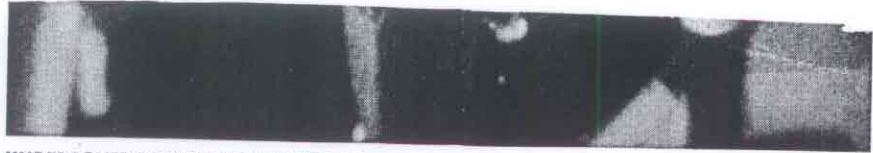


over their short-wave radios: "Suspects are proceeding down Spruce Street, headed for Gold." In the third-floor observation post, one agent cracked to TIME Correspondent James Willwerth, "The Chinese are very punctual." So they were—right on time for the most important narcotics bust this summer.

At 9 p.m., two wary men walked up to the green Cadillac: Kenneth Kan-Kit Huie, 60, self-styled "unofficial mayor of Chinatown," and Tim Lok, 35, known to federal agents as "the General" for his ramrod-stiff posture. The four men—two undercover narcotics agents, and the two "connections" whom they had been trying to nail for four months—wasted no time. The agents opened the trunk of the Cadillac and showed the Chinese the contents of an olive-drab attaché case inside: \$200,000 in \$50 and \$100 bills.



**UNDERCOVER AGENTS SHOW HUIE & LOK \$200,000 IN TRUNK**

*In hollowed-out heels, false-bottomed suitcases, cars, girdles and boa constrictors.*

Then the General led one of the agents off on a meandering excursion that ended up in a Chinatown sportswear shop. There it was the agent's turn to inspect the wares: a cardboard box packed with 14 plastic bags containing 20 lbs. of pure No. 4 white heroin from Southeast Asia. Street value: \$10 million.

The agent and the General then went back toward Gold Street in a taxi, followed in a gray Dodge station wagon by a third Chinese, Guan Chowtok, bringing the heroin. But Guan, owner of the sportswear shop, doubled

back and dropped the heroin in a vacant lot, arriving empty-handed. He seemed worried about police. The agent and Guan argued in the street in front of Beekman Hospital for several minutes, and finally the hesitant Chinese agreed to make the deal. The four men piled into the green Cadillac and followed the gray Dodge station wagon to a dark, deserted street, under the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. Following the General's directions, one undercover agent walked through waist-high grass into the vacant lot. Suddenly, he knelt down and said loudly: "This is the package; this is the package."

On that signal, the night fairly exploded with armed men and flashing lights. Two unmarked cars squealed to a stop at opposite ends of the street, blocking the escape routes. Agents waving pistols and shotguns sprinted out of the shadows from all directions. Huie, the General and a fourth Chinese accomplice surrendered immediately. Guan jumped into his gray Dodge—and found himself staring into the muzzle of a .45 automatic in the hands of an agent who was leaning through an open window.

Though last week's Chinatown bust was motion-picture perfect, to U.S. narcotics experts it was another bittersweet element in an increasingly frustrating, not to say disastrous situation. True, the raid was the latest in a number of successful skirmishes in what President Nixon describes, more and more plausibly, as a global "war on drugs." In Montreal and Saigon, narcotics officers have recently nabbed some of the bigger wholesalers. Washington, mean-



while, is awaiting the imminent extradition by Paraguay of Auguste Joseph Ricord, French-born boss of a Latin American connection that is alleged to have piped heroin worth \$1.2 billion into the U.S. over a five-year period (TIME, Aug. 28).

But the bad news about narcotics far overshadows such success. The "skag" seized at the Brooklyn Bridge last week was the second large shipment of Asian heroin to be intercepted in New York. The first seizure came last November when a Philippine diplomat and his Chinese partner were arrested at Manhattan's Lexington Hotel with 38 lbs. of heroin in their luggage. The two busts tend to confirm the gloomy forecasts of U.S. narcotics experts that as some of the old drug trade routes from Europe become more dangerous, new ones will open up from Asia. The emergence of Asia, with its immense opium production, as a major exporter of narcotics, promises to make the drug trade a truly global problem.

