⁴⁴U.S. Air Force, "History Milestones," <http://www.af.mil/information/heritage/milestones.asp?dec=1970-1980&sd=01/01/1970&ed=12/31/1989> (accessed 6 March 2010).

⁴⁵Fighting in Panama: A Transcript of Bush's Address on the Decision to Use Force in Panama, *New York Times*, 21 December 1989.

⁴⁶Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management June 1987-December 1989* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2008), 28.

CHAPTER 4

FOREIGN AID IS A TWO WAY STREET

The United States realized early on that any effort to stop the flow of drugs into the country would have to rely on the assistance of the countries where the drugs were grown. The government knew that to defeat the drug problem it would have to attack the sources themselves. As long as drugs were grown and produced, there would be always be a market for them. To defeat the drug problem in America, the government of the United States needed to reach out to the countries where the drugs were produced and offer assistance in many forms. For the most part this assistance would come in the form of money, but direct assistance and training missions also offered and accepted by the governments of counties supplying drugs to the US. Unfortunately, the producers of the drugs would do everything possible to prevent the local governments from interfering with their business.

The government of the United States also attempted to use education as a means for stopping drug use. By educating people about the dangers and costs of drug use, the government attempted to prevent any new users from starting, thereby reducing the demand for illegal drugs within the United States. Coupled with other efforts a significant reduction in demand might theoretically reduce the flow of drugs entering the United States and minimize the problems that went with drug use. The government wanted the American people to be its greatest weapon against the drug trade.

The government's number one goal was to stop the flow of cocaine into the United States. Cocaine was the drug that caused the greatest concern due to its tendency to incite crime and cause health problems. There were numerous public instances of the

dangers of cocaine for the users and the dealers. One such example is the “Dadeland Massacre,” in which a shootout occurred between rival cocaine dealers at a liquor store and included stray gunfire into the local streets.¹ Events such as these led to a rising public awareness of how dangerous the drug trade was, even for people who were not consumers.

The country that emerged as the greatest foe to the United States’ anti-drug efforts was Colombia. Due to its location in close proximity to the equator, Colombia offers nearly year round growing potential for drugs such as marijuana and cocaine. These crops are easy to produce by unskilled laborers who stand to make more money by either growing or processing the drug than they could through any other source. The producers also enjoy a large coastal area from which to select their loading and sailing points. They also used this vast shoreline to have several decoy ships leave at the same time in an effort to distract the Colombian Navy and the USCG. While the Colombians or Coast Guard chased these decoy vessels, the real smuggling vessel could depart on its mission. At the onset of the War on Drugs, the Colombian government was not set up to adequately patrol the amount of shoreline that it possessed. It had too few vessels and aircraft to cover the areas that the smugglers used.

To stop the flow of cocaine the United States needed to recruit the government of Colombia, the leading production country, into its efforts. After years of negotiating, the government of Colombia signed an agreement with the United States in 1979 in which Colombia agreed to extradite people accused of transporting illegal drugs to the United States.² The treaty came about after the murder of the Colombian Minister of Justice after he spoke out openly in favor of extraditing suspected drug suppliers and traffickers to the

United States due to the futility of the Colombian justice system bringing such men to justice. The drug suppliers had long before bought their ability to operate with impunity in that country. Bribes and blackmail were just a few of the tricks that they employed in order to ensure that there were never any witnesses against them nor people willing to prosecute them.

The person whom most people related Colombian drug imports at the time was Pablo Escobar. Escobar started as a minor crook who used intimidation as his primary weapon to become the world's richest drug dealer. Escobar began his criminal career by dealing stolen cars on the streets. It was then that he learned the value of a good bribe, as he was never arrested, and was always able to come up with false documentation to prove ownership of the vehicles.³ He also began to use violence as a way of protecting his business, something that would be the hallmark of his career.⁴ If someone did not pay in a quick manner for his services, Escobar would use his hired help to encourage payment by employing violence and intimidation.

Escobar was able to use the connections that he made by selling stolen cars to break into the local drug markets. Originally, he dabbled in marijuana, but once the cocaine explosion hit Colombia Escobar was hooked. Unsurprisingly, he started his cocaine career by using violence to take control of a cocaine-processing lab that was in his territory.⁵ Once in control Escobar sought to find new buyers who would be willing to pay whatever price Escobar demanded. From those beginnings, he would end up running the largest of the cocaine cartels, and by the mid-eighties he would measure his drug trade in the billions of dollars. Escobar would use every method possible to get his drugs to the United States, and would end up making enough money to upset the Colombian

economy. He also made enough money to buy himself a seat in the Colombian government, but was unable to keep that post.⁶ It was just another way for him to keep himself ahead of the law. The violence Escobar wrought within Colombia, as well as the corruption he spawned in the Colombian government, helped drive public support for Colombia teaming up with the United States to attack the leadership of the drug trade within their borders.

Eventually the people of Colombia became weary of Escobar's methods and his brazen actions. The Colombian government would reach out to the United State for assistance in bringing Escobar, and others like him, to justice. With approval from the President, the United States provided technical assistance to the Colombian government in the form of members of the Army's Intelligence Support Activity (ISA), and Delta Force who were sent to Colombia.⁷ The ISA provided the intelligence that the Colombian government used to track down Escobar by monitoring his phone calls and reporting his location. Delta Force was used to train the members of the Colombian Police Force in tactics that would allow them to defeat Escobar's forces in close quarters combat. It all came together to allow the Colombians to track down Escobar and he was subsequently killed in a gunfight with police members. Although due to the amount of money that Escobar's organizations pumped into the local economy, many mourned him throughout Colombia, but the government merely breathed a sigh of relief.

