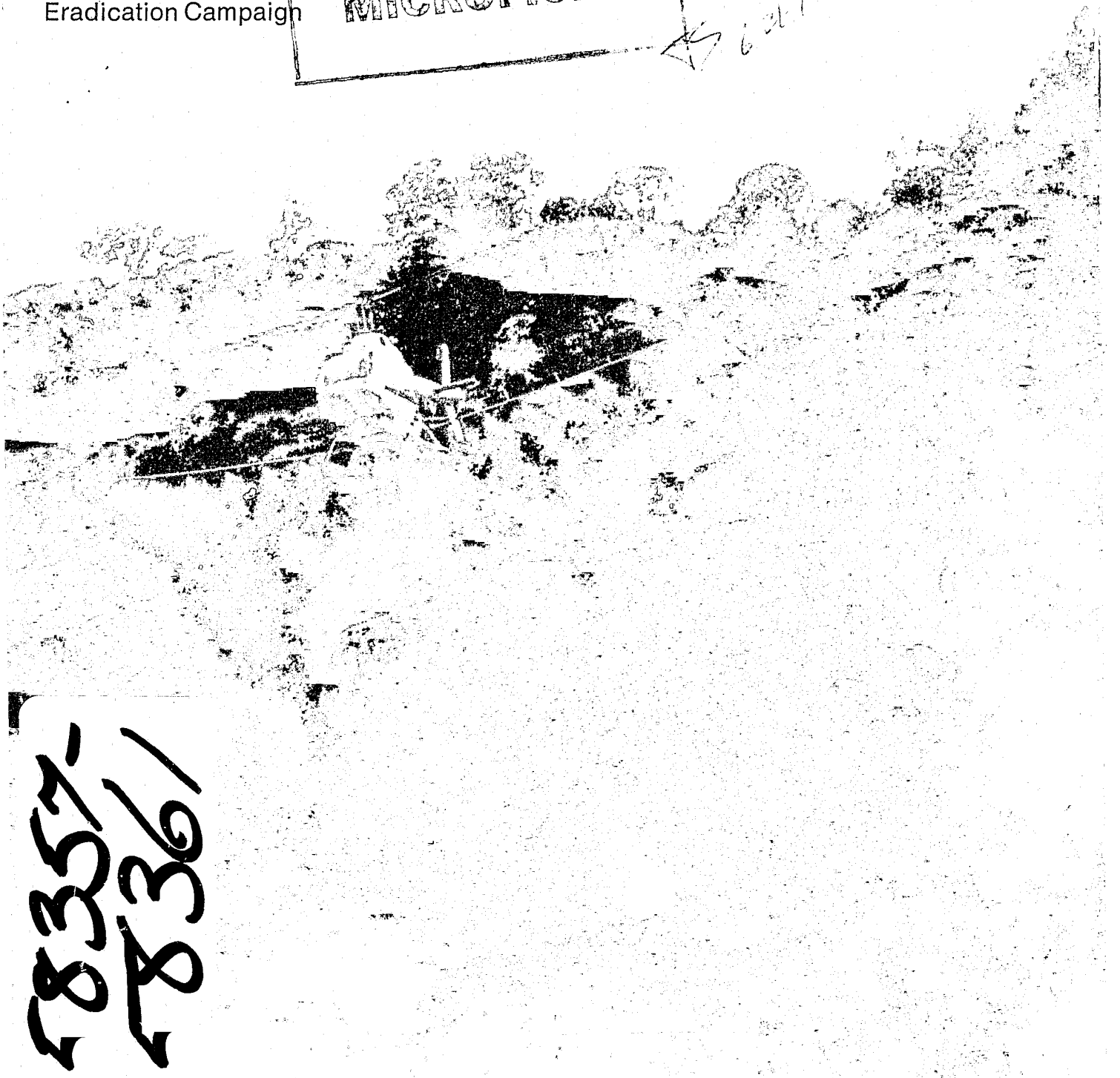
Drug Enforcement

February 1977

The Mexican Poppy Eradication Campaign



Message from the Administrator

DEA Administrator Peter B. Bensinger

An international conference of elected officials, parliamentarians, and law enforcement experts to draw up strong new anti-narcotics agreements was recently proposed by U.S. Representative Lester L. Wolff (D-N.Y.), Chairman of the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control. The recommendation followed a 16-day fact-finding mission, including visits with His Holiness Pope Paul, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Afghanistan President Daoud, as well as United Nations, U.S. Military, and top French and Italian narcotics officials.

