

PREPARED STATEMENT  
OF  
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BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT INFORMATION,  
JUSTICE, AND AGRICULTURE

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am RADM Donald C. Thompson, Chief of Staff of the Coast Guard. It is a pleasure to appear before you today to provide an update on the Coast Guard's involvement in drug law enforcement.

First, I would like to briefly review some background on the nature of maritime drug trafficking, and at the same time present current trends that are being noted.

As you know, most maritime drug traffic destined for Florida, the Atlantic and Gulf Coast regions of the United States departs from South American or Caribbean staging areas. Marijuana from the Guajira Peninsula on the north coast of Colombia is the prime example. As seaborne smugglers proceed north, they normally pass through one of the four inter-island channels we call "choke points" enroute toward the Bahamas, Florida or the Gulf Coast. Some vessels attempt to avoid the increased law enforcement pressure off Florida by transiting the Eastern Caribbean and offloading further north along the Mid-Atlantic or the New England seacoasts. Evidence of this, however, has decreased in recent months. There has also been a substantial increase in drug smuggling on the West Coast, which could be a further reaction to increased enforcement pressure in the Caribbean. We have noted that as law enforcement pressure in the maritime region has increased, there has been a shift to other modes and methods of transportation. There has been a decided increase in airdrop activity, the use of hidden compartments (compartments incorporated into the design of a ship for the express purpose of hiding contraband) and attempts by smugglers to circumnavigate our interdiction resources through counterintelligence and the use of their own surveillance aircraft. We believe these tactics confirm the fact we are having a noticeable effect on maritime smuggling because they make smuggling more difficult and expensive for the trafficker. The operational efforts to stem the overall flow of drugs, therefore, have become increasingly dependent on the coordination of all law enforcement agencies' interdiction and intelligence gathering activities.

Analysis shows that while we must keep pressure on all facets of the maritime drug scenario, interdiction of "motherships", which deliver contraband to smaller, faster contact boats well off our coast, has the greatest potential for disrupting the maritime flow of drugs. In addition to removing other contraband, one mothership seizure may remove as much marijuana from the market as would 10-20 contact boat seizures closer to shore. Coast Guard drug interdiction operations have therefore continued to concentrate on these large motherships. In addition to large quantities of marijuana, large quantities of other drugs (primarily cocaine) have begun to be seized, a distinct shift in trafficking trends. Previously, we rarely seized these higher value, low volume, drugs because they are usually disposed of "over the side" prior to the at-sea boarding of the vessel. So far, this year we have seized over 5,000 pounds of cocaine, up from the 1,967 pounds seized in 1984, and well above the high of 46 pounds in previous years.

Effective maritime drug law enforcement requires rendering smuggling of narcotics substantially less profitable by achieving any combination of:

1. greatly increasing the seizure rate,
2. denying the use of traditional maritime trafficking routes, thus enhancing source country eradication and seizure efforts,
3. forcing the smugglers into using more vulnerable methods/routes in order to increase the chance of detection, and
4. forcing the smugglers into shipping smaller loads via aircraft or secret compartments in vessels.

As I have stated, the Coast Guard's drug interdiction strategy has been mainly directed toward intercepting motherships as they transit the Caribbean choke points, however there were major problems associated with this strategy. To effect this "choke point" strategy, the Coast Guard conducted continuous surface patrols and frequent surveillance flights over the waters of interest, and an intense program of boarding and inspecting vessels at sea. Major resources were concentrated in the choke points with emphasis on the Yucatan Channel between Mexico and Cuba and the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti. Cutters also patrolled elsewhere as available, such as the Bahamas, Eastern Passes of the Caribbean, and the Gulf and Atlantic and Pacific coastal areas. The amount of contraband seized remained fairly level, however, despite our stepped up efforts and increased vessel seizures. The existing strategy did not allow the flexibility to vacate the choke points in order to seek out drug traffickers close to the source of their cargo or concentrate forces in areas of heaviest traffic. Thus, our forces were kept in a "defensive" rather than "offensive" mode. Additionally, the smugglers knew the pattern of operations and employed spotter aircraft to keep track of cutters stationed in the choke points. They employed decoys and search and rescue hoaxes to draw our resources out of their patrol areas.