One of the innovations that Escobar had brought to Colombia was importing the materials he needed in order to make cocaine. In those days, the majority of the cocaine in Colombia actually began as coca leaves in one of the surrounding countries, notably Peru and Ecuador.⁸ Escobar's organization came up with the idea of importing the leaves

to Colombia for processing into the cocaine. Escobar was, at his height, worth nearly \$25 billion dollars and was listed as the seventh richest man in the world.⁹ Those who would challenge him would soon find themselves forced out of business or dead. Escobar's dealings with his friends and enemies were often referred to as "plata o plomo." You could accept either his plata (silver) or his plomo (lead).¹⁰

Escobar was the typical drug lord of that time. They all used the similar tactics of violence and money in order to get what they wanted. Unfortunately, this violence, though directed at each other, often spilled over, and involved innocent bystanders in Colombia and other countries in the region as well. Escobar's reach allowed him to control his business even from prison, something other leaders would do when it was their time to serve their "sentences."¹¹ Escobar showed them all what it took to be successful at running a drug empire and preventing national governments from interfering in their business.

The Colombian government was hesitant to take on Escobar directly because he, like so many other drug smugglers, enjoyed the support of the people. Escobar went so far as to spend large amounts of his own money in order to gain favor with the local Catholic Church.¹² Escobar knew that this kind of support would go a long way towards giving the appearance of legitimacy to his business. Having the appearance of legitimate business dealings was designed to keep the anti-drug forces away from his dealings. This was something that the other drug suppliers noticed, though none of them went to the extraordinary levels that Escobar did. He was the type of person that the governments would have to directly in order to shut the operations down. By shutting down the larger

operations with the most capability to transport drugs first, the governments knew that they could easily redirect their efforts to shot down the smaller operations.

The first tentative steps in the War on Drugs for the Colombian government came during the early days of the 1980s. The Colombian government was concerned that the business of drug smuggling was beginning to get dangerous. It also worried about the connections that were being established between the drug dealers, smugglers, and local terrorist groups such as the FARC.¹³ The government knew that this was an unacceptable because the money that the FARC earned by protecting the drugs was allowing them to increase their numbers and equipment levels which they used to attack the government. This prompted the Colombian government to go on the offensive against the drug dealers.

The United States started off its assistance program with money, believing that Colombia could handle matters on its own if it had enough money to do the job. The first financial assistance was provided when the President approved the Andean Drug Strategy in 1989, which was designed to provide monetary support to countries that were willing to employ it to prevent drugs from leaving their countries. The Colombian Government accepted 153 million dollars from the United States, which it earmarked for improving its military forces and increasing the size of the Colombian police forces.¹⁴ The Andean Drug Strategy directly led to the International Narcotics Control Act of 1989, which was designed to provide money to Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, as they were the leading producers of cocaine at that time. President George H. W. Bush signed that act into law, which led to stiffer penalties for anyone caught smuggling drugs into the US as well as the provision for monetary assistance for those nations.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, the act

also had a clause to allow for the donation of excess military equipment to countries engaged in fighting against drug smugglers.¹⁶

Colombia, as the main source of the drug problems, led the way with taking and employing the money that the United States provided. It was the first country to implement the improvements that would allow increased effectiveness in fighting the drug dealers. Other countries in Latin America, such as Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia, observed the Colombians' actions and implemented them within their own countries. These improvements in waging the drug war would not have been possible if the United States was not willing to provide the financial resources necessary along with the stipulation that the money provided be used solely for fighting the drug dealers.

The first improvement that the Latin American governments made was to buy new communications systems for their police and military forces.¹⁷ Prior to that purchase, they were forced to rely on their country's indigenous systems in order to talk to each other and share information, which was of mediocre technological value and prone to eavesdropping. This allowed the drug smugglers to listen in to their frequencies and be aware of what the police and military were planning. The smugglers took advantage of the insider information and moved people and product away from the area that the military or police were intending on attacking. Coupled with the information that was gained using bribes and planting false information, the dealers were able to thwart efforts to capture them.

To combat the dealer's intelligence gathering from the police and military communication systems the governments in Latin America used the American money to buy American encrypted communication systems, which the drug dealers could not

monitor, to be used by the police and military. To further complicate any intelligence gathering attempts, these encryption systems were capable of using different configurations in different geographical areas. The drug leaders were unsuccessful in gaining access to equipment to crack the system, and coupled with a purge of corrupt officials from the governments, they found themselves having to resort to paying lookouts to be stationed at key areas in order to sound the alarm at the approach of military or police forces.

Along with the new communication equipment, the United States also sent members of a secret organization in order to eavesdrop on the drug leaders communications and to assist in locating them for the local governments. The most notable example of this was in Colombia, where members of the National Security Agency (NSA) provided intelligence using the system referred to as Centra Spike.¹⁸ Centra Spike allowed the tracking of radio and cellular telephone communications with an accuracy measured in hundreds of feet.¹⁹ The most amazing part of the system was its portability. The equipment could be loaded into a vehicle such as a large van or plane, and the system could be used to localize and track the drug leaders. With multiple sets, the search area could be narrowed down and forces sent into the refined search area to locate the target. It was using this system that the government of Colombia was able to finally locate Escobar. The Americans pointed out his location and the local military forces ended up killing him in a shootout.