The proposal of the Select Committee on Narcotics for an international commitment by elected officials, parliamentarians, and law enforcement officers will be welcomed and supported by lawmen throughout the world.

Narcotics abuse presents a global problem that requires unprecedented cooperation among the world's leaders — political, professional and religious. We need better understanding by parliamentarians around the globe of the problems that police are facing.

In our visits with government and police leaders and with His Holiness Pope Paul VI, we found real and mounting concern with the drug problem.

European Law Enforcement is very worried about the rapid spread of heroin. The police were surprised and, I might add, very impressed that our parliamentarians and our police were looking at our drug problems together. That in my mind is the key.

Drug Abuse is no longer just an American problem. Twenty kilograms of Southeast Asian heroin, enroute to Amsterdam, was recently seized in Rome. Two hundred people died last year in West Germany from overdose of drugs, 20 from our own military.

The cultivation of opium poppy must be controlled. This will require government dedication to narcotic crop eradication, and income substitution, complemented by consistent enforcement that discovers and properly punishes offenders who continue to plant these illegal crops.

Cooperation of this type has been achieved in Turkey. In addition, there has been a determined effort by the Government of Mexico to destroy poppy growing in that country.

It was clear to me that we have our own responsibilities in the United States. We ask foreign governments to eradicate opium poppy fields and prevent exportation of heroin to this country, but when dealing with drug traffickers, here, too, they are too often let off by our courts with just a slap on the wrist.

Through probation and lenient sentencing, more than half of those convicted in the United States for narcotics charges during 1975 were freed immediately or were eligible to go back on the streets within a year.

In Singapore, traffickers of 10 to 15 grams of heroin are subject to at least 20 years imprisonment and traffickers of more than 15 grams to death. Indonesia provides life imprisonment or death for trafficking in heroin. Turkey and Mexico have far stronger sentences than we do and the laws of Japan provide for stiffer sentencing for drug violations than for homicide. By contract, in the Netherlands, where drug laws until November 1976 have been the most lenient in Europe, we have the biggest trafficking and transit problem.

Chairman Wolff and the members of the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control deserve the praise and support of the American people for the initiative they have taken in bringing together the Congress and the executive branch to closely coordinate the battle against narcotics. This initiative should elevate the level of awareness internationally and should force the standards of performance, the level of commitment, the bail, sentencing and interdiction efforts here and abroad that are so desperately needed.

