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John C. Trainor

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Coping with the Drug Runners at Sea

Captain John C. Trainor, U.S. Coast Guard

For the third time in our century, the Navy and Coast Guard are cooperating in an interdiction effort at sea. During Prohibition, the Coast Guard attempted to stifle the efforts of the "rum-runners." To help out, the Navy loaned the Coast Guard more than a score of destroyers from its large fleet of idle warships. During the Vietnam war, Coast Guard cutters and patrol boats played a major role in the Navy's Operation Market Time off the South Vietnamese coast, an apparently successful effort to frustrate enemy shipments of munitions to the Vietcong. Now, in our current struggle to halt the seaborne movement of marijuana and cocaine into the United States, the Navy's ships and aircraft are helping the Coast Guard to detect and capture suspected drug runners in the Caribbean.

Before 1973, the Coast Guard had seized only six drug-running boats. Then, in 1974, the Coast Guard and Drug Enforcement Administration conducted a joint operation called "Buccaneer." This operation alone led to the seizure of 7 vessels and over 10 tons of marijuana. It provided concrete evidence that marijuana was being smuggled into the United States by sea, mainly from Jamaica and Mexico into southern Florida, and substantiated the national perception that drugs were flooding into the country.

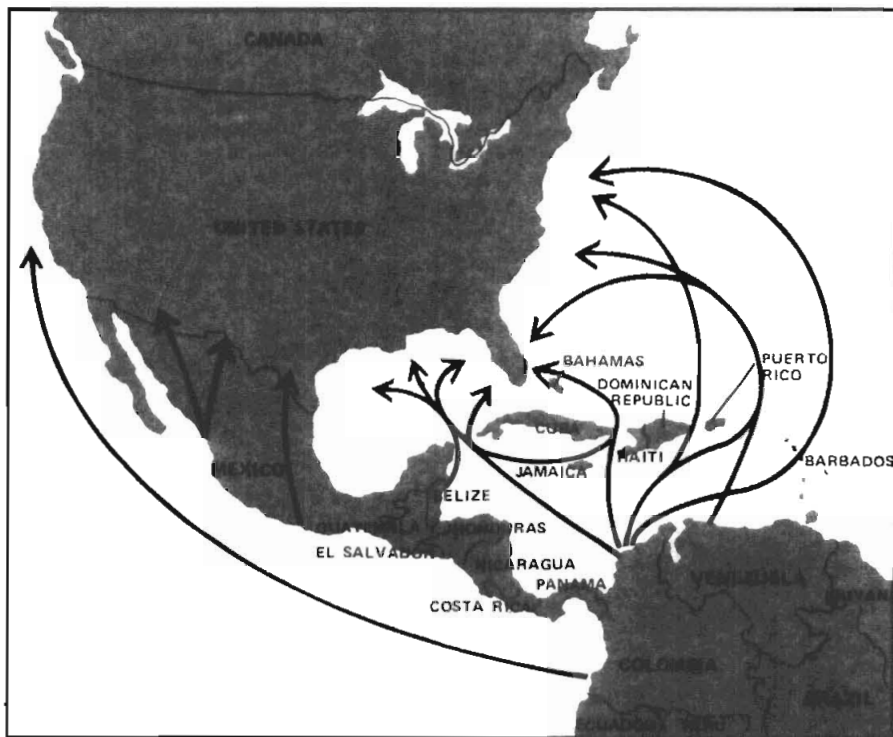
With this awareness, the Coast Guard stepped up its efforts, and between 1973 and 1978 seized 189 vessels and over 250 tons of marijuana. Most of these captured smugglers were pleasure craft registered in the United States and operated by U.S. citizens.

During this time, steps were taken by the governments of Jamaica and Mexico to cut the export of marijuana from their countries. Jamaican officials cracked down on the growing and shipping of marijuana, and Mexico started a marijuana crop chemical eradication program. Their actions were so successful that soon they gave way to Colombia as the major source country for marijuana.