Another use of the American provided money was to buy better military equipment such as ammunition and weapons, which is where a good portion of the money earmarked for the military was spent.²⁰ With better equipment, the police and

military forces could be assured of the ability to defeat the drug cartels in a firefight. Prior to this, the drug cartels often enjoyed superior weapons and equipment that deterred the police and military from attempting to apprehend them. With the playing field leveled, the drug leaders were forced to engage the services of protection agencies such as the FARC.²¹ Linking the illegal drug trade with known terrorist organizations allowed the United States to further justify the amount of money and support it was sending to the Latin American countries to help fight the cartels.

Although its troops that were now properly equipped the Colombian forces still could not venture to the cartels main operating bases without relying on American supplied aircraft such as the UH-1 and eventually the UH-60.²² With those aircraft, the Colombians could now endeavor out into the jungles where the main processing labs were hidden. For the most part these locations were only accessible via back roads, which the cartel controlled. Previous attempts to take out these labs resulted in mostly failures due to the cartels being tipped off in advance. In some cases the cartels labs were high up in the mountains, which could not be reached by land vehicles. The cartels would rely on horses and people to carry the raw materials to the lab and the products away from the labs. Once the product reached the coast it was now part of the problem at sea, and if not caught there then it was on to America for sale.

Along with providing equipment, the United States secretly sent members of its special forces to train the Colombians to conduct surprise quick-strike missions from helicopters.²³ This information was classified at the time to prevent the cartels from finding out that the Americans were training the Colombians to operate in ways they had not operated in the past. The labs and other cartel strong points were not equipped to

defend themselves from an air attack, as they had no portable surface-to-air missiles with which to defend themselves.

The next major acquisition that the Colombians received from the US was in the form of C-130 transport aircraft and A-37 Dragonfly light attack craft.²⁴ These aircraft allowed them to seek out the drug labs from above, which was sometimes the only way to spot them in the dense jungles. The aircraft could orbit above the location of the drug labs and direct the helicopters to the nearest landing zones to offload the police or military members who were going to destroy the lab. Once on the ground, the troops knew that the aircraft above them could offer them protection as well as informing them if the people in the lab were attempting to escape and what direction they were heading.

Once the troops reached the labs, they would take any people they captured at that location into custody until guilt or innocence could be proven. These people were removed to the helicopters and flown to the nearest police or military base for questioning. Simultaneously, police or military forces were confiscating and destroying whatever equipment they were able to find at the lab. Of key importance for them was any form of communication, especially which frequencies were being used. They would track that information to see if they could find certain frequency ranges that they were using to communicate. The officials would provide any information they discovered concerning communication and particular frequencies to personnel monitoring the cartel's communication in order to limit their searches.

The equipment found at these labs was always the same. Raw Coca, either from Colombia or from one of the nearby countries, would be in various stages of being turned into cocaine. The process of turning coca into cocaine is a simple one, and is not very

expensive. The coca leaves are crushed or beaten and mixed with a solution of alcohol, gasoline, kerosene, or any other solvent in order to separate the cocaine from the leaves. The mixture is repeatedly heated and cooled in order to separate the impurities. The remainder is then subjected to acids and this further purifies the cocaine. This is mixed with Hydrochloric acid and allowed to dry. The substance at this point is turned into powder by crushing it. This is now the type of cocaine that can be snorted or injected.²⁵

All drugs required processing from raw materials to become the final product. This process often relies on chemicals, which were useful when it came to the destruction of the drug labs. Often it took no more than a couple of matches to destroy the drug making labs. The Latin American countries destroyed the labs as they found them in an effort force the drug cartels to move on to even more remote locations to process the drugs. They knew that this would cut into the cartels profit margins and that was where they could hurt them the most.

The other large purchase that the Colombians made with the American money was to buy multiple small boats in order to be able to patrol the rivers and shoreline effectively.²⁶ In the case of the labs that were deep in the jungle, it was highly likely that they were built near a river or creek since the drug making process needed large amounts of water. The rivers and creeks became not only a part of the drug manufacturing process, but also a means to transport materials to the site and products from the site. Having a capable riverine force would allow the government forces to take away the supply routes from the drug leaders. By denying the cartels the use of the rivers, the government forces knew that they would force the drug dealers to use humans and animals to transport the drugs from the labs. This would cause the drug lords to raise their prices to cover the

increased transportation costs, forcing the user to pay more out of pocket for drugs.

Forcing the cartels to raise their prices helped satisfy the overall goal of the program, to make the cost of drugs so high as to ensure that no one could afford to do them.

The small boats also allowed the government forces to patrol the shorelines and intercept the drug boats while still in Colombian waters. At that time, the drug runners were setting up onload spots on the beaches in order to handle the large number of smuggling boats they were using to transport their product.²⁷ Combined with the aerial search, the Colombians could use the small boats to find where the onload locations were and then proceed to capture many of the smugglers out at sea while still within their territorial waters. Later the smugglers would have to find secluded spots to load their boats where they could not be spotted from the sea or air. The United States Marine Corps, which had taken the mission of riverine warfare from the Navy after Vietnam, provided training in the use of the boats.