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North American Report

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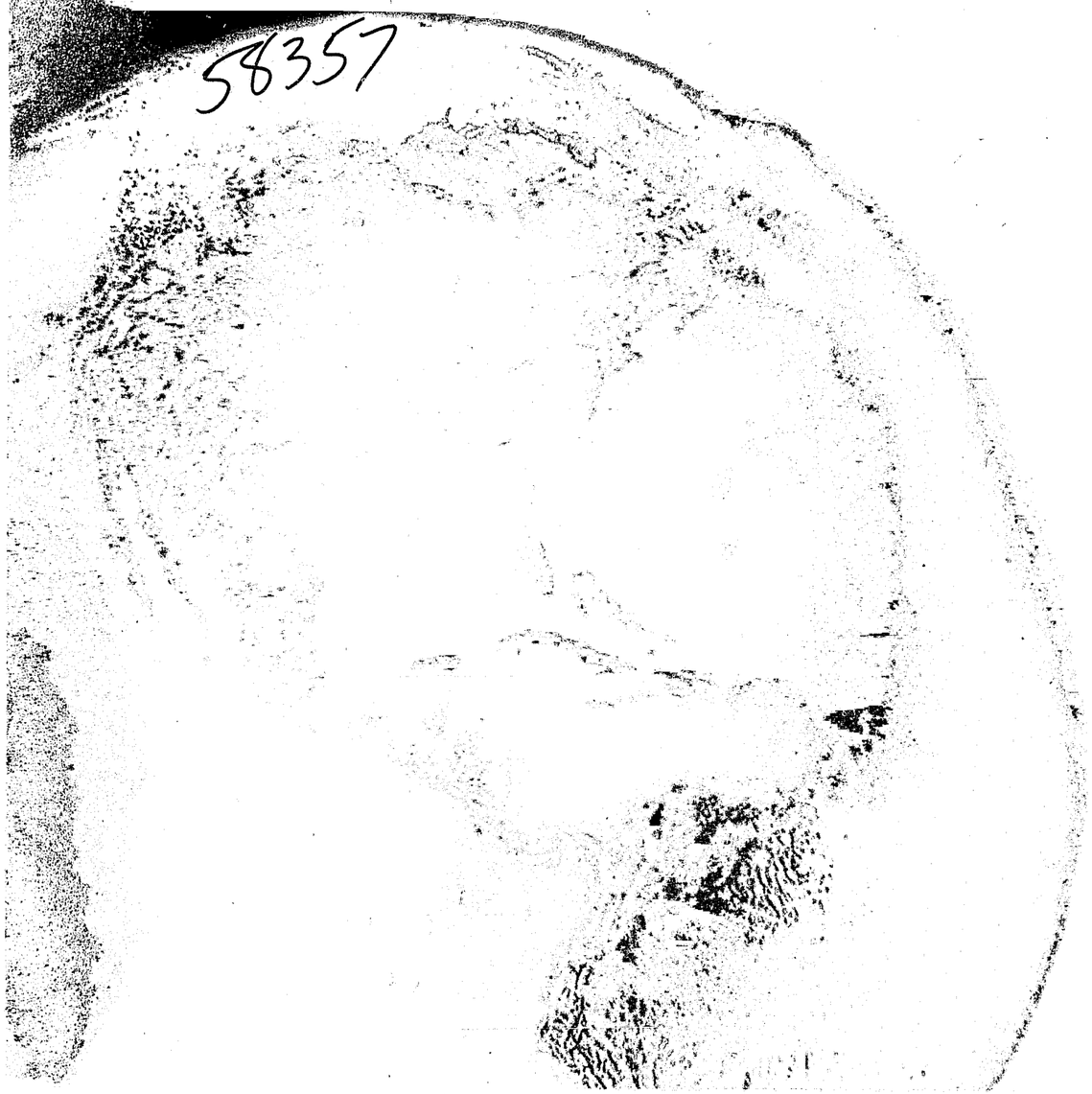
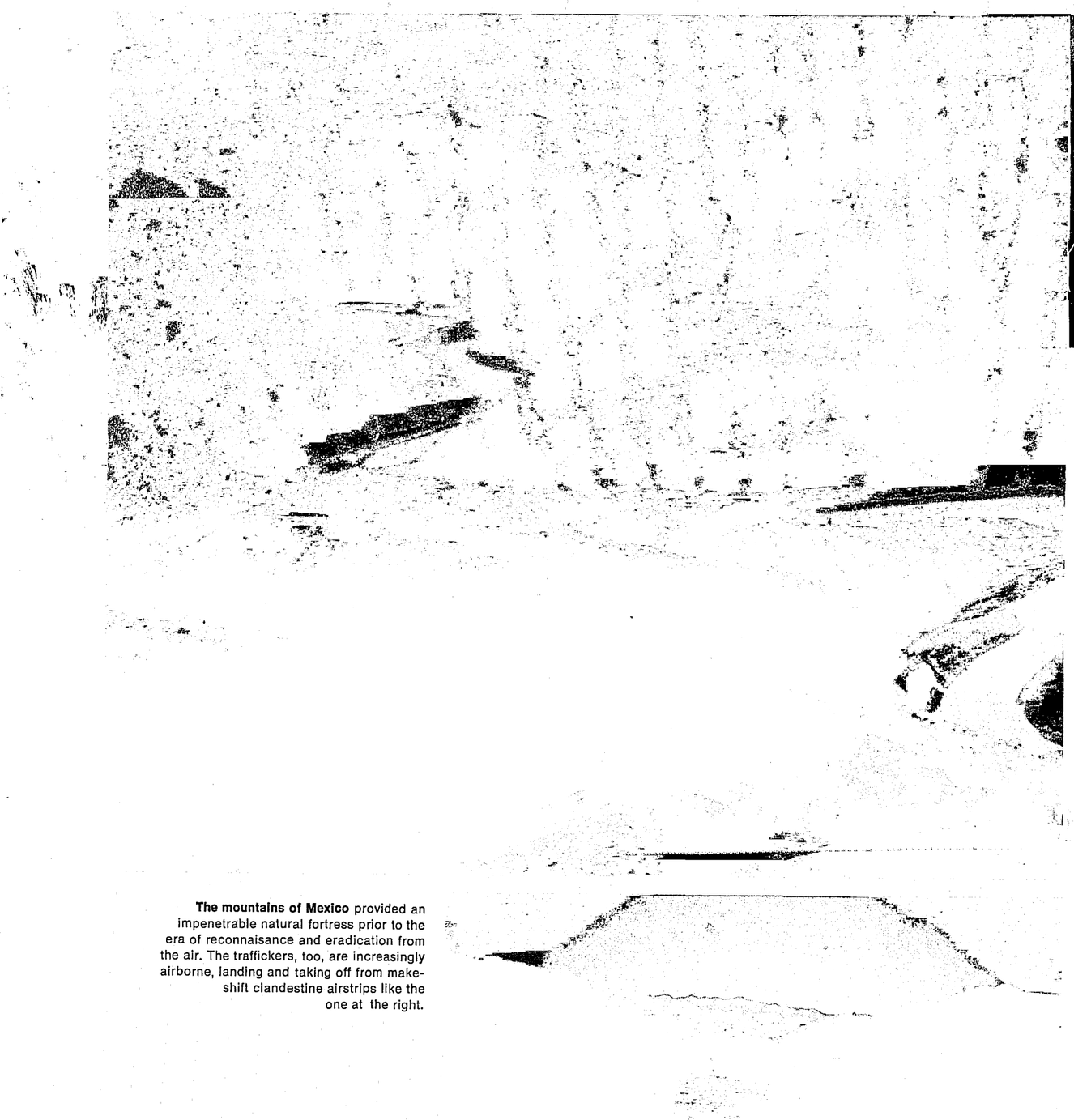