**New Routes.** Through most of the postwar years, drugs had flowed from the poppy fields of Turkey and the labs of Marseille direct to the U.S. via the famed "French connection." In the past two or three years, more and more heroin has been routed through Latin America and the Caribbean, where law enforcement is spotty and protection cheap. But as the Latin connection begins to feel more and more heat, and if Turkey phases out remaining opium production under pressure from Washington, the drug trade is expected to swing increasingly to Asia, drawing on the vast surpluses of opium grown in the remote, misty hills of Burma, Thailand and Laos, source of 58% of the 1,200 tons of illicit opium the world produced last year. State Department narcotics experts already see several routes developing, including one to the U.S. via Hong Kong and Britain.

The present flow of narcotics to the West is capable of supporting a savage rise in consumption—and with it, savage rises in crime, in crippled lives and in deaths. Hard statistics are hard to come by, but the best Government estimates put the U.S. heroin-addict population at 560,000—ten times the level of 1960 and almost double what it was only two years ago. On the average, a U.S. addict spends \$8,000 a year to support his habit; in New York City, with an addict population of more than 300,000, as much as 50% of all crime is related to addiction. The U.S. has become a heroin market worth \$5 billion a year to the international drug trade.

As other countries are discovering to their horror, it is an expanding market. In Canada, recent estimates place the addict population at 14,000 and rising. Turkey now has a small heroin-addict population—a development that defies Moslem strictures against drugs and the powerful conviction among Turks that narcotics reduce sexual potency. Heroin is spreading among young



THAILAND DRUG TRADERS DELIVERING OPIUM IN OPEN TRUCK

South Vietnamese, who have picked up a taste for hard drugs from the departing American soldiers. All over Western Europe, which once idly dismissed hard drugs as "an American problem," officials now reckon that they have a growing addict population of about 100,000. Says a U.S. State Department official: "They're real scared about what the late 1970s will bring."

So is Washington. One day last January, John E. Ingersoll, blunt-spoken chief of the Justice Department's Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, went to the White House to report personally that an "astonishing variety" of drugs—heroin, cocaine, amphetamines, hashish, marijuana—was continuing to pour into the U.S. Nixon, by all accounts, was in a rage. "But dammit," he said at one point, "there must be something we can do to stop this."

The result has been a dramatic change in the U.S. approach to drugs. Only two years ago, U.S. narcotics agencies operated on a miserly \$78 million budget. Now the White House is asking Congress for \$729 million next year for a flock of new agencies.

The agencies are charged with what is essentially a broad-gauged search-and-destroy mission. In the U.S. the Justice Department's eight-month-old Office for Drug Abuse Law Enforcement has 300 investigators tracking down street pushers, while the Internal Revenue Service has 410 special agents checking distributors' tax records.

The Bureau of Customs, charged with policing thousands of miles of wide-open frontier, is due to add 330 new men to its hard-pressed 532-man border patrol force. Last month Nixon ordered the Air Force to help out by installing new extra-low-level radar at sites in Texas and New Mexico, where it will be used to track the airborne smugglers who scoot across the Mexican border in light planes, avoiding detection by flying at cactus level. Air



MULE TRAIN HAULING OPIUM DOWN FROM THAI MOUNTAINS



MARIJUANA PICKUP IN JAMAICA  
And diplomatic couriers.

Force and Air Guard squadrons have been ordered to maintain their F-102 and supersonic F-106 interceptors on alert status, ready to scramble in five minutes. Besides the heroin smugglers, their targets will also include the light planes that deliver something like a ton of Jamaican marijuana daily, mostly at airfields in Florida.

The heart of the strategy is a U.S. effort, one with no precedent in history, to tear up the major international drug routes. On one wall of the Washington "war room" of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, magnetic chips on a huge map of the world in-



THE WORLD

dicating the location of the bureau's 1,610 agents—up from 884 two years ago. In each of the key drug-traffic countries, such as France, Mexico, Turkey and Thailand, eight to 15 BNDD men act as advisers to their local counterparts, gather intelligence on their own, and, when necessary, engage in what is known in CIA argot as "dirty tricks."