Since the distance from Colombia to the United States is much greater than that from either Jamaica or Mexico, small island freighters and converted fishing vessels, generally 60 to 200 feet in length, came to be preferred over

Captain Trainor is a graduate of the Naval War College and recently commanded the Coast Guard cutter *Boutelle*. He is currently serving as Chief of the Operational

Marijuana Smuggling Routes



Source: This and following map courtesy of Drug Enforcement Administration, *Quarterly Intelligence Trends*.

the small pleasure vessels. These “motherships,” as they became known, would sail from the northern coast of Colombia, or some other Caribbean area, and head northward through the Yucatán Channel, or the Windward, Mona or Anegada Passes. The motherships could carry 5 to 50 tons of marijuana, which does not appear to be much, but the cargo is light, bulky and of high value—a single tightly packed bale of about 6 cubic feet weighs 60 pounds and has a street value of nearly \$60,000. If they were successful in running past the scanty Coast Guard forces in these natural chokepoints, they would continue on to their rendezvous with contact boats, then off-load and return south. Most contact boats were small pleasure craft that had the speed and shallow draft to dart into small coastal inlets, but some fishing vessels also did the work.

These contact boats were and are usually registered in the United States and crewed by U.S. citizens. The Coast Guard has jurisdiction over them, both on the high seas and in all navigable waters of the United States, by the authority granted in P.L. 14 USC 89. This law was most recently revised and

expanded in 1949, but its origins can be traced back to the original Congress. In its present form, the law recognizes the inherent difficulty of conducting law enforcement at sea, and grants the Coast Guard broad authority beyond that normally acceptable for shoreside law enforcement. This authority includes the right to search, seize, and arrest, based solely on probable cause, without requiring a warrant.

Some motherships, however, were flying a foreign flag, and were crewed by mixed nationalities, mainly Colombians. Under international law, the flag state retains jurisdiction over their vessels on the high seas. To board, search, and seize these vessels without the consent of the master requires particular consent of the flag state.

In order to approach the flag state for consent to board a suspect vessel, the Coast Guard must first conduct a conference call with the Departments of State and Justice to explain the circumstances of the case. Such consultation is required—authorized by Presidential Directive NSC-27/PD-27—for any nonmilitary incidents which could adversely affect the conduct of foreign relations. If all parties agree that there is sufficient cause to board the foreign ship and there are no overriding conditions to prevent it, the State Department will contact the claimed flag state through the U.S. Embassy and ask for a registry check. If the check confirms the claimed registry, then the United States will request permission to board the vessel from the flag state. If the flag state consents to the contemplated action and the Commandant of the Coast Guard finds all the facts in order, he will issue a “statement of no objection” for the law enforcement personnel to proceed with the boarding. Should contraband be found, the crew is arrested and the vessel seized under U.S. law or on behalf of the foreign government.

This process is not necessary for a U.S. flag vessel, nor for foreign vessels in U.S. customs waters (that is, within 12 miles of the beach), nor for those vessels considered to be stateless—because they do not claim a state, claim more than one state, or the claimed flag state refutes their claim of registry; or for British vessels in certain waters because of a special arrangement made with that government. In some circumstances, other nations, notably the Bahamas and Panama, allow the Coast Guard to board U.S. or third country vessels in their territorial seas if the Bahamian or Panamanian law enforcement representative riding on the Coast Guard cutter agrees. These arrangements help to speed the interdiction process which can take a day or more if the flag state is unable to rapidly confirm registration of a vessel.

If authority over the foreign vessel is established but the vessel refuses to stop and be boarded, the PD-27 procedure is repeated to obtain permission to fire warning shots and disabling fire into the fleeing vessel. With or without the procedure, the escalation of the exercise of authority to the point of firing at a vessel is very deliberate. Before permission to fire is granted, all other means to make the suspect stop must prove futile. If the suspect vessel persists

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even after warning shots are laid across the bow, then the cutter may fire into the screws, rudder, fuel tanks, or engine room to neutralize the vessel in order to enable the cutter crew to board.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the magnitude of illegal drugs being imported into the United States by land, sea, and air was apparent. As the Nation's seagoing law enforcement agency, the Coast Guard is the primary federal agency tasked with keeping out seaborne drugs. With its slender forces, the Coast Guard developed a defensive strategy to carry out the mission of reducing the flow of illicit drugs entering the United States by sea. This strategy rested on the interdiction of "drug" ships at chokepoints, in the mass of legitimate traffic and in the arrival zones as the motherships were off-loading to contact boats.

