
Interview: Lieutenant-Commander James Simpson

Operation Hat Trick: International cooperation comes to war on drugs

On Nov. 11, Vice-President George Bush, whose office is in charge of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction Service (NNBIS), was pleased to announce the second phase of a major multinational drug-enforcement operation called *Hat Trick II*, which began on Nov. 1. Hat Trick II is a complex operation that involves tightened surveillance along our border with Mexico and along the known ocean supply routes from South America and other Caribbean nations. According to Bush, "Land patrols have been stepped up and hundreds of boats and planes are working right now." He provided a sketch of the operation, saying that the "U.S. Navy and Coast Guard working together provide the primary maritime surveillance and interdiction forces while the U.S. Customs Service working with the Navy, Air Force, Army, and Marines are conducting air operations."

Bush said the operation involved "working with our neighbors and allies to provide the maximum coordination of their own anti-drug programs with our own operations. . . . Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, Jamaica, and others are co-operating in this international effort."

Because Hat Trick II is a live operation, details remain classified information. However, *EIR* has been told that the precursor effort, *Hat Trick I*, serves as the working model. In the interview that follows, details of Hat Trick I and a related short-term effort are described by Lt.-Commander Jim Simpson, stationed at the headquarters of the U.S. Coast Guard 7th District, Southeast Region in Miami, Florida.

EIR: I understand that Hat Trick II is a live operation and the details are classified information, but could you tell us what Hat Trick I was all about?

Simpson: Hat Trick I was at the time called Hat Trick, because we didn't want to acknowledge that there was going to be a Hat Trick II.

We, the Coast Guard, had for many years pursued a policy which we called a "choke point" policy to interdict drug smugglers. On either side of Cuba, there is a relatively narrow stretch of sea: one between the Yucatan peninsula and Cuba, and the other is the "windward" passage between Cuba and Haiti. Going further to your right, there is a third passage called the "Mona" between the Dominican Republic

and Puerto Rico. Our policy for many years was to put Coast Guard cutters and aircraft on patrol in these three choke points under the assumption that it was easier to catch vessels coming through these three relatively smaller areas than to scour the whole southern Caribbean looking for them.

It worked fairly well and we made a lot of seizures in those choke points. We've occasionally sent other boats down south in other areas, but the principal strategy that we've used for years and years was to patrol those choke points. It's much easier to catch a slow-moving mother ship with 20 or 30 tons than it is to wait until they get up further north and make their dropoff. Then, we've got to catch 10 or more pick-up ships with a ton each, and these boats are a lot faster.

That strategy worked fairly well, but it wasn't 100% successful; a lot of dope got through. First, it's obvious that a lot made it into the country. Second, this was a very passive strategy; we kind of sat there and waited for the smugglers to come to us. And, third, that strategy was just a U.S. strategy, it did not involve other countries. Hat Trick I was the first really major attempt to remedy that situation. What it involved is this.

We worked with some of the source countries, principally Colombia, but other countries were involved as well. But Colombia was the main target for Hat Trick I. [Colombia is the number one supplier of marijuana to the United States—ed.] If you graphed marijuana shipments on a chart from January to December, you would find that, in November-December, there is a huge jump in shipments. It's essentially the shipment of the fall harvest of Colombian marijuana. So, we made the conscious decision to try to interdict or disrupt that fall shipment.

We left our vessels in the choke points and in the Bahamas, our normal patrols in place, and created a task force of ships from other sources. For example, we brought an ice-breaker down to participate; they patrolled. If you look at your map and find Jamaica, they set up a second "picket line" that ran roughly between Jamaica and Honduras, well south of where we had normally patrolled before. The idea was to catch whatever smugglers were already in the pipeline, out on the water. That was called Phase I.

In Phase II, we moved that task force of ships down right

off the coast of Colombia. The Phase II objective was to bottle up the smugglers, to keep them from putting to sea, while at the same time—and this is really the most significant aspect—the Colombians went in on the ground and tried to seize or destroy whatever they could. . . . The goal of it was not to make seizures on the high seas, but to bottle them up in Colombia so the Colombians could make seizures. And their President said that they destroyed about half of the fall harvest.