BNDD men talk as if their job is to tear up the Ho Chi Minh Trail, not the international drug trade. "We'll never dry up the supply lines," Ingersoll tells war-room visitors. "But we can disrupt the lines and reduce the flow to a tolerable irritant. That's our goal."

The Administration's boast that "the tide has turned" is vastly exaggerated, but there are encouraging signs. American agents in and out of the U.S. so far this year have helped seize 3,966 lbs. of heroin, a sixfold increase over three years ago. The amount represents less than 20% of the estimated 11½ tons of heroin that U.S. addicts used last year—a measure of how far the war is from being won. But the effect is being felt on the street.

Evidently because of recent busts in Canada, France and New York, addicts are shuddering through the third month of a major heroin drought. In Montreal, a major port of entry for French heroin, one dealer complained last week that "the stuff is scarce as hell. I can pay but my man can't deliver." In Marseille, the price of a kilo of heroin has risen in past weeks from \$2,500 to \$5,000, partly as a result of the shortage, partly because the heat is on.

Another sign of hard times is slipping quality. Even after being cut with sugar and powdered milk, retail heroin used to be about 10% pure; now the range is from 3% to 7%. So low is the potency nowadays that the "good stuff," when it is available, may kill an unwary addict. San Antonio has had twelve overdose deaths in the past nine weeks because someone—perhaps an inexperienced pusher—has been peddling heroin that is 53% pure.

To Myles J. Ambrose, a hard-bitten former federal prosecutor and Customs Bureau chief who heads the domestic side of the Justice Department's



TURKISH WOMEN HARVESTING OPIUM GUM

## The Milieu of the Corsican Godfathers

*The eyes in the walnut face held his. "I am the head of the Union Corse." The Union Corse! More deadly, and perhaps even older than the Unione Siciliano, the Mafia. Bond knew that it controlled most organized crime throughout metropolitan France and her colonies—protection rackets, smuggling, prostitution, and the suppression of rival gangs.*

—Ian Fleming, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*

THE Union Corse, an organization that originated in the parched hills of Corsica but is today centered in Marseille, rules more in fact than even James Bond imagined in fiction. It dominates the worldwide trafficking in narcotics, and in particular controls the supply and processing of heroin flowing into the U.S. from France, South America and Southeast Asia. Though it is relatively weak in the U.S., the Union Corse is far more powerful than the Mafia in many parts of the world.

As an organization, the Union Corse is more tightly knit and more secretive than its Sicilian counterpart. U.S. agencies have been able to obtain information from all levels of the Mafia clans in the U.S., but not from the Union Corse. "When the Mafioso is spilling his guts," says one U.S. intelligence official, "the Corsican is still silent—refusing even to give you his name." In the early 1960s, for

instance, a Union Corse member who called himself Antoine Rinieri was arrested in New York with a suspected narcotics payoff of \$247,000 in cash. In the Corsican tradition, he refused to give his real name or explain what he was doing with the money. His silence caused him to be sent to jail for six months for contempt of court. At the end of his term, the U.S. deported him but, since it could prove no link between the \$247,000 and dope trafficking, the government was forced to give him the money back—with interest.

In France, the very existence of the Union Corse is still denied, in much the same way that the Mafia was often dismissed as fictional in the U.S. two decades ago. "The structure is a myth," says a senior French cop. With five gang murders in Marseille in the past six months alone, that notion is beginning to change.

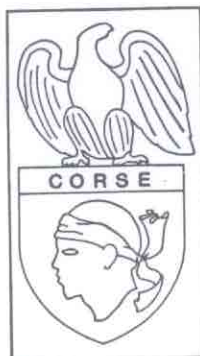
In many respects, the Mafia and the Union Corse are similar. Both are divided into a number of families—the Mafia into about 24 in the U.S., the Union Corse into

about 15 in France. The best-known of the Corsican families are the Francisci, Orsini, Venturi and Guerini clans. The identity of some of the clans is so deep a secret that a member could be marked for death for discussing them. And in the matter of exterminating informers, the Union Corse is said to be quicker and more deadly than the Mafia.

The Corsicans have spread around the world for much the same reason Sicilians came to the U.S.—hopeless poverty at home. "We see our sons as they leave as young men and when they come back to retire on their pensions," says a Corsican detective in France. Often smuggling is the only way that Corsicans can make a living.