The mountains of Mexico provided an impenetrable natural fortress prior to the era of reconnaisance and eradication from the air. The traffickers, too, are increasingly airborne, landing and taking off from makeshift clandestine airstrips like the one at the right.

acceleration of these efforts, the tide continued to rise. By 1975 the percentage of domestic brown heroin was measured by DEA at 89 percent. It was in that year that a fundamental decision was made by the Government of Mexico to use herbicides for an airborne strike at the Mexican poppy crop.

The question is: Can the United States and Mexico find the resources, the equipment, the skills, and the intricate techniques of cooperation to do what was achieved with the French and the Turks and other countries concerned with the crisis of the sixties in Europe?

Against the background of complex preparations in the preceding years, let me summarize the operations of the Drug Enforcement Administration as drawn up to form a 10-point Mexican heroin program in April 1976.

DEA Ten-Point Mexican Heroin Program

1. *TRIZO.* Targeted primarily at the tristate area of Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango, Operation Trizo, Phase I, had lent active support to the Mexican Eradication Campaign since its inception in November 1975. Herbicide spraying operations were already underway in January. Twenty-seven DEA experts were assigned to Mexico for the duration of Phase II, scheduled to commence in September 1976.

2. *JANUS.* A program to present evidence on major heroin traffickers for prosecution by the Government of Mexico, Operation Janus had been in effect for one year. In-depth training for all DEA agents and Assistant U.S. Attorneys had been carried out to insure prosecution of previously untouched

to be 8 kg. It is roughly estimated that 20 laborers are required to harvest an acre. The figure suggests that an army of a quarter million may have been immobilized by the partial destruction of the total 1975 crop.

