

Full Court Press puts criminals on defense

Interagency effort targets marijuana growers, environmental contaminants in national forest

By **MASTER SGT. DAVID J. LOEFFLER**
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As hikers, campers and nature enthusiasts enter the Golden State's forests, too few realize the dangers lurking deep within the canopy. The perils they face are not limited to terrain and wildlife; they now face a large number of criminal organizations growing marijuana in California's parks, reserves and public lands. The growers, who are often armed and dangerous, continue to damage the environment, poison the watershed and escalate their violence.

The "Emerald Triangle," known for decades for its cultivation of high-grade marijuana, was the target for a multi-agency marijuana eradication effort known as Operation Full Court Press in July. The operation targeted large-scale, illegal grow sites in and around the Mendocino National Forest, with participation from 25 local, state and federal agencies. California National Guard Soldiers and Airmen supported Full Court Press with aviation assets, criminal analysis, logistics, IT networks and reclamation efforts.

"One of the California National Guard's most important roles is the planning from the beginning. Bringing all of the agencies and resources together is 90 percent of the mission," said Air Force Maj. Sean Bothelio, intelligence officer for the CNG's Joint Task Force Domestic Support-Counterdrug. "We assist law enforcement agencies by gathering information from traffic stops, suspected grow areas and suspected drop points and generate intelligence reports that can be used to piece it all together."

CNG troops also provided ground tactical support, and CNG aviation assets used multi-spectral imagery to detect water usage and ground disturbances in potential grow sites. Guardsmen on the ground removed miles of plastic irrigation line and tons of pesticides, fertilizer and garbage from the forest. The trash generated by the growers, much of it hazardous material, was airlifted from the grow sites and transported for further processing.

"It's a lot like 'Groundhog Day,'" a reclamation team member said after his fourth day removing waste, referring to the 1993 movie in which Bill Murray's character relives the

same day again and again. "But we know we are making progress and doing this for the right reason."

The reclamation teams consisted of a full spectrum of law enforcement agents, with California National Guard members integrated into the teams. The teams were lowered from helicopters, or hoisted, into the remote grow sites and spent long days cleaning up trash and "chasing line." The intricate web of black irrigation tubing often led members through treacherous terrain to additional grow sites and further scarred forest.

"[Criminal organizations] are clear-cutting trees, poaching animals, damaging water sources and poisoning the forest," said Lt. Sam Castillo of the California Department of Fish and Game. "It is common for the growers to use rodenticides, pesticides and fertilizers, many of which are illegally brought into this country. ... That eventually gets into water that is consumed by plants, animals and people."

Full Court Press resulted in seizure or eradication of 632,000 marijuana plants and 2,000 pounds of processed marijuana, according to the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office. Agents also seized \$30,000 in U.S. currency, 38 weapons and 20 vehicles, and they arrested 159 individuals. More than 51,000 pounds of garbage, 40 miles of irrigation line and 5,500 pounds of fertilizer and pesticides were removed from the forest.

"The growers do tremendous damage to California's land and they pose serious risks to the citizens of California," said Maj. Gen. David S. Baldwin, adjutant general of the California National Guard. "I am very proud of the efforts of the Soldiers and Airmen of the California National Guard and their involvement in Full Court Press. They are highly trained professionals who provide unique abilities to law enforcement agents who take on this very difficult, demanding and important mission."



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Two members of the California National Guard's Joint Task Force Domestic Support-Counterdrug speak with a U.S. Forest Service agent (center) while bundling irrigation line to be removed from Mendocino National Forest. The 25-agency effort Operation Full Court Press removed 40 miles of irrigation line from California forests this summer in addition to 25 tons of other garbage, 38 weapons, 20 vehicles, \$30,000 in cash, 632,000 marijuana plants and a ton of processed marijuana.

Army medics join marijuana suppression operations

By **SENIOR AIRMAN JESSICA GREEN**
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California Army National Guard medics worked with flight crews from the Califor-

nia National Guard's Joint Task Force Domestic Support-Counterdrug during Operation Full Court Press, a 25-agency mission targeting illegal marijuana grow sites in Mendocino National Forest in July.

Counterdrug planners identified the need for a medical team with the ability to swiftly reach restricted and potentially hazardous environments to provide emergency medical care to injured personnel. The medics were prepared to extract, treat, stabilize and evacuate the injured, while acting in a threat-evading recovery role.

The three medics who participated in Full Court Press received enhanced medical training through the Flight Medical Aidman's course at the U.S. Army School of Aviation Medicine on Fort Rucker, Ala. The course consists of 86 academic hours of medical subjects, 19 hours of aeromedical subjects and 44 hours of aviation subjects.

The medics embedded with Counterdrug teams on California Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters and California Air National Guard HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters.

"To my knowledge, this is the first time Army medics have functioned as a part of an Air Force flight crew — at least in California," said Air Force Maj. Brian Finnerty, a Counterdrug HH-60G helicopter pilot. "They were able to log flight and training

time on Air National Guard helicopters after [the National Guard Bureau] approved the interfly mission."

Army Sgt. Andrew Neil, who was recently hired to the Task Force, has already proven to be an asset to the Counterdrug mission with his 11 years of combat medic experience.

"Having medics on the flight with us, not only for their expertise in the case of emergency, but as another set of eyes and hands in the back [of the helicopter], is extremely reassuring during missions like these," Finnerty said.

He also emphasized the importance of building rapport between Army and Air Guard personnel, because while deployed overseas they are often integrated into a single crew.

"Working with Counterdrug is a great opportunity to become proficient working in the aircraft," Neil said. "Any additional time performing my job, outside of a traditional Guardsman status, is a great chance to improve my skills and more adequately support the mission."



Photo by Senior Airman Jessica Green

Army Sgt. Andrew Neil, a flight medic with the CNG's Joint Task Force Domestic Support-Counterdrug, looks out of an Air Guard HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter from the 129th Rescue Wing during Operation Full Court Press this summer in northern California. Neil and other medics provide valuable medical support for Counterdrug missions and also serve as helicopter operations and management specialists.