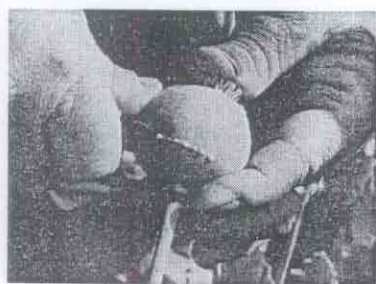
The French bring a new language to international crime; the army of ordinary racketeers, for instance, is known simply as the "milieu." The Corsican gang boss ordinarily carries his identification in plain sight—a watchfob medallion bearing the Moor's-head crest of Corsica. Like the Mafia, the Union Corse has a code of honor; the word of a gangster is supposed to be his bond. The difference is that Mafiosi are forever doublecrossing each other—hence the present gang war in New York—while the Corsicans usually keep their word. Members of the Mafia usually submit internal disputes to other Mafiosi; Corsicans often call in expert outsiders to arbitrate their quarrels.

The strength of the Union Corse outside the U.S. is based largely on its ability to infiltrate government agencies. In France the Union Corse has, to some degree, infiltrated the police, the military, the customs service and the French equivalent of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, the SDECE (for *Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionage*). One of that outfit's former agents, Roger de Louette, who was convicted in Newark last April of smuggling \$12 million worth of heroin into the U.S. and is currently serving a five-year prison term,



CORSICAN MEDAL





SLASHING POPPY BULB FOR GUM

OSWEN ACHER

drug effort, the shortage proves that the Administration strategy is on the right track. "The name of the game for the big-time pushers is moving the stuff into the U.S.," he says. "We belt 'em on one place, and they move someplace else. When we catch the stuff, that's when they lose their money."

Of late, the big-time pushers and traffickers have been losing their money, goods and sometimes their freedom at an encouraging rate. Some of the bigger catches over the past year:

**SAIGON:** South Vietnamese police and BNDD agents nabbed Joseph Berger, 66, a pudgy, balding American who arrived in Southeast Asia 16 years ago and skillfully worked his way up to the top of the drug-smuggling heap. Narcotics agents believe he is the only American to have had face-to-face dealings with "the Phantom," the ubiquitous Chinese who until recently reigned supreme over drug traffic out of Indochina. Four months ago, Berger hauled a 400-lb. load of opium down Thai country roads, bullying his way past police checkpoints into Cambodia. He arrived

in Saigon in June for a scheduled meeting with the Phantom, but was arrested. When the Phantom arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport, Berger fingered him. He turned out to be one Wan Pen Phen, a middle-aged Chinese with both Taiwanese and Thai papers. Police say Phen routed 4,500 lbs. of opium monthly through the area. In July, the cops arrested Luu Phuc Ngu, a prominent Saigon hotel owner, his son Luu Se Hon, and Phen's No. 2 man, Am Nui. The three organized the South Viet Nam end of the opium trade for the Phantom. Under interrogation last week, both Phen and Nui denied any knowledge of any drug dealings.

**MARSEILLE:** The shrimp boat *Caprice des Temps* (Whim of Time) attracted the attention of French customs agents last March when its captain refused an order to cut his engines. The captain, Marcel Boucan, 58, was already being watched for his dealings with cigarette smugglers. The agents also noticed that though the 60-ton boat had made two trips to Miami, it never ventured near the shrimp-fishing grounds. After cus-

testified that he imported the drugs in league with his superiors in the agency. The Corsican influence in French law-enforcement agencies is also believed to have been a large factor in the French government's reluctance to crack down on the Corsican narcotics laboratories in Marseille until drugs became a problem—and a political issue—in France.

The Union Corse's immense political influence in France stems from the Corsicans' work for the French underground during World War II—German collaborators in Marseille were regularly and efficiently dispatched—and for the French government in the postwar years. In 1948 Paris called upon the Union Corse to break a strike by Communist-controlled unions that threatened to close the port of Marseille. The Union Corse obliged by providing an army of strike-breaking longshoremen to unload the ships and a crew of assassins to gun down defiant union leaders. French government officials have not forgotten such favors.