During November - December 1984, a new strategy was employed. Operation Wagonwheel was the key element of a larger national and international operation, Operation Hat Trick, coordinated by the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS). The latter involved other U.S. law enforcement agencies, other U.S. armed forces and foreign governments. Wagonwheel employed a strategy that was markedly different. Substantial forces were massed in the Southeast with extensive operations in the southern Caribbean. The major choke points (Yucatan, and Windward) were covered by a reduced number of cutters. As the operation progressed, ships and aircraft were deployed close to the territorial sea of Colombia. Those forces employed the maximum of flexibility and deception complementing the anti-drug operations being carried out by Colombian forces ashore and afloat.

During the first month of the operation (November), a higher than usual quantity of marijuana was seized (as compared with previous November seizures). The traffickers were active. When the smugglers became aware of the fact that a sizable interdiction force was operating in the southern

Caribbean, a deliberate effort was made to delay trafficking until the operation ended. Seizures dropped to a very low level in December 1984 and January 1985. Given the thorough coverage off the Guajira Peninsula, it is considered unlikely the low seizures meant an increased amount of marijuana was getting through, but rather that the operation effectively shut down maritime trafficking from the north coast of South America. Stockpiles ashore, therefore, suffered severe losses due to shelf-life problems and Colombian in-country seizure efforts.

Operation Blue Lightning was another major offensive action against the trafficking organizations, also coordinated by NNBIS. During two weeks this April, the Coast Guard participated in Operation Blue Lightning, a coordinated law enforcement effort between the Government of the Bahamas and the U.S. Its goals were to disrupt the primary maritime smuggling routes through the Bahamas, destroy cached contraband and facilities on various islands throughout the Bahamas, and intercept those smugglers approaching the Florida coast who had been "flushed out" by the pressure in the Bahamas.

The successes of Wagonwheel and Blue Lightning point out the advantage of occasional offensive tactics against trafficking organizations. However, regardless of the pressure applied, the smuggler will take the action necessary to maintain future profitability; thus it would not be wise to repeat the same strategy option very often. Instead, options should be varied and applied in a manner which will keep the trafficker "off balance" and deeply concerned about what the Coast Guard will do next, and strategies employed which will force the trafficker into a position or mode which increases his vulnerability.

In 1981 Congress passed legislation clarifying statutory restrictions on the use of Department of Defense resources for law enforcement purposes. As a result, the Department of Defense now has greater freedom to support federal law enforcement agencies. DOD resources have been playing an important role in the federal drug interdiction program by providing surveillance and support services, such as using aircraft to search for smugglers and Navy ships to tow or escort vessels seized by the Coast Guard to the nearest U. S. port. Additionally, Navy ships have been deploying with Coast Guard Tactical Law Enforcement Teams (TACLETS) or Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDETS) aboard. These teams and detachments conduct boardings of suspect vessels from their Navy hosts in the same manner as they do from Coast Guard vessels. To increase further the number of surface assets available for interdiction, the Coast Guard has been routinely deploying LEDET personnel on Navy Pegasus-class Hydrofoil Patrol Boats operating out of Key West. These hydrofoils are being used as "pouncer" vessels to interdict fast drug smuggling contact boats. As of the end of May, the DOD has been involved in 34 vessel seizures and their assistance was invaluable during operations Wagonwheel and Blue Lightning.

During the past several years we have increased the number of cutter patrol days and aircraft operating hours devoted to drug interdiction to increased our ability to respond quickly to sightings and other intelligence. We now average about six of our larger cutters on patrol at all times in waters off the Southeastern United States and in the Caribbean. We have also reprogrammed some of our helicopter assets to make our flight-deck equipped cutters more effective and formed a Surface Effect Ship squadron of three vessels in Key West, which became fully operational in 1983.