In keeping with this strategy, the Coast Guard focused its small number of east coast high and medium endurance cutters on the principal chokepoints. The 378- and 210-foot cutters can carry helicopters to extend their observation and detection range, but many cutters only have surface search radar for tactical intelligence. Operating from fields as distant from each other as Cape Cod and Puerto Rico, long-range search aircraft, particularly C-130s, flew surveillance missions in support of the cutters, using "lookout" lists based on intelligence derived from arrested crewmen, informants, or supply country sources. In the arrival zones, other Coast Guard patrol boats, as well as Customs Service forces, patrolled likely rendezvous spots (islands, coves, and shallows provide protection from both weather and easy detection) to interdict the contact boats or motherships in the final act of smuggling contraband into the United States. Seized seaborne contraband was nearly all marijuana, with only small amounts of cocaine or other drugs being captured. Whatever their size and nature, the Coast Guard's ships and aircraft share one characteristic: they were, and are, too few. However, the new 270- and 110-foot cutters are providing some relief, as are the Navy's ships and aircraft.

On the west coast, vessels heading from Colombia transit a much longer route to the United States, but they are not vulnerable to restrictive chokepoints. Thus, they can hug the coasts of Central American countries, or head out to sea in an effort to sweep the flank of Coast Guard interdicting forces. There is also an Asian threat of Thailand marijuana called Thai Sticks. This potent, expensive drug is shipped from the Gulf of Thailand along great circle routes to west coast ports. By 1982, the Coast Guard had seized nearly 20 tons of this marijuana strain. Let me illustrate: the smugglers chartered the 170-foot offshore exploration vessel *Allison*. When that ship sailed, she headed toward Asia, picked up two containers full of Thai Sticks, and steered a course back to the United States. She put into Seward, Alaska where the containers were off-loaded and then carried to Seattle, unwittingly, by a

commercial ship. It was at the pier in Seattle that the goods were seized. The *Allison* was subsequently seized at the dock in Seward.

The Caribbean transit and arrival strategy was pursued with some success. In the peak interdiction years of 1981 and 1982, the Coast Guard seized a total of over 3,500 tons of marijuana, 379 ships, and arrested 1,987 crewmen. Despite all the seizures, there was still an abundance of marijuana available on U.S. streets. Although no import statistics were available, the prevalence of marijuana and cocaine in our society, at prices low enough to entice youths, became a national concern. The consensus of Congress and the general public was that the Coast Guard was too small to do the whole maritime drug interdiction job by itself.

Thus, in the Defense Authorization Act of 1982, Congress clarified and expanded the role of the other military services in combating drug trafficking. In this law, Congress relaxed certain aspects of "Posse Comitatus," a law passed during the Reconstruction Era after the Civil War, precluding military forces other than the Coast Guard from being used in a general law enforcement role upon civilians. With this change in law, these services can employ their advanced strategic intelligence assets, conduct routine tactical intelligence patrols, and provide men and equipment in support of the Coast Guard's drug law enforcement mission. One of the most significant changes sanctioned by this act was to allow Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDets) to ride Navy ships and exercise Coast Guard authority from those ships.

These 4-6 man detachments operate from Navy ships in drug trafficking areas on both the east and west coasts. If they want to board a suspected smuggler, the ship hoists the Coast Guard ensign indicating that she is conducting Coast Guard business. Then the Coast Guardsmen board the suspect ship from a Navy boarding craft. This team has the same authority as any other Coast Guard boarding party, including exercise of the PD-27 process, to board foreign flag vessels. The Navy ship provides full support for the detachment, including gunfire to stop a vessel or to protect the boarding party. At first, only those ships that were conveniently transiting trafficking areas were used as LEDet platforms. Although there were few ships involved, and some of those in a rapid transit between ports, they had some successes such as in 1982 when the U.S.S. *Mississippi* (CGN-40) seized a drug-runner which yielded 25 tons of marijuana, and resulted in 11 arrests.

The success of the *Mississippi* and others encouraged Coast Guard officials to plan for operations where Navy ships could be dedicated to drug interdiction for an extended period. During such periods, though the Coast Guard has on-scene tactical control, the Navy retains operational control of its ships. To gain commitment of these forces, the Coast Guard turned to the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS), headed by the Vice President. NNBIS was created in 1983 to coordinate the efforts of law

enforcement agencies—federal, state and local—against drug trafficking so as to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of drug interdiction efforts. Specifically, it was to facilitate the contributions of DOD forces, and increase national intelligence support.