The same kind of political fix, arranged in other ways, has kept the Union Corse narcotics network operating in Southeast Asia since 1948. A large share of the heroin used by U.S. troops in Viet Nam was supplied by Corsican-financed narcotics producers in Laos and Thailand. For about ten years following the French withdrawal from Indochina in 1954, a group of Corsican war veterans ran several small charter airlines whose purpose was the smuggling of narcotics from Laos into South Viet Nam; the lines were collectively known as "Air Opium."

In Latin America, the Union Corse

is extremely influential in a number of countries, including Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, Paraguay, Bolivia and Panama. In some cases, the influence has proved strong enough to protect a handful of heroin laboratories that have recently been moved there from Marseille. In Paraguay, Corsican influence is believed to have been behind the U.S.'s recent difficulties in extraditing French-born Auguste Ricord to the U.S. to face narcotics charges.

According to testimony given before a U.S. Senate subcommittee in 1964, one of the Corsican godfathers is Marcel Francisci, 52, a flamboyant, onetime war hero (the *Croix de Guerre*) whose business interests include casinos in Britain, France and Lebanon. In 1968, caught in a gangland vendetta, Francisci barely escaped an ambush in a restaurant on the island of Corsica. Four months later, the men who tried to kill him were murdered in a Parisian restaurant by gunmen posing as cops. Francisci today is an elected district official on Corsica.

Other known leaders of the Union Corse, according to the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in testimony before the same Senate subcommittee, include Dominique Venturi, 49, and his brother Jean, 51. Dominique's base has been Marseille, where he has been known as a political crony of Mayor Gaston Deferre, the Socialist candidate for President of France in 1969. Dominique got into the narcotics-smuggling business in 1953, and at one time ran a fleet of yachts for hauling

morphine base from the Middle East to Marseille. Jean Venturi, who went to Canada in 1952 and is believed to be operating there still, is sometimes credited with pioneering the technique of hiding heroin in the nooks and crannies of imported autos.

About 10 years ago, the Union Corse began to move into the U.S. to fill the vacuum created by the partial withdrawal of the Mafia from the narcotics racket. Its chief contact in the U.S. became Florida Gang Boss Santo Trafficante Jr., who traveled to Saigon and Hong Kong to work out narcotics deals with the Corsicans and later turned up in Ecuador to check out a cocaine network in which he had been offered a partnership. The Union Corse also supplied and financed the new gangs of South Americans, Puerto Ricans and blacks, who moved into the vacant territories. All members of the milieu were instructed to avoid disturbing those Mafiosi who still continued to deal in narcotics—chiefly the *capos* and soldiers of the Bonanno and Gambino families.

The peace between the Corsicans and the Sicilians has endured for a surprisingly long time, but it may not last much longer. Last week representatives of the Mafia clans in New York met to consider a mass re-entry into the narcotics business. If they decide to proceed, and if approval comes from the Mafia's supreme council, the Commission, they will have to do it over the Corsicans'—and some of their own—dead bodies.



HARPER & ROW

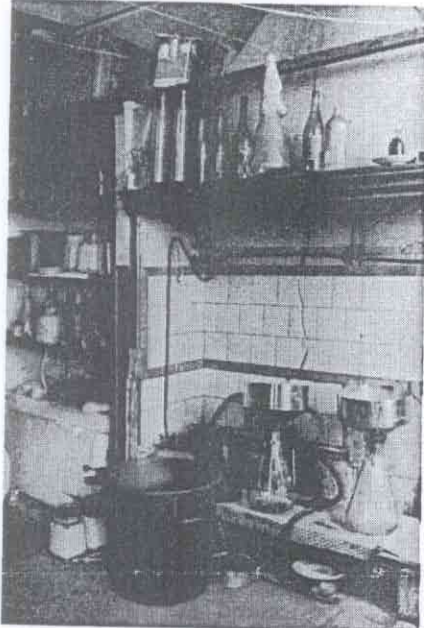
FRANCISCI



Thailand and Laos known as the Golden Triangle, the richest poppy-growing area in the world and the source of the Asian heroin now reaching the U.S. in growing quantities.

