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Flying Drug-Runners Reap Big Profits

By ROBERT LINDSEY

They fly low and slow, by the light of the moon, and make \$50,000 a night.

They use some private planes and old military transports and land on deserted air strips or sagebrush-covered desert. Their cargo is marijuana, cocaine and heroin.

Along the sparsely settled frontier that divides the United States and Mexico, airborne drug-runners are doing a booming business, and Federal agents say that they do not know how to stop them.

On most nights, the agents estimate, at least 10 planes cross the border with marijuana and other drugs. On rare occasions, the smugglers are caught by United States agents flying their own planes. But usually they land unnoticed in Arizona, California, Texas, Florida or elsewhere and net at least \$50,000 each trip.

"Anybody who knows how to fly can get into the business and make a lot of money in a hurry if he gets away with it," said Donald A. Quick, a Bureau of Customs agent based at the border town of Nogales, Ariz.

"You get bush pilots, soldiers of fortune, crop dusters, guys who flew with Air America in Vietnam [an airline said to be affiliated with the Central Intelligence Agency], and a lot of 'em can't get jobs.

"Pilots are a dime a dozen these days, and they're willing to do anything to fly, including smuggling."

"They're developing their own air force, and it's getting bigger and bigger," said an official of the Justice Department's Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, which is jointly responsible with the Customs Bureau for policing the smuggling.

Most of the drug-runners use light single and twin-

engine private planes, often equipped with special devices so they can take off and land on short, improvised desert strips.

"But a lot of them are starting to use bigger planes—DC-3's, surplus military transports, turbo-prop executive planes, and we have our eye on one group that has a Constellation," the Justice Department official said. The Constellation can carry 40,000 pounds of cargo.

The United States agents' air force consists of 30 unmarked helicopters and small planes. Occasionally, the agents are able to pursue smugglers and arrest them when they land. Increasing use of the planes over last year has clearly had an effect.

Since July 1, they have been used to make 57 arrests and seize 14 planes that were used in smuggling, according to the Bureau of Customs. This is twice the rate of a year ago.

"But we know we're only getting a tiny fraction of them," a Customs agent said. "They are very clever people, and if we put the heat on in one area—like we did in Brownsville, Tex., recently—they learn about it quickly and just take another route."

Started 5 Years Ago.

Drugs have been smuggled into this country by air for at least five years. Initially, the smugglers tended to be of college age. They rented a plane and flew into Mexico to buy a small amount of marijuana and then sold it for a comfortable profit.

More recently, officials said, the huge profits that can be made have lured more and more older pilots and other people into the business.

Lieut. Dennis Dierking of the Arizona State Department of Public Safety, who heads the narcotics detail in the southern part of the state, said:

"We know of approximately 10 different organized operations in Tucson alone, each involving six to eight people, that are flying in loads weekly."

Customs agents recently arrested the City Attorney of Winslow, Ariz., a town of 8,000, and accused him of helping to direct a large aerial smuggling operation. He is under indictment for possession of marijuana.

Officials attribute the increased aerial smuggling to the growing market for drugs in the United States, the huge profit potential, tightened surveillance at some ground border crossing points and the relative ease of flying in contraband.

"Smuggling of narcotics by small planes is less risky for operators than by any other means of transportation," said Neal Sonnett, an Assistant United States Attorney in Miami, where he said smuggling of heroin by air is growing rapidly.

The drugs come into Florida from France via islands in the Caribbean and the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico.

Economics Explained

A Justice Department expert explained the economics of the industry this way:

"In the interior of Mexico, you can buy weed [marijuana] for as low as \$2 a brick [a kilogram, or 2.2 pounds], but if you don't know your way around, you probably will have to pay closer to \$30. It doesn't take

a very big plane to fly 500 bricks if you take out the seats and strip it down.

"If he takes the stuff to Tucson, he can sell it for about \$130 a brick, maybe as much as \$200, depending on the market. We've heard they're getting as much as \$750 in Boston. But, say he buys it for \$30 and sells it in the states for \$130; that's a profit on 500 bricks of \$50,000 for a night's work."

Although Mexican-grown marijuana is by far the largest cargo of the aerial smugglers, they have been increasingly carrying heroin and cocaine. It appears this is partly due to tightened surveillance of surface shipments on the East Coast.

"A small plane is perfect for bringing in heroin," an agent said, "because it doesn't take much to make a small fortune." Ten ounces of heroin purchased in Mexico for \$3,500 can be sold in Los Angeles for \$140,000.

Another recent trend that worries the authorities is the recent diversification of a group of "one-way" smugglers called "contrabandistas."

Operating from small airports along the American side of the border, contrabandistas fly United States merchandise such as refrigera-

tors, television sets and tobacco into Mexico and Central and South America without paying import duties.

Local Officials Bribed

As far as the United States is concerned, the flights are legal as long as readily available export permits are obtained. South of the border, the contrabandistas usually bribe local officials and earn a solid profit by selling their duty-free merchandise.

Within recent months, lured by the promise of even greater profits in drug traffic, an increasing number of contrabandistas have been flying to this country with drugs instead of returning home with their planes empty.

Although some illegal flights cross the border in daylight, most cross at night. The planes usually fly a few hundred feet above the ground to dodge what they believe to be searching signals from Air Force or Federal Aviation Administration radar antennas.

For the most part, such precautions are unnecessary. What radar there is on the border, officials said, is largely ineffective below 9,000 feet and at some points it is useless below 18,000 feet.

All pilots who cross the international frontier are required to file an official flight plan with the F.A.A. or the Mexican Government, depending where the trip originates. Many pilots ignore this rule. But some follow the procedure up to a point; they take off and land on the route indicated in their plan, but they take a detour over the border, drop the drugs to confederates on the ground or land briefly on the desert to get rid of the contraband before landing at an airport where they might be subject to a search.

Asked how the smuggling could be halted, Mr. Quick, the Customs agent here, said:

"People hear terms like radar, jet and computer, and think you can solve any problem. But this is a very complicated problem. That's a long border, and it's easy to get lost in it, and when you take it up to 18,000 feet, that's a lot of air space to watch.

Continued

Pay for Information

"The best thing that people can do is tell us when they see suspicious planes landing under unusual circumstances. And we try to get information from people in Mexico about a buy or a flight that's coming. We pay money—\$50,000 last year—for good information."

Efforts to police the smuggling include risky aerial chases at low level and gunfights in the desert. But sometimes the agents have something to smile about. Currently, they're getting some laughs over a man in his early thirties who has had a run of bad luck. An agent said:

"He's either a bad pilot, or he's too greedy. He works for an organization up north and stuffs the plane with too much marijuana or forgets to take enough gas. He's cracked up at least four planes and maybe six. He crashed a few weeks ago, and we just missed him. But we think he'll do it again, and we're waiting."