One of the largest programs that the Latin American countries attempted was to eradicate the drugs at their ultimate source: the crops themselves. The most daunting challenge was to determine the best way to apply the herbicide. To that end, the Latin Americans found that a fleet of helicopters and aircraft, crewed by joint Colombian-United States teams, would be able to deliver the agent from above, leading to vast amounts of drug plants being destroyed before they were harvested. These aircraft belonged to the Colombian Anti-Narcotics Airwing, and were based out of Bogota and several smaller bases throughout Colombia.²⁸ These aircraft were often flown into some dangerous situations and shootings occurred on every mission. Fortunately, no aircraft were ever shot down in the conduct of these missions.

In addition to trying to eradicate the crops through chemical means, the Colombian government also attempted to introduce new cash crops into those areas where the drug crops were grown. Most farmers turned to growing the drug crops because it made them more money than any other type of crop. The fact that they might be arrested and their lands confiscated was not a concern of theirs, since they thought that their remote location gave them an advantage against the anti-drug forces. The drug cartels would help the local farmers with the cultivation of the crop and then transport it to the nearest lab for processing. The drug cartels even protected the land for the farmers with their agreements with such organizations as the FARC. These drug crops required little of the farmers to do in terms of maintenance. The only real work required of them was to plant the crops and then harvest them when ready.

Instead of growing the drug crops, the US encouraged the Latin American countries to find alternative crops that could be grown in those areas and help the farmers with selling them. Alternative crops that were examined included macadamia nuts, cardamon, flowers, tea, cocoa, and coffee.²⁹ Early efforts found that farmers were not willing to grow those crops as they required more work and turned in a smaller profit for them. Additionally, it would require an investment from the farmers themselves to buy the first set of seeds to grow the crops, albeit partially paid for with US money.³⁰ In some cases, the US was able to provide for economic development in the areas that showed an ability to grow the alternative crops successfully.³¹ Ultimately, the success of this program came down to whether or not the farmers could afford to grow the alternative crops, and whether they could be protected from being forced to grow illegal crops again.³²

In order to defeat the drug cartels the US was willing to pay, and the Latin American countries eagerly accepted the money and assistance. Three key programs provided funding to the Latin American countries from US sources. They were the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics Matters (INM), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and the Agency for International Development (AID).³³ Combined they provided just over 100 million dollars to Colombia and Bolivia alone between 1984 and 1989.³⁴ Other funding would come from the Department of Defense, which would provide equipment and trainers for the Latin American countries who requested it. At first, the US sought the other countries assistance in ensuring that the drugs were not able to leave their country of origin. Later this would be expanded to include efforts to eradicate or replace the source of the drugs altogether. What is certain is that due to the efforts of all of the countries involved countless tons of drugs were confiscated, destroyed, or never created in the first place. Their efforts were crucial in ensuring future successes and further combined operations to eradicate drugs on much larger scales.

Latin American countries were just as tired of drugs and violence as the US was. The difference was that they did not have the resources and money to make stand against the cartels. Once the US stepped in and provided the money and resources, the Latin American countries proceeded to launch an offensive against the cartels. The combination of their efforts and the US money and equipment resulted in fewer drugs being created, a more hostile path to American consumers, and higher prices for potential buyers. As a result of the combined efforts between the United States and Latin America, the drug cartels knew that they were no longer able to hold as much sway over the people

of the Latin American countries anymore. The US assistance ensured that the ability to attack the cartels directly with a good chance of success. The smugglers responded by attempting to shift the flow of drugs back to overland routes, a clear indication that the efforts of the US Navy and Coast Guard were immensely successful in making the transportation of drugs too difficult at sea. With the involvement of the Navy and the Coast Guard, the smugglers knew that they were no longer able to count on getting the majority of their shipments to the US over water as the sea route was being denied to them. With this shift in routing, the overland route now ran to Mexico with small boats taking the speed routes from Mexico to the US.³⁵ The only other option that the smugglers had was to try to smuggle their product to the US on board a container ship and hope that the Customs Agency would overlook their shipment in the thousands it had to check every day.

¹Deans Guide, "Miami 'Dadeland Massacre' 1979: 'The War on Drugs' Begins," <http://deansguide.wordpress.com/2008/07/13/miami-dadeland-massacre-1979-the-war-on-drugs-begins/> (accessed 21 March 2010); U.S. Congress, Senate, Statement before Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics, and Terrorism, 16 July 1997, [http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct970716a.htm#The Violence of the Colombian Cartels](http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct970716a.htm#The%20Violence%20of%20the%20Colombian%20Cartels) (accessed 10 March 2010).

²Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001), 32; Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 125.

³Bowden, 19-20.

⁴Ibid., 20.

⁵Ibid., 22.

⁶Ibid., 34.

⁷Michael Smith, *Killer Elite: The Inside Story of America's Most Secret Special Operations Team* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2006), 146-174; Bowden, 148-151, though Bowden does not mention the presence of the ISA, he alludes to it.

⁸Bowden, 25.

⁹Ibid., 49.

¹⁰Ibid., 24.