Opium production is outlawed in Burma, but Lo has what the State Department describes as "a contract" with the Burmese government: he keeps his turf clear of Communist insurgents, and the government allows him to deal in opium as he pleases. Lo has had no trouble in keeping up his end of the deal. He maintains a private army of some 5,000 local tribesmen and deserters from Chiang Kai-shek's old Kuo-

WHERLE-GAMMA



RAIDED LAB NEAR MARSEILLE

"Chemists" turn morphine into heroin.

mintang 93rd Independent Division.

Typically, the big-time operators deal in more than just drugs. After they deliver their opium to smugglers on the Thai border, Lo's huge caravans—often 200 mules and 200 porters, guarded by 600 troops—frequently return to Burma with contraband ranging from trucks and airplane parts to bolts of cloth and auto engines. Lo, says one U.S. official, "doesn't go empty-handed either way."

Similarly, drug traffickers in Uruguay, Argentina, Peru and Brazil dabble on the side in cigarettes, TV sets, whisky, radios and watches. By some accounts, French smugglers are into something far more complex. It is said that the SDECE, France's CIA, has quietly engaged Paris- and Marseille-based smugglers to move arms to a number of Middle East countries. These secret arms shipments are said to enable France to bolster its export arms industry and its influence in the Middle East, while it continues to adhere publicly to its 1968 total embargo on weapons sales to the belligerent nations of the region. The theory goes that arms and ammunition are turned over to established smugglers and shipped in compartments concealed

in specially fitted vehicles. The underworld then takes advantage of the arrangement: on the return trip, the same compartments are filled with drugs.

Narcotics experts say that big drug dealers share something approaching a community spirit. On one occasion a trafficker loaned a competitor 20 "keys" (kilos of narcotics) in order to make up a shipment. The real common denominator in the business is an addiction to immense profits. At the labs in Marseille, a dealer must shell out anywhere from \$120,000 to \$350,000 for 100 kilos of heroin refined from Turkish opium. On delivery to a U.S. wholesal-

er, however, the 100-kilo package is worth about \$1 million. After expenses, the net profit can be as high as \$750,000.

Those profits attract investment funds from a variety of sources. Switzerland is so fretful about an influx of tainted narcotics money that the government has announced a special drive to screen numbered bank accounts for illegal uses. While there is no financial "octopus" for drug money in Switzerland, there are ways in which capital flows into narcotics. Money invested in clandestine companies registered in the name of a "manufacturer's representative" or "legal representative" often

## Portrait of a Narc: Death Is Never Far Away

THE 1,610 agents of the Justice Department's Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs are the advance scouts and front-rank skirmishers in the U.S.'s war on narcotics. The BNDD agent's business is basically intelligence; he deals with small-time pushers and "mules" (couriers), as well as international traffickers, in any number of situations and any number of languages. He must be, in short, the compleat narc.

Roughly 45% of the BNDD's agents are stationed abroad, in as many as 57 countries. They sometimes operate out of a U.S. Embassy or consulate but they have a passion for anonymity and independence. If they work with anyone, it is the local narcotics agents—especially in France. French narcs, says one U.S. agent, "work like we do. It's all in the approach. They will stay on the job 24 hours a day for as many days as it takes to break a case."

At any one time, an agent may be working on a dozen cases spread out over several countries. U.S. agents, with budgets that are the envy of their foreign counterparts, depend heavily on informants. Such sources, who have led the way to major busts, have been paid as much as \$30,000—well over the average agent's annual salary. The overseas agent is usually careful to pass his information over to local authorities, and let them make the bust. Abroad, agents must not only be resourceful undercover operators but also diplomats, especially in countries sensitive to U.S. meddling in internal affairs.

One such agent-diplomat is Nick Panella, 39, a graduate of The Bronx, Manhattan's Hunter College, and most of the world's drug trade centers: New York, Rome, Istanbul, Marseille, Montreal and Paris. Dark and compact, Panella describes his appearance as "the stereotype of the Italian wise ass"—a distinct asset in the trade. "Up in East Harlem," he says, "nobody's going to introduce any bright-eyed, 6-ft. Ryan to anybody worth talking to in drugs. But I fit right in. They'll sell to someone who looks like me."