With NNBIS assisting to obtain DOD resources, a new strategy was developed. This maritime strategy was the basis for Operation Wagonwheel. Operation Wagonwheel was the nucleus of an overall effort planned for the 1984 fall harvest season. Since Coast Guard forces could now be augmented with U.S. Navy ships, this maritime strategy expanded from defensive efforts in the transit and arrival zones to offensive efforts in the departure zones, especially around Colombia's Guajira Peninsula. Besides Coast Guard cutters, these patrols included frigates, destroyers, hydrofoil missile boats, and even oilers. Never entering territorial waters, the patrolling ships would be on station for 2 or 3 weeks at a time. Ships from the various Caribbean navies often cooperated, generally by working inside their territorial waters. The smugglers, thrown off guard by interdictions in what had previously been safe waters, began to stockpile marijuana ashore in an effort to wait out the U.S. forces. However, Colombia was also taking a strong law enforcement stance. The political climate in that country was shocked into action by the brutal murder of the Colombian Justice Minister, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, on 30 April 1984. After this drug related killing, Colombian officials agreed to provide shipriders on U.S. vessels and make in-country sweeps during Wagonwheel. The smugglers were caught in the pincer action ashore and afloat by U.S. and local forces. In this episode the maritime forces seized 37 vessels with 169 tons of marijuana, while ashore Colombian ground forces destroyed another 300 tons.

Following this success the Department of Defense provided additional forces on a year-round basis as long as it did not interfere with defense needs. Air Force E-3s, and Navy E-2Cs and P-3Cs flew long-range surveillance flights. The Army contributed Blackhawk helicopters and communications equipment, and the Marines provided OV-10s. Training, logistics, radar sites, and towing capabilities were all put to use in a joint effort against smugglers. These efforts proved effective. To cite just one recent case, on 2 December 1986, a U.S. Navy P-3 sighted the 60-foot motor vessel *Delfin* and notified the Coast Guard cutter *Gallatin*. The *Gallatin* intercepted the vessel 45 miles north of Colombia's Guajira Peninsula. The *Delfin* made no claim of registry. After she was determined to be stateless, the *Gallatin* crew boarded her, and subsequently seized her when over 8.5 tons of marijuana were found. Furthermore, regular LEDet patrols were started on U.S. Navy *Pegasus*-class hydrofoils. This operation alone proved to be highly successful, resulting in 51 arrests and the seizure of 95.5 tons of marijuana.

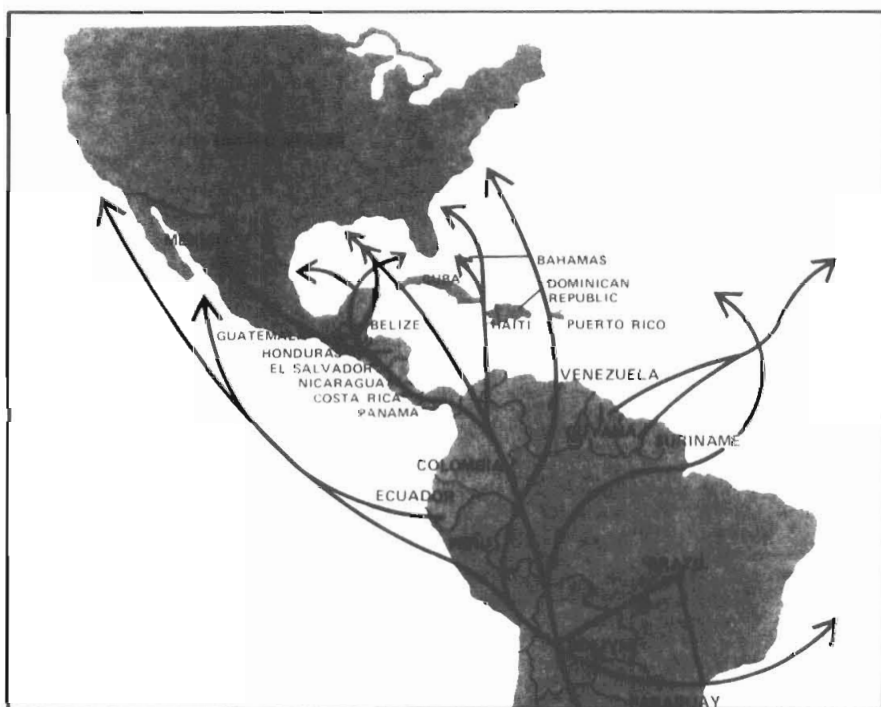
In the last couple of years the Coast Guard has begun to introduce new ships, boats, and aircraft into the struggle. These include the 270-foot medium

endurance cutters which have started regular patrols, a medium-range surveillance aircraft, the Falcon HU-25, and a new extended-range shipboard helicopter, the HH-65. Additionally, fast new 110-foot patrol boats have begun to sail not only in the arrival zones but deep in the eastern end of the Caribbean. Furthermore, new sensors, such as sea-based aerostats—balloon-mounted radar: towed by cutters—also contributed to the detection phase of drug interdiction.