¹¹Ibid., 109-112. It is worth noting that Pablo paid for his own prison and designed it to meet his specifications. He was allowed contact with the outside world through visitors and phone calls which were not monitored. Prison guaranteed Pablo protection from his enemies outside the government.

¹²Bowden, 28-29. Pablo would fund various things for the Catholic Church such as paying for new churches and schools being built.

¹³U.S. Congress, Senate, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics, and Terrorism, Committee on Foreign Relations; and the Caucus on International Narcotics Control, <http://www.gao.gov/products/NSIAD-91-296> (accessed 5 April 2010).

¹⁴Ibid. The military was allocated 65 million of those dollars.

¹⁵The President of the United States, "George Bush: Statement on Signing the International Narcotics Control Act of 1989," <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=17942> (accessed 5 April 2010); Library of Congress, "Bill Summary and Status, 101st Congress (1989-1990) HR 3611, CRS Summary," <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d101:HR03611:@@@D&summ2=m&> (accessed 5 April 2010).

¹⁶Library of Congress, "Bill Summary and Status, 101st Congress (1989-1990) HR 3611, CRS Summary," <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d101:HR03611:@@@D&summ2=m&> (accessed 5 April 2010). The exact text is: "Amends the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to authorize the President to transfer excess defense articles to any country: (1) which is a major illicit drug producing country in Latin American and the Caribbean with a democratic government; and (2) whose armed forces do not engage in human rights violations. Requires such countries to ensure that such articles will be used only in support of anti-narcotics activities. Limits the aggregate value of articles to be transferred to a country in any fiscal year. Permits such transfers only if: (1) the articles are drawn from existing Department of Defense (DOD) stocks; (2) funds available to DOD for the procurement of defense equipment are not expended in connection with such transfers; and (3) the President determines that such transfers will not have an adverse impact on the military readiness of the United States. Permits such transfers without cost to the recipient country. Requires the President to notify specified congressional committees prior to transferring such articles."

¹⁷U.S. Congress, Senate, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics, and Terrorism, Committee on Foreign Relations; Bowden, 264-268.

¹⁸“CNN Presents: Killing Pablo,” Transcripts, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0305/25/cp.00.html> (accessed 22 May 2010).

¹⁹Bowden, 72.

²⁰U.S. Congress, Senate, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics, and Terrorism, Committee on Foreign Relations.

²¹Kevin Jack Riley, “The Implications of Colombian Drug Industry and Death Squad Political Violence for U.S. Counternarcotics Policy,” 1993, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/notes/2009/N3605.pdf> (accessed 3 February 2010).

²²U.S. Congress, Senate, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics, and Terrorism, Committee on Foreign Relations.

²³Bowden, 65.

²⁴U.S. Congress, Senate, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics, and Terrorism, Committee on Foreign.

²⁵ “How Cocaine Is Made, Manufacturing Cocaine,” <http://www.a1b2c3.com/drugs/coc08.htm> (accessed 15 April 2010).

²⁶U.S. Congress, Senate, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, Narcotics, and Terrorism, Committee on Foreign Relations.

²⁷Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 77.

²⁸U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Drug Control: U.S. Supported Efforts in Colombia and Bolivia,” <http://www.gao.gov/products/NSIAD-89-24> (accessed 5 April 2010).

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Raphael Perl, “United States Andean Drug Policy: Background and Issues for Decisionmakers,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 17.

³²*Ibid.*, 34; U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Drug Control: U.S. Supported Efforts in Colombia and Bolivia.”

³³U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Drug Control: U.S. Supported Efforts in Colombia and Bolivia,”

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Fuss, *Sea of Grass*, 226.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The period of 1970 through 1990 represented a period when the United States and her allies stood up to the drug cartels and severely limited their ability to get their products to the United States from the sea. The national leaders of the governments for many of the countries in North and South America finally grew tired of the toll the illicit drug trade was taking on their countries. Once the governments of the countries recognized the scope of the negative impact of the drug trade upon their populace and economy, they mobilized their forces, under the leadership and with the substantial resources of the US, to fight a sometime coordinated effort against the drugs coming into their countries.

From the earliest stages of the drug war, the US Coast Guard carried the burden of stopping the flow of drugs at sea, while the Customs Service and the Border Patrol attempted to do the same for the overland routes. The Coast Guard was already well versed in attempting to stop smugglers at sea, having done so since the 1920s, when it intercepted shipments of alcohol to the US in violation of the 18th Amendment.¹ The other two government organizations were not originally equipped to perform smuggling interdiction missions, but they adapted their equipment and tactics to fulfill their mission. The US government failed to realize the magnitude of illicit drug shipments into the country until the Coast Guard started to intercept smugglers at sea. As the Coast Guard revealed the unexpectedly high volume of drug flow into the country, the US took appropriate steps to augment the Coast Guard's efforts with assistance with Department of Defense resources. Other countries also pledged their own contributions, and once the

combined effort was in place, it was very successful at stemming the flow of drugs into the US.

The evidence presented offers several conclusions that can be drawn from the events of the drug war. These conclusions are presented in priority as assessed by the author. First, the policy that became the War on Drugs was a necessity because the drugs being smuggled into the US were illegal and personnel crossing the border in support of the drug trade were a threat to national security. By recognizing the threat to national security, the use of the military to fight the illegal drug trade was consistent with both domestic and international law.