[But the press then reported this] by comparing seizures in 1984 to the previous year and said, well, this was a failure, you didn't make a lot of seizures, ignoring the quantities destroyed in Colombia which never put to sea, and therefore didn't need to be seized.

That was Hat Trick I. That ran November to December and a little bit into January, but basically, two months.

It was not solely a Coast Guard operation; the Navy was involved, Customs, DEA—it really was the first operation that involved all of these agencies, and it was coordinated by NNBIS. It was the first such effort on that kind of major scale. This was the largest task force of Coast Guard ships assembled since Vietnam. And I think it's the largest peacetime task force we'd ever assembled. So it was a big deal.

That was one of the other things that the Colombians reported; that during Hat Trick I, they destroyed 30 cocaine laboratories.

Then, under the auspices of NNBIS, Operation Blue Lightening was run for 16 days in the Bahamas, in April of this year. Coast Guard ships surrounded the Bahaman islands, up to 30 islands, not all at one time but over the 16-day period. We would surround the islands by ship so they couldn't leave and then the DEA would fly in Bahaman officials, using helicopters, to make seizures or what have you. Having learned from Hat Trick I that we couldn't do this in secrecy, we anticipated that there would be smugglers who would flee other islands that we weren't covering. So, at the same time that we were working in the Bahamas, we had a 24-hour blockade along 150 miles of the Florida coastline. It wasn't really a blockade, because that has legal connotations, but basically that's what it was. It consisted of Coast Guard, Customs, 27 different state and local law-enforcement agencies, basically everybody who had a boat and a badge was involved. We had the Miami Police, the Broward County Sheriff, the Palm Beach County Sheriff, the Biscayne Bay Park Rangers—everybody. That operation netted about 5,500 pounds of cocaine and about 60,000 pounds of marijuana.

To put that in perspective, the federal government had been seizing about 2,000 pounds of cocaine a month, for the previous six months. During that two-week period, they got 5,500 pounds. And something else happened: For about the last two days of the operation, for about two days after it ended, there was just bale after bale of marijuana washing up on the shore of the South Florida coast. They got flushed out

of the Bahamas. they knew there was a 24-hour patrol, they couldn't get into Florida, they had no place to go, so they dumped it over the side and let it wash up on the shore.

The key thing, and it is something that a lot of reporters who covered the drug war three years ago, four years ago, do not appreciate, is that this is different. They are working under the assumption that things are the same as when they were working here three years ago. We try to explain things to them and they say, "I know, I was there." What they don't understand is that in the last 18 months, actually now about 24 months, there has been a significant shift in regard to nations like Colombia and Dominican Republic, and Jamaica and the Bahamas. The shift has been from: "You have a drug problem, you in the United States have a drug problem, to we have a drug problem and we have to do something about it." And that has not been recognized, particularly in the media.

We've had here in Miami, in the last year, journalists, both print and electronic, three different teams from Germany, one from Sweden, two from Great Britain, one from Belgium, and a couple of others. Essentially, the Europeans are starting to take an interest in the drug interdiction program down here. Because they are starting to see it: Cocaine has become a major problem in Europe.

As far as Hat Trick II is concerned, I can tell you that it started on Nov. 1, the Vice-President made a speech on Veterans Day in which he disclosed some information, basically what had already been done, but obviously didn't talk a great deal about what the future would carry. That's really about as far as we can go now. Obviously we're not going to tell anybody what ships we've got and where they're patrolling and that kind of thing until after the fact.

You see, the key thing, in this operation, is that NNBIS will not make a single seizure; Coast Guard, Customs will make seizures, each agency involved will make seizures, but the major thrust will be in the source countries and what they destroy. But that doesn't show up when NNBIS goes to Congress; all they can say is, well, here's what we coordinated in operations. The whole idea of Hat Trick II is to coordinate agencies here and in six different nations. That's the role of NNBIS.

EIR: In June 1985, Admiral Watkins, chief of naval operations, proposed the military's full involvement in a war on drugs. What do you think?

Simpson: One of the things the Vice-President did say is that there is extensive use of all five branches of the armed forces in Hat Trick operations.

One of the things that we were trying to protect the secrecy of, was which countries are involved in working with us, because in some countries, this is a very difficult thing for them to do, politically, e.g., Colombia. It's one thing after an operation has begun, it's another thing a week before it kicks off to say a country is actually involved in this.