New and more capable resources are becoming available to the Coast Guard. These resources will be brought to bear on the drug trafficking problem as quickly as possible. Our 41 new twin-jet Falcon medium range search aircraft are just completing their first full year of operations, increasing our air reconnaissance capability considerably. The first of six AIREYE systems for our Falcon aircraft has completed flight testing, will complete its final checkout in July as the prototype for the remaining five and should be operational in September. The remaining five are expected to be operational in 1987. This sensor package will greatly extend the Falcon's search and detection effectiveness in both daylight and darkness. New radars are being procured for our fixed wing aircraft. The new, more capable HH-65 helicopters are being received to ultimately replace our fleet of HH-52 short range helicopters. These new ship-deployable helicopters will markedly improve our at-sea surveillance capabilities because of their higher speed and better navigation capability, and eventually they will have FLIR (Forward Looking Infra-Red) installed to further improve their night identification capability. Sixteen new patrol boats are being purchased to help our drug interdiction efforts in the Southeast United States and Caribbean. Some of our older cutters are being replaced with thirteen new 270 foot medium endurance "Bear" class cutters which are helo capable. The remaining fleet will continue to be renovated, modernized, or replaced as necessary to insure they remain safe and productive.

We have been looking at other tools. For example, we are deploying leased Sea Based Aerostats (SBA's). Each consists of a small, 25,000 cubic foot balloon equipped with a surface search radar tethered to a 194-foot offshore supply type vessel (support ship). The aerostat lifts the radar to a sufficient altitude to greatly increase its range. Meant to be part of a coordinated operation, the surface target information it acquires is passed to a command and control cutter for evaluation and deployment of other assigned units, both surface and air. The first leased system is currently deployed and the second will be delivered in July.

The continuous large area radar coverage possible with such systems can significantly enhance our law enforcement efforts. Our specific mission objective is to make better use of available resources by reducing the ship and aircraft time devoted to the search phase of the maritime interdiction process, thus freeing cutters for contact intercept, identification, and boarding. Our initial aerostat experience has shown that cutters and aircraft can be accurately vectored to identify more targets of interest than has previously been possible. Prior to the aerostat, our ability to search large areas was limited severely by the number of ships we could assign simultaneously to a given pass, or by the on-scene endurance of assigned search aircraft. Aerostat eases these constraints by providing a tool that searches a relatively large area for prolonged periods of time. Operational results show aerostats can be effectively used as force multipliers, allowing our ships to be used for target intercepts and boardings, rather than for lengthy searches. Our search aircraft are then freed to perform target identification. As conceived, the aerostat will be used as part of a Mobile Interdiction Surveillance Team (MIST), which includes a helo equipped medium or high endurance cutter acting as Command and Control and at least one other chase craft. While the aerostat will not replace our cutters and aircraft, it does allow us to use them much more effectively. At present, we are preparing

to contract in July for two fully capable Sea Based Aerostat systems with expedited delivery. The contracts will contain options to purchase additional systems.

Better intelligence remains an important factor in increasing our overall interdiction effectiveness. Our most critical need is timely and accurate information on the number, identity, location and destination of vessels and aircraft bound for the U.S. carrying contraband. During the past year improvements have been made in the collection, evaluation, and dissemination of intelligence. Along with expanding our intelligence collection programs, we have developed a staff of trained personnel to exploit this information and ensure its timely flow to our operational commanders. Our new intelligence coordination center here in Washington, D.C. maintains a 24-hour all-source intelligence watch to exploit all intelligence systems available to the Coast Guard. It produces intelligence products tailored to the needs of our operational commanders. Our Area Commanders' staffs have also been expanded by adding additional intelligence-trained personnel. These staffs in New York and San Francisco function as clearing houses that ensure the timely dissemination of information to our field commanders as well as to other law enforcement agencies. We are also continuing our liaison with the law enforcement community's intelligence network. Only through the melding of all these available sources of intelligence can we efficiently locate, track, identify and interdict smugglers.

Part of our improvements in the intelligence area have come about due to our active participation in NNBS, the Attorney General's Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETFs) and other ongoing initiatives. We work and cooperate closely with the other federal agencies on a continuous basis. Interdiction efforts cannot be focused in one or two agencies since drug traffickers exploit all modes of transportation and possess a wide variety of resources within their vast crime organizations. To combat the problem, coordinated efforts and active participation at regular meetings among all agencies are required to make effective use of all federal law enforcement resources.

This concludes my prepared testimony, Mr. Chairman. I will be happy to answer any questions you or the members of the committee may have.