Narcotics laws were nothing new to America at the start of the 1970s. The first legal efforts to stop the use of drugs came about as a result of the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937.² While this act only called for a minor monetary fine, it was the first legislation in which punitive measures were associated with drug possession or illegal use. This act remained in place until replaced by the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970.³ This new legislation placed drugs into five classes (or schedules) based on whether they were: “intended for human consumption . . . structurally substantially similar to a schedule I or schedule II substance, . . . pharmacologically substantially similar to a schedule I or schedule II substance, or . . . represented as being similar to a schedule I or schedule II substance and . . . not an approved medication in the United States.”⁴ Title II of the Act is known as the Controlled Substances Act, which made manufacturing, importing, possessing, using, and distributing certain types of drugs illegal.⁵ Upon signing the bill into law, President Nixon remarked, “It provides for jurisdiction that we have not previously had. The jurisdiction of the Attorney General will

go far beyond, for example, heroin. It will cover the new types of drugs, the barbiturates and the amphetamines that have become so common and that are even more dangerous because of their use. And also it provides a very forward-looking program in the field of drug addiction.”⁶ He also remarked, “And therefore, I hope that at the time the Federal Government is moving, as we are moving very strongly in this field, that the whole Nation will join with us in a program to stop the rise in the use of drugs and thereby help to stop the rise in crime; and also save the lives of hundreds of thousands of our young people who otherwise would become hooked on drugs and be physically, mentally, and morally destroyed.”⁷

By passing the Controlled Substances Act, the US effectively declared certain drugs illegal to possess, use, or sell. This federal law formed the basis for the War on Drugs and led to involvement from government organizations such as the Coast Guard and Department of Defense. Had there not been the public outcry for government intervention in the growing epidemic of recreational drug use, this law would have never been ratified, or it might have carried less severe penalties. With this law in effect, the US also had a standardized penalty and punishment system for those who were found guilty of violating the law.⁸

Additionally, the Controlled Substances Act paved the way for the Department of Defense to get involved in the War on Drugs. When the DoD Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Officials directive was passed in 1982 (cancelled and replaced in 1986) and then amended in 1989, it authorized the Department of Defense to assist Civilian Law Enforcement agencies as required.⁹ The ability of the military to participate in the War on Drugs was contested in 1983, but as was shown earlier in the paper it was

allowed under the amended *Posse Comitatus* Act, which enabled the military to provide equipment and personnel to support law enforcement agency efforts to stop the flow of drugs.

The final piece of legislation that legitimized the War on Drugs was the passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988. For the first time the drug laws were expanded to ensure that there was a penalty system in place for not only the distribution of drugs, but also for the use of drugs. The most significant effect of the law was the creation of the Office of National Drug Control Policy in the Executive Office of the President.¹⁰ This new office ensured that there was high-level federal participation in the program, which would facilitate coordination and focus of efforts among all the agencies involved in the War on Drugs.

The second conclusion finds that the American public played a significant role in causing the government to take more decisive action. This in turn led to the military's entry into the War on Drugs. Without public support, the military would not have been able to assist the other agencies in the fight. The American public was slow to catch on to the link between crime and drugs, which was probably a result of attitudes in the 1960s and 1970s that drugs were no different than alcohol or tobacco. Numerous campaigns sprung up in the 1970s to legalize all drugs along with the philosophy that legalizing drugs would free the government to do other things rather than waste time fighting a problem that most Americans did not consider to be a threat.

In the early 1980s, as cocaine became more popular, the link between drugs and crime was unmistakable. Addicts were turning to crime in order to fund their habit, or in the case of the cartels, they were committing crimes in order to increase their power.

Local Police Departments were not able to keep up with the rise in drug-related crime and the public demanded action out of their government. To that end, the President authorized the military to assume a more active role in the drug wars. With the public's support, the President signed off on a modification of the *Posse Comitatus* Act which would allow the military to assist the various federal agencies trying to shut down the drug trade. In order to ensure that the military was properly employed, armed forces personnel supporting the War on Drugs had to have members of law enforcement organizations physically present with them in order for those members to make the actual arrests.

With the military involved, the public was able to see the large seizures made both at sea and on land. The amount of drugs collected through these seizures was not enough to satisfy some members of the government who complained about the additional costs that were being incurred as a result of the military's participation. There were numerous reports from the General Accounting Office that questioned the allocation of funds and what the military was doing with them.¹¹ However, it would have been impossible for the military to provide the level of support it did without the level of funding it received. A large portion of the funds went directly to operations and maintenance, which allowed the ships and aircraft to remain in a material condition to support the drug interdiction efforts.¹²

Third, this study finds that the gains and successes of the War on Drugs from 1981 through 1990 would not have been possible without the assistance, both direct and indirect, of the military. The Coast Guard was originally tasked to lead the crusade against the flow of drugs into the US from the sea and the Customs and Border Patrol

were to attack of overland shipments. At the time, this level of effort appeared sufficient to rectify the problem, since the amount of drugs being shipped into the United States was unknown. Of the drugs that were coming in, the majority arrived using overland routes in the early 1970s. Attitudes of the time were that there was not a sufficient amount of drugs entering the country to warrant an increase in existing efforts to stop them.¹³

As has been shown, this was not the case and the drug trade measured in the millions of dollars before the end of the 1970s, and the billions of dollars in the 1980s. The smugglers recognized that a drug flow of this magnitude required a different technique. They looked to the ocean and the various sizes and types of ships that sailed it, and embraced the sea as a means of getting their product safely into the US. Given the actual numbers of ships that were participating in the drug trade, this soon proved to be more than the Coast Guard could handle while performing its other missions.