It is in the crude, clandestine laboratories of the hinterland that Mexican brown heroin acquires its only distinctive features. Raw opium gum is normally converted to heroin in a continuous three-day process. In contrast to classical French procedures, morphine hydrochloride is produced instead of morphine base, simply by adding water, lime, salt, and probably hydrochloric acid. The morphine product is then filtered by squeezing it in a cloth. On the third day it is acetylated to produce heroin hydrochloride.

Mexican sources of supply, many of them fugitives from U.S. justice.

3. *Interdiction.* Coordinating DEA responsibilities for route interruption with border interdiction by the U.S. Customs Service, this interagency effort has continued to improve in efficiency with the increased transmission of tactical intelligence. DEA, Customs, INS, and Coast Guard seizures and interagency cooperation have improved markedly.

4. *CENTAC.* Central Tactical Units, targeting major violators for prosecution under U.S. conspiracy laws, are increasingly being utilized on the basis of intelligence gathered from regional debriefing of defendants, informants, and prison inmates, as well as the growing resources of the El Paso Intelligence Center.

5. *Spanish-Speaking Personnel.* The identification of all Spanish-speaking agents and their subsequent reassignment to duty posts in direct support of the Mexican heroin program was undertaken to assure optimum effectiveness. DEA agents in other key cities were scheduled to receive additional training to increase their language proficiency.

6. *Target City Operations.* On the basis of intelligence analysis, six target cities were singled out to be the focal points of an intensified enforcement effort: Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix, San Antonio, Chicago, and Detroit.

7. *Coordination with State and Local Police.* Managers of state and local law enforcement agencies were familiarized with aspects of the program as they pertained to their operations. Chiefs of Police were alerted to the techniques of JANUS and encouraged to submit possible cases for prosecution in Mexico. There was also a new impetus to intelligence-sharing to identify major violators whether operating internationally, interregionally, or within local jurisdictions.

8. *Full Support from DEA Offices of Intelligence, Science and Technology, and Training.* In support of the brown heroin program, these offices were assigned a number of specific responsibilities. EPIC facilities in El Paso were required to play a particularly important role, and all DEA laboratories were tasked to identify promptly the purity and source of brown heroin received for analysis.

9. *SAO/MEX.* Special Action Office for Mexico was established to review all heroin cases reported from the field, maintain liaison with intelligence experts, coordinate interregional conspiracy investigations, and allocate financial resources on a priority basis.

10. *Interagency Intelligence Committee.* To streamline the necessarily rapid exchange of intelligence, a special committee was formed of top-level intelligence analysts from DEA, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Bureau

Aerial Reconnaisance, using the Multi-Spectral Opium Poppy Sensor (MOPS), can now identify fields otherwise invisible to the naked eye. The fields are plotted on maps in preparation for an airborne strike.

of Customs, and the Coast Guard.

As itemized in outline form, these constituted the ten primary resources upon which we were to draw in the months ahead. I should now like to turn to events since April 1976, occurring simultaneously in Mexico, along the border, and in the United States.

The Mexican Eradication Program

TRIZO, Phase I, officially terminated on April 30, 1976. The results as they were tallied were impressive. Under the direction of Dr. Alejandro Gertz-Manero, the Mexican Federal Judicial Police (MFJP), assisted by U.S. equipment and trained personnel, had discovered and destroyed 22,887 isolated opium poppy fields. By hand or by herbicides more than 14,000 acres of poppies were eradicated.

