

(NOTE: This article is intentionally vague about certain aspects of this mission. The agencies involved have requested The DRIL not reveal names, locations or specific details of this Counterdrug mission.)

The building was fairly new, with no markings on the outside. We were ‘buzzed’ into a reception area, then had to wait a moment before being admitted through another electrically locked door. Once inside, the Counterdrug Liaison Officer to the California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement (BNE,) led me to the conference room, where the team for the next day’s “bust” was gathering.

The helicopters, two UH-1 “Hueys” and one OH-58 “Kiowa,” had landed a few minutes before and the crews were performing post-flight checks on the aircraft and equipment. BNE agents were still arriving...

The meeting started. I was introduced, and the meeting “chair” told the group that I was along to videotape the bust for “B-Roll,” stock footage for use in a future video production. I asked the group if there were any undercover agents who I shouldn’t photograph, and more than a couple of hands shot up...

The mission had been set up after the BNE field office had received information that a group of people was making methamphetamine on a parcel of land deep in the hills of Northern California. The site, several miles from the nearest electricity and telephone service, consisted of a few small travel trailers in a semicircle. During the course of the surveillance, agents gathered enough information to support a search warrant.

The plan, developed by the lead investigation agents and the Counterdrug liaison officer, was simple. Early the next morning, a team of BNE agents would drive to the area and link up with local sheriff’s deputies. Two of the officers would watch the

property from a nearby hilltop. The “second team” would wait nearby for the helicopters to arrive, then climb down from the road to two travel trailers set away from the main area, cutting off anyone trying to escape in that direction, and apprehend anyone found at the other area and bring them down to the main area. A third team of sheriffs' deputies would serve a search warrant on a cabin on adjacent property where they suspected an indoor marijuana garden. The main team would arrive in the two Hueys and land in the “front yard” of the rural property. The BNE agents would exit the aircraft and “hug the ground” while the Hueys lifted off, then run to the circle of travel trailers, find and handcuff anyone in the area, serve the search warrant, and begin the search. The OH-58 would remain aloft as a Command and Control platform, as well as track anyone trying to escape. One UH-1 would remain in orbit while the other went to a nearby CDF helicopter base for fuel. When it returned, it would land and the orbiting Huey would go get fuel, return, and land.

After the plan was briefed to the assembled team, a BNE agent said that rain was forecast for the next day, but the day after that would be sunny. The BNE agent in charge of the operation asked if we (Counterdrug) could postpone the operation until the day after. After a few telephone calls, the mission was postponed.

During a break, I helped the Liaison officer set up a makeshift “sand table” on the conference room table. Cardboard boxes stood in for buildings, strips of masking tape represented roads and ditches, and paper circles on dowels stood in for the helicopters. After the break, the Liaison officer took the BNE team leaders and helicopter pilots step-by-step through the plan. At each step, one or more agents had questions or wanted clarification. At the end of the sand-table run-through, several agents said it had helped

their understanding of the plan. The Liaison officer finished by briefing the agents on the [XX principles of War. {insert here}]

We went to the airport to train on the helicopters. First, we sorted out who would sit where. As I would be last out of the helicopter, I got the door-gunner spot. And with that seat assignment came an additional duty – pinning the door open before I exited the aircraft. We made a couple of dry runs, then the pilots cranked up their aircraft and we flew to a nearby field. At 30-seconds-before-landing, the crew chief slid the door open and I had to juggle my camera to pin the door open. We landed, the BNE agents exited and got prone. I followed. The helicopters took off and we picked ourselves up off the ground. I noticed the field had recently hosted grazing cattle... After one more dress rehearsal, we returned to the airport and called it a day.

The day of the operation dawned bright, cool and with a steady north wind. At the field office, the BNE agents were making ready. The team kept their excitement subdued – this raid would be the culmination of a long investigation. The operation leader held a formation to check the teams' equipment. The liaison officer noticed a few of the agents had loose straps or equipment dangling from their equipment vests. He suggested the items be dressed or secured so they'd be less likely to catch on something as the agent exited the helicopter.

“Always think of the worst-case scenario,” he said, “You want to get out of the helicopter, not fall out.”

The pre-operation checks completed, we left for the helicopter pad at the airport.

The aircrews had just finished their pre-flight checks. We climbed in, belted up, and the pilots cranked up the engines. After a five-minute warm-up, the pilots “pulled

pitch,” and we were on our way. The land beneath us changed from flat farmland to rolling hills to pine-covered mountainsides.

The crew chief announced the five-minute warning, and I started the video camera. At 30-seconds-to-landing, the door was slid open, and I pinned it open. I saw the roofs of the travel trailers glide beneath us, and then we were on the ground. The BNE agents exited into a ditch – I followed. The helicopter took off and I looked around quickly to orient myself. The front yard was behind me, and so were most of the BNE agents. They were running toward a group of people who were resignedly holding their hands up in the air.

I stayed well back, taking video, until the agent in charge of the operation signaled the area was secured. The second team made their way down the hill from the secondary area. They had found no one there.

With the area secured and the residents detained, the bust team began the search of the area. The main area had several vehicles in various states of disassembly, three travel-trailer living spaces, and a large-ish homebuilt storage shed, full of boxes crammed with personal items. The agents and deputies broke into teams and began searching for items named in the search warrant.

One member of the raid team wore a t-shirt with the word “latent” printed on it. I asked if he was the fingerprint man, and he said he was. Just then an agent wearing latex gloves came over with a box containing an assortment of drugs and asked the fingerprint specialist to dust the containers for any prints. He was able to “lift” a partial print from a hard-surfaced mint tin, but would have to process the plastic bags and ‘seal-a-meal’ pouches back at his lab.

Six hundred yards away, the deputies had found the indoor grow, and were inventorying the seedlings, plants, grow-lights and other equipment tucked into a room of the cabin. The plants were extremely small, but, as a deputy pointed out, the grower had manipulated the plants to produce buds (the flower, and the most potent part of the plant.) The deputy estimated that the grower could harvest each of the plants once a week for several weeks. Downstairs, another deputy was doing “field interviews” with each of the individuals they had apprehended in the cabin.

Back at the main area, the search was drawing to a close. The agents had not found any lab equipment or the necessary chemicals. Meth labs are easily transportable, and either the operator made it a point to store the equipment and chemicals at another location between “cooks,” or some aspect of the investigation had been compromised, tipping the lab operators off that a bust was a possibility. Still, the search teams found enough contraband to charge and arrest six members of the group. These six would get to ride a Huey helicopter to the local jail.

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