Panella, who earns \$25,000 a year,

lives with his Italian-speaking wife Sylvia and their three children in a comfortable Parisian suburb. In his current role as deputy director of BNDD's key Region 17, which includes Marseille, Panella's wardrobe runs to sporty suits. When he operated as an agent, he added a big pinky diamond and, frequently, a cigar. "By the time you're through with a case," he says, "you sometimes think you're a trafficker. You sure as hell look like one."

The toughest place Panella has worked in was Turkey. Frequently he posed as a buyer and approached the wagon trains by which heavily armed Turkish opium farmers moved their wares at night. "I never made a case in the interior when there wasn't shooting," Panella says, "but nobody ever got hit. The confusion is unbelievable. You just close in when the time comes and grab as many farmers as you can."

"You're always nervous when it begins," says Panella. "You never get used to those first few minutes—you know, with the guns and all that." The closest call he has ever had was in Beirut, when he arranged the bust of a small-time dealer. "We got to the building where I was going to pick up the stuff. The police were supposed to stay at the top of some long narrow stairs until I climbed up there with the trafficker. But they started to come down too soon. I felt the automatic in my back. When I heard the hammer click, I dived forward and prayed. There were bullets all around, as usual, but none in me—or the smuggler, for that matter. He got away."

Eleven BNDD agents have been killed in the past four years. The chief occupational hazard is the "little guy," who is apt to panic when he finds he has been dealing with an agent. A regular trafficker would "just back off and split," says Panella. "These guys don't like messy stuff." They do not hesitate to rub out a suspected informer.

Many agents admit a respect for "the other team." Says Panella: "It's professional stuff. When you get them, they know you've played a good hand. When they get away, you know you've still got something to learn from them."



gued that the "only really effective way" to end the drug traffic is to end poppy cultivation. The U.S. already has satellites in orbit that can locate poppy fields on the earth's surface. In *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, a new study that attempts, with only partial success, to blame U.S. policy for the vigor of the world drug trade, Author Alfred W. McCoy, a Yale graduate student, suggests that Washington might consider paying the hill peoples of the Golden Triangle area not to grow their poppies. If they were paid the going price in the area of \$50 a kilo, by McCoy's reckoning, the cost to the U.S. would be \$50 million.

**Tough Strategy.** But that is hardly realistic; the dollar has not always served the U.S. well in Indochina, and there is little reason its luck would be any better in the hills of Burma, where the poppy is deeply embedded in the local culture. What are the alternatives then? India, which dominates the world trade in legal opium used in medicine, is widely regarded as having one of the best control programs in the world. That is somewhat mythical, however. In New Delhi, there are 800 registered addicts, served by two government opium shops—but another 30,000 or so unregistered addicts can get opium under the counter at tea stalls or from cigarette vendors in the city.

The U.S. would hardly accept drastic measures like those of China, where opium dealers were shot on sight in the 1950s and 1960s, or Iran, which has a chronic addiction problem. In 1955, when that country was plagued with 2,000,000 addicts in a population of 25 million, the Shah ordered Iran's opium fields burned and addicts bused off to camps for a forced withdrawal program. Addiction dropped way down, but it was only a temporary reprieve. The addict population is back up to 400,000 and still climbing, even though Iranian troops regularly fight gun battles with Turkish and Afghan opium smugglers along the borders.

The U.S.'s war on heroin is only getting under way, and it is not without its critics, who variously contend that it is too little too late, and that the effort is diffused because some narcotics agents go after marijuana dealers with the same zeal they apply to the heroin traffic. Yet barring any unexpected developments—an international agreement for a total ban on the poppy, say, or discovery of insects that attack the plant, or a medical breakthrough in treatment of addiction—the outlook is for a protracted war. There will be little deviation from the present U.S. strategy of tough, front-door diplomacy with the countries along the drug supply lines and back-alley skirmishing with the traffickers. That strategy will not bring victory in the drug war, but even a draw would be a plus—provided that the respite is used to develop a social and educational approach to the problem of addiction.