The US Military, after it gained approval from the government to participate, moved into this capability void. With this came the US military's substantial capability to bring its experience and equipment to bear--provided it did not violate the *Posse Comitatus* Act. The military could assist the Coast Guard with the Detection and Monitoring (D&M) of all contacts approaching the US and could share this information with Coast Guard vessels through various data and voice links. These measures helped the Coast Guard to its own position assets more judiciously to conduct intercepts of the vessels or aircraft outside of US territory.

The participation of the US Navy, in particular, forced the drug smugglers to adopt new methods to avoid contact. With the introduction of Navy vessels to common

drug transit routes, the smugglers were forced to go further out to sea and take longer trips in an attempt to avoid detection. Before the change in the Navy's legal status, the smugglers could sail within sight of Navy ships without worry since they knew that the Navy ships could not search or seize them on the high seas. Even if the Navy informed the Coast Guard of the presence of smugglers, drug traffickers knew that they would have plenty of time to escape since the Navy ships were not likely to pursue them. It was not until after 1982 that Navy ships could stop smugglers at sea with enough personnel available and trained to board them and take them into custody.

Air Force capabilities and resources also presented a problem for the drug smugglers. The Air Force sent its aircraft over the ocean to search for suspicious ships and aircraft, and then relayed that information to the local Coast Guard district. Additionally, the Air Force also assisted the Coast Guard in intercepting aircraft heading to the United States with suspected drugs onboard. The Air Force had more than enough assets to monitor the aircraft and provide information as to where they landed and could remain on scene until the DEA or Customs could send their forces to perform the arrest and confiscation.

Thanks to the participation of the Navy and Air Force, the confiscations of illegal drugs transported at sea went up dramatically. The additional assets provided by the military allowed the Coast Guard to operate in areas where it could not before. The Navy also had the speed to keep up with some of the faster smuggling ships, and the firepower to deal with some of the larger ships.

As Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard drug interdiction operations at sea expanded, the Army and Marine Corps were also doing their part to assist in the War on

Drugs. Both services trained and operated with various Latin American countries' police and military forces ashore. These forces not only trained the Latin Americans in how to use the US provided equipment, but they also trained the Latin American forces in tactics that would enable them to take on the cartels and win. In certain cases, the American soldiers even provided intelligence to the local forces who employed it to good effect, bringing cartel leaders to justice, most notably Pablo Escobar.

The US Military also gained valuable experience from these operations; experience that it could use in its other more conventional maritime missions. The War on Drugs allowed the military to hone its skills against an adversary that employed similar tactics to the Soviet Navy. With the active participation of the Cuban government in the drug trade, it is not difficult to assume Cuban assistance to the drug smugglers in the form of tactical information as to how best to defeat the US forces trying to stop them.¹⁴ The Cubans went so far as to send their own ships out to investigate proposed shipping routes for the smugglers before they departed from Cuba.¹⁵ The Cubans doubtlessly provided the smugglers with information about the specifics of US detection equipment and the best ways to defeat them.

The US military had to learn how to counter the drug smugglers' efforts at subterfuge, and to do so they developed new technologies and tactics. The military used these newly developed technologies and tactics against the smugglers. It also used them against the Soviet Navy. They learned to employ covert methods to track the smugglers ships--methods that could be used to prevent detection by Soviet ships and aircraft.

The study suggests that the success of the US would not have been possible without the support and efforts of the Latin American countries involved in the War on

Drugs. Despite the US's multi-service approach to fighting the War on Drugs, the Latin American countries' support was crucial in ensuring success. The Latin American countries bravely took a stand against the cartels that were using their countries to manufacture drugs and ship to the US. The governments of the Latin American countries had to fight against the popular support that the cartels had cultivated in their countries. After the US stepped in and started to provide the Latin American countries with the financial resources that these countries were lacking, the governments were able to wean their populace's dependence on the cartels while simultaneously educating their people on the true harmful nature of the cartels' operations.

The Latin American countries also took the fight directly to the cartels with the money and equipment that they received from the US. The government forces finally had the ability to attack the drug labs and large staging areas, which they could not before due to a lack of assets or properly trained forces. With American assistance, they had the tools and the training to take on the cartels directly. The Americans also gave the Latin American governments the resources to propose alternative crops to the farmers in the production areas.

Finally, the evidence suggests that the efforts the US expended were justified by the operational results--a virtual shutdown of overwater transport of drugs by 1990. The period from 1970 through 1990 saw the US, and the rest of the world at large, wake up to the perils of drugs. The US effort changed in size and scope as the knowledge of these dangers became apparent to the public. The US Military answered the call, employing dozens of ships and aircraft to interdict the flow of drugs to the US, as well as sending large numbers of military advisors to Latin American countries to assist their efforts in

stopping the drug trade from going north. The US spent hundreds of millions of defense dollars to support the War on Drugs, and those expenditures, on balance, seemed justified in 1990. The US seized hundreds of thousands of tons of narcotics at sea and on land.