Other, more extensive operations were planned. To evaluate the planning and fully exploit the additional resources, interdiction war games were played at the Naval War College Gaming Center. These games provided scenarios to test strategies and tactics on adversaries before committing expensive resources. Many new players were educated by the play which featured an expert panel of advisors. Intelligence, sensors, and resource constraints all contributed to the learning process. Players from a variety of air and surface units became acquainted with one another and gained appreciation for the advantages and limitations of each other's equipment. The dividends from these gaming efforts have been realized in the Caribbean.

The consolidated efforts of the interdicting forces have caused the traffickers to change their habits. No longer can they boldly stack bales of marijuana on deck: they must hide it in concealed compartments; they must

Cocaine Smuggling Routes



alter their routes through the longer Caribbean eastern passes or tranship the drugs through Mexico; they must invest in counterintelligence to find our forces; and they must use air transport to go over our ships. In addition, more Caribbean nations are now actively engaged in drug law enforcement programs of their own, as well as eradication projects. Venezuela, Panama, the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Haiti to name just a few, are actively engaged in seaborne efforts. Similarly, Colombia, Mexico, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic have made transits riskier for smugglers. Both Honduras and the Dominican Republic have recently shot down drug trafficking aircraft that penetrated their air space and refused to land.

Just as the seaborne marijuana trafficking yielded to joint and combined interdiction efforts, the American public began to turn to cocaine as the drug of choice. This dramatically came to the public's attention with the death, in mid-1986, of Len Bias, a great basketball player from the University of Maryland. In the aftermath of Bias' death, and with the 1986 elections coming up, Congress prepared the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act. This act not only provided new resources for the national strategy implementation and called on the Department of Defense to contribute still more to the interdiction effort, but it also brought the Coast Guard into the air interdiction mission, where cocaine is the principal illicit cargo.

Until this legislation, Customs Service had been the sole agency tasked with stopping airborne traffickers. To do this, Customs has four P-3As with sensors, a modest fleet of interceptor/tracker airplanes, and some Blackhawk helicopters on loan from the Army. But Customs does not have the resources to man a 7-day, 24-hour operation. So cocaine, more compact and valuable than marijuana, is being flown into the United States in great quantities.

The maritime air interdiction mission is more complex than the surface one. First, there are no chokepoints, and the interceptors must detect an aircraft that has a wide-range of choices in altitude and speed. Where a suspect is detected, an interceptor must be vectored out to read the tail number and make a determination on the legitimacy of the flight. If the aircraft is evaluated as a possible drug carrier, it must be trailed to its final destination. (Sometimes there are intermediate destinations for refueling, if the flight is long and the aircraft small.) The interceptor may be relieved by a longer-range tracker aircraft if the pursuit is lengthy. At the destination, an air interdiction aircraft, usually a helicopter, delivers an arrest team to confiscate the drugs. To be effective, such an operation demands effective command, control, communications and intelligence (C³I).

The Bahamas is one geographic area where interdiction cooperation has generally worked well. Because this island nation affords hundreds of remote locations to either land a lightplane or make an airdrop to an awaiting boat, it has long been a smuggler's haven. By special arrangement with the Bahamian

Government, helicopter teams are staged at strategic locations to respond to interceptor requests for assistance. The helicopters are flown by Air Force, Army, Drug Enforcement Administration or Coast Guard pilots, and the teams are made up of U.S. Drug Enforcement agents and Royal Bahamian Defense Force personnel. They launch quickly to a landing or drop-site and make seizures and arrests before the drugs are transhipped.

Although in the past Navy E-2Cs and Air Force E-3s were flying some surveillance missions in the vicinity of airborne drug trafficking routes, it was soon recognized that surveillance in the detection phase was still a weak link. As a remedy, Congress directed that four Navy E-2Cs should be dedicated to this mission, with the provision that two each should be turned over to the Coast Guard and Customs Service. The Coast Guard's E-2Cs would be staged out of Norfolk and would work the maritime region. In this same legislation Congress funded sensors (radar and FLIR) and the necessary communications equivalent for eight Coast Guard HU-25 aircraft to act as interceptors and trackers. Congress also provided funds to add long-range airborne surveillance radars for retrofit to existing long-range Coast Guard aircraft.

