U.S. Losing Drug-Smuggling War

By Jack Anderson and Les Whitten

The government's war against drug smuggling, trumpeted as one of the major domestic successes of the Nixon administration, is losing the battle to fleets of small private planes and fast boats.

Classified documents from the Customs Bureau made available to us demonstrate the extent of the government's failure. They flatly state that the narcotics agents cannot compete with the ingenuity of the smugglers.

The dope runners have organized the most important small boat operation since the evacuation of Dunkirk, and the government's fragmented narcotics forces are unable to cope with them.

"We must undertake a program to provide Customs control of small boat traffic entering the United States," one of the documents asserts. "Smuggling of narcotic drugs by small boats is a serious problem. At present, we have no means of effecting interdiction of drugs entering the United States by this means."

The high flying dope peddlers operate with equal freedom, hauling their cargo of white powder from Mexico and Canada with virtually no opposition.

"Smuggling by means of private aircraft has grown in a situation where control of this commerce, for technical reasons, was not possible," the documents said.

In short, the situation is so out of hand that Mafia and free-lance traffickers have virtual carte blanche to haul their wares across the United States borders.

Federal anti-narcotics officials have made elaborate plans to increase their efficiency in the air and on the water, but budget conscious bureaucrats have cut out this capability. For this fiscal year alone, the Office of Management and Budget has sliced the Customs budget for these plans from $11.4 million to $3.3 million.

This penny-wise policy is preventing narcotics agents from acquiring sophisticated tools, including aircraft with special tracking equipment, boats fast enough to catch smugglers' craft, and sensors to seek out the dope runners.

The drug fighters are using some electronic sensors borrowed from the military, but find them virtually worthless.

The heavily publicized seizures of millions of dollars worth of narcotics are largely the work of old-fashioned customs and narcotics agents at ports or elsewhere, based on leads from painstakingly nurtured informants. Arrests of smugglers through random checks of small planes or boats have been few and infrequent.

Presently, the air-sea fight against drugs is badly fragmented between Customs at the Treasury Department and the new Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) at the Justice Department. A memorandum describing a meeting last month between Customs' air intrusion coordinators and George Brosan, a top Customs enforcement official, makes clear that neither agency knows what the other is doing.

There are about 50 planes of various kinds available at any one time to the two agencies for air and boat surveillance. But without cooperation between them through use of informers who signal the departure of a shipment from some lonely harbor or airport, the planes are useless. They cannot "picket-line" the entire border.

DEA, which may wind up with the whole program eventually, is too busy reorganizing to take on any new duties, particularly ones as complicated as the "Air Intrusion" operation.

The overall mess is best summed up by Brosan:

"Both the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Immigration and Naturalization Service have token programs. Neither can compare with the present Customs effort, and possibly some thought ought to be given to combining the three programs."

CIA Pig-Sticker—The men who work for the Central Intelligence Agency are traditionally regarded as close-mouthed characters who spend their waking hours tracking spies and tapping telephones.

Angus MacLean Thuermer, the agency's "public information officer," defies tradition. He is one of the nation's foremost "pig stickers," and he doesn't mind talking about it.

He became addicted to the exotic sport of "pig sticking" nicely underplayed British nicely underpayed British term for hunting wild boar on horseback with a spear"—while serving with the Foreign Service in India.

Last year, Thuermer went back to India for another hog hunt. When he returned to the States, he broke CIA tradition and published his memoirs of the hunt in an obscure weekly newspaper called the "Piedmont Virginian."

Although Thuermer rarely has anything to say to reporters about CIA affairs, he waxes poetic about pig sticking.

Footnote: So proud of his pig-sticking prowess is Thuermer that he keeps his spear in his office. He invited us over to see it, but we politely refused when he added that "it isn't every day that you get to stick an Anderson man."