Areas for Continued Analysis and Research

The limitations placed on the members of the military because of the *Posse Comitatus* Act severely constrained the efforts of the US Navy in attempting to stop the flow of drugs north. More research is required into the impact of this Act on execution by properly trained members of the Navy to carry out law enforcement duties, specifically for the purposes of counter-narcotics interdiction, in international waters. Although it is beyond the scale of this paper to recommend legislative efforts by Congress, there is a need for the Judge Advocates General (JAG) in the services to further research court decisions both domestically and internationally in order to determine if policy is being unduly constrained by overzealous application of the principle of *Posse Comitatus*. As of the date of this study, in 2010, the Navy is required to have Coast Guard LEDETS onboard in order to carry out searches, seizures, and to arrest anyone found to be transporting drugs. Further research is also needed along the lines of a cost benefit analysis into the overall effort. Such research should include correlation with statistics that address drug use during the period studied.

The study also suggests that further investigation into the intelligence sources and architectures used in the War on Drugs is warranted. The author did not go into detail about these sources in keeping with the unclassified nature of this paper. Intelligence assets provided all-source estimates on the amount of drugs that were being shipped, thus giving the anti-drug forces a baseline metric for how successful their operations were.

To understand the current efforts against drug trafficking, one can look into the efforts of the Joint Interagency Task Force - South, which took overall control of the efforts in 1999. It built upon the foundations that discussed during the course of this thesis to become a model of joint, interagency, and multi-national cooperation. There are numerous reports published by the GAO which lay out specifics as to the amount of money that was spent during the War on Drugs. Further research using these reports is encouraged to understand the debates that were occurring at the Federal level and how much to set aside for counter-drug efforts versus education and prevention programs.

Final Thoughts

Ultimately, the US military effort in support of the War on Drugs was not maintained after the end of the Cold War--due to defense cuts and force reductions. In some sense the Drug War was a casualty of the “peace dividend.” Without a peer adversary, the US was not willing to spend money on defense dollars and allowed other programs to take priority. For a time the US had virtually taken away the ability for the cartels to transport drugs over the sea and seriously degraded their ability to transport it over land. It was a tactical victory for the US and her allies, and something that ensuing generations have tried to achieve with varied results. Whether or not the US chooses to ever again mobilize the level of effort against the drug war as during the 1970s and 1980s will depend on the support of the American people and the will of the administrations to put an end to the organizations that want to sell the drugs. Posterity owes a debt of gratitude to the people who fought, and to those who still continue to do so, against the cartels, and tried to deny them the ability to transport drugs to the US.

¹U.S. Coast Guard, “Drug Interdiction (CG-5313),” http://uscg.mil/hq/cg5/cg531/drug_interdiction.asp (accessed 10 May 2010).

²Shaffer Library of Drug Policy, “The Marihuana Tax Act of 1937,” <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/hemp/taxact/mjtaxact.htm> (accessed 27 April 2010). The Tax Act actually taxed anyone who was in possession of cannabis, hemp, or marijuana for commercial purposes. The actual tax at the time was one dollar, but this was the start of penalizing people for having drugs. The word marijuana was spelled with an h instead of a j at the time.

³U.S. Department of Justice, “Title 21 US Code Section 801, Congressional Findings and Declarations: Controlled Substances,” <http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/21cfr/21usc/801.htm> (accessed 27 April 2010).

⁴U.S. Department of Justice, “Lists of: Scheduling Actions Controlled Substances Regulated Chemicals,” November 2009, <http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/schedules/orangebook/orangebook.pdf> (accessed 27 April 2010). A current listing of all controlled substances and their classification.

⁵Cornell University Law School, “§ 801. Congressional findings and declarations: controlled substances,” <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/21/801.html> (accessed 27 April 2010).

⁶President of the United States, “Richard Nixon: 389 - Remarks on Signing the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970,” <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2767> (accessed 27 April 2010).

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, “Chapter 1, The Controlled Substance Act,” <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/abuse/1-csa.htm#Penalties> (accessed 27 April 2010). These penalties have been continually adjusted by subsequent laws with stiffer penalties and jail time.

⁹Department of Defense, DoD Directive 5525.05, *DoD Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Officials*, 15 January 1986; Incorporating Change 1 - December 20, 1989, <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/552505p.pdf> (accessed 28 April 2010). The 1989 amendment allows for direct assistance to any foreign government that requests it provided the Secretary of Defense approves it.

¹⁰Library of Congress, “Bill Summary and Status, 100th Congress (1987-1987) HR 5200, CRS Summary,” <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d100:HR05210:@@@D&summ2=m&> (accessed 29 April 2010).

¹¹U.S. Congress, House, “Statement before the Committee on Government Operations, Subcommittee on Legislation and National Security, and Government

Information, Justice and Agriculture,” <http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat13/139795.pdf> (accessed 2 May 2010).

¹²Ibid.

¹³William Schulz, “The Smugglers of Misery,” *Readers Digest*, April 1970, 45-54. Schulz estimated that only 300 tons of drugs entered the country in 1969 and expected a 500 percent increase in just three years.

¹⁴PBS, “Frontline: Drug Wars: Archive: Cuba and Cocaine,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/archive/cubaandcocaine.html> (accessed 1 May 2010).

¹⁵Ibid.

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