For an interdiction to be effective, it must be coordinated through a C³I center. This center must receive and analyze intelligence so as to ensure that surveillance ships and aircraft are positioned in the most advantageous locations. A center must have tactical control to launch strip alert interceptors/trackers when alerted by detecting platforms. These interdicting forces must be in an alert status to make arrests and seizures. Therefore, the C³I center must be manned on a continuous basis, and should be under the command of the service most responsible for the operating area. The 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act provided funds for three such centers; the center for the southeast region will probably be in Florida.

Intelligence is vital to determine drug trafficking routes and methods, to pinpoint load-out areas, and to identify aircraft and vessels being loaded with drugs. Drug trafficking patterns change in response to law enforcement efforts. This dynamic interaction presents a challenge to intelligence agencies which must anticipate drug movement, thereby enabling enforcement agencies to adjust their strategies. This is no easy task since intelligence agencies must rely on foreign government agencies and are dealing with family-oriented trafficking organizations which are difficult to penetrate. Nevertheless, if we are to position our forces properly, enabling us to sort out the likely drug runners from legitimate traffic, tactical intelligence must continue to improve.

In April 1986, President Reagan signed a national security decision directive which stated that international drug trade is a threat to our national security because of its destabilizing effect on allies. The drug trade is added by a possible source of funds for Soviet intelligence services, and insurgent

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and terrorist groups.¹ The strategy is to work with cooperating governments to halt the production and flow of illicit narcotics, to reduce the ability to use drug trafficking to support terrorist activities, and to provide assistance to those governments willing to combat the threat. This directive should provide a further incentive for cooperative countries to join in maritime interdiction efforts.

The joint and combined maritime surface operations of the last few years have caused a significant decline in the amount of marijuana shipped by sea. This means Mexico has regained first place, ousting Colombia, as the largest source of marijuana smuggled into the United States.² Most of the Mexican drugs are transported across the land border. The decline of marijuana shipped by sea has been accompanied by a rise in cocaine traffic. For instance, the Coast Guard captured only 46 pounds of cocaine in 1983, but seized 10,334 pounds in 1986. Clearly, this increase is chiefly a response to demand from customers in our country. Complicating the interdiction of cocaine is the ease with which it can be hidden in vehicular compartments and the problem of jettison when the interdicting forces appear on-scene. Unlike marijuana, cocaine sinks, and cocaine on the ocean floor is better than cocaine on our streets.

In 1984, the National Narcotics Act established what is now the National Drug Policy Board to provide a focal point for coordinating national and international policies, strategies, and resources which affect the national strategy. The national strategy was addressed most recently in the *1987 National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy*.³ This strategy includes international cooperation in eradication, education and prevention to discourage drug use among children; detoxification and treatment of addicts; research to provide information to health care professionals; and drug law enforcement. Therefore, it is important that we recognize that drug law enforcement—which includes drug interdiction—is *a holding action until the other strategies become more effective*. The board seeks to balance supply reduction efforts with those of demand reduction until Americans no longer choose to abuse drugs. Until that happens, law enforcement agencies must stem the flow of both international and domestically produced drugs. Surface and air maritime interdiction, performed by joint and combined forces, is the cornerstone of the strategy to stop the international trafficking in illicit drugs headed for the United States. Still, in order to capture a few hundred smuggling craft annually, tens of thousands of vessels must be boarded by Coast Guardsmen.

With the passage of the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, the Coast Guard's strategy expanded to include interdiction of maritime air as well as seaborne drug trafficking. This was only natural. The Coast Guard has the air and surface resources, GI experience in maritime interdiction, and an

operational infrastructure, coupled with the capacity and flexibility to respond to all maritime areas. As the largest federal law enforcement agency involved in drug law enforcement, the Coast Guard is the key service to coordinate multiagency resources in the air and surface maritime environment.

So, for the foreseeable future, Coast Guardsmen in ships, both white and gray hulled, boats, and aircraft, in foul weather and fair, can expect to be hunting, and finding, drug-laden carriers both on and over the maritime area.

Notes

1. Joseph D. Douglass, Jr., and Jan Sejna, "International Narcotics Trafficking: The Soviet Connection," *Journal of Defense & Diplomacy*, December 1986, pp. 20-25.

2. "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics Matters, March 1987, p. 19.

3. *National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy*, National Drug Enforcement Policy Board, January 1987.