No sooner was Phase I finished than preparations for Phase II were underway. Intelligence reports indicated that the farmers, who normally grow only two poppy crops in a year, might try to plant a third crop in May or June to make up for some of their losses. On May 10 a 25-day reconnaissance mission was launched, using U.S. aircraft flown by DEA pilots and crewmen, accompanied by MFJP spotters. The experience of Phase I enormously increased the potential of Phase II, but it also extended the area now under surveillance. The U.S. Multispectral Opium Poppy Sensor System had photographed about 9,000 square miles and produced accurate maps of the traditional tristate poppy-growing area known as Zone I. Running Southwest along the rugged slopes of the Sierra Madre lay Zones II and III, where poppy cultivation was known to be proliferating. It was in Zone III, 50 miles north of Acapulco, that a DEA aircraft, a U-6 Beaver, piloted by Special Agent James Lunn, accompanied by Special Agent Ralph Shaw and a MFJP officer as spotters, crashed and burned in May, killing all three officers.

Reconnaisance reports revealed the locations of many fields under preparation but few that had as yet been newly planted. Meanwhile, the SAO/MEX staff was at work on operational guidelines for strategy and logistical support. Late in June a two-day meeting was held at headquarters to iron out a host of long-range responsibilities, ranging from resources, pilot rotation schedules, on-site mechanics and maintenance to such small but significant details as Mexican gasoline credit cards and required reporting procedures.

TRIZO II officially began on September 1, 1976, 10 weeks earlier in the growing season than the campaign of the previous year. It is estimated that the use of air-delivered herbicides resulted in the destruction of more than half of the spring crop. It is expected that most of the fall crop will be destroyed before it can ever be harvested. The aspersion techniques whereby the opium plants are chemically destroyed without adverse ecological effects remains essentially the same. But the initial returns from the field offer a new index of efficiency that augurs well for the coming months. During the first five weeks of the new campaign, 1,116 acres of poppy fields were destroyed, as compared with 405 acres during that period of the previous year — a ratio of almost three to one.

Transborder Operations

On October 1, 1976, a U.S. Customs lookout initiated by DEA resulted in the arrest of two persons with 28 pounds of brown heroin upon entry at Eagle Pass, Texas. The two arrested agreed to cooperate in a controlled delivery of the heroin to an intended recipient in Chicago. Following a DEA convoy to Chicago, one additional person was arrested.

On October 27, 1976, a U.S. Customs lookout initiated by DEA's El Paso Intelligence Center resulted in the arrest of one person with 23 pounds of brown heroin.

These are two recent examples of the benefits accruing from increasingly sophisticated intelligence-sharing. The nerve-center of this operation is the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC), a unique interagency operation manned by special agents and intelligence analysts of DEA and Immigration and Naturalization Border Patrol Officers, together with representatives from the Bureau of Customs, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Coast Guard, and the Federal Aviation Administration. Here, in response to more than 150 requests for assistance daily, data is retrieved by computer to provide actionable intelligence for the immediate use of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

It should be emphasized that brown heroin cannot be dealt with separately from the rest of the incoming drug traffic. One of the reasons that law enforcement cannot overlook the presence of marihuana and cocaine is that the driving forces behind it so often consist of the same elements of organized crime. Take the celebrated case of Alberto Sicilia Falcon, a 31-year-old Cuban formerly residing in Tijuana, Mexico. His organization had the capability of supplying not only brown heroin but cocaine and marihuana in almost incredible quantity. On a tip by DEA's San Diego District Office, Sicilia and two lieutenants were briefly placed under surveillance by MFJP Commander Florentino Ventura in Mexico City. Alerted to the surveillance, a high-speed chase ensued. The three were soon arrested in possession of weapons and 220

pounds of cocaine, the largest seizure of cocaine ever recorded. Fourteen others were rounded up before the case was closed. But the evidence for the case was in the United States. About a year earlier, 42 tons of marihuana had been seized by the MFJP, accompanied by DEA agents, south of the border, a world record at that time.* Under interrogation the major suspects confessed to the ownership of the marihuana. Alberto Sicilia Falcon, however, was not one to take incarceration lying down. It is reported that he paid over a million pesos ($80,000 in U.S. currency) to have a tunnel dug from the basement of a residence, a distance of about a hundred feet, into his cell in the Lecumbarri Prison. Through this tunnel, in April 1976, Sicilia and three others made good their escape, only to be arrested three days later. He and his henchmen are awaiting trial. The significance of the case lies in the fact that there would be no trial except through the facilities of operation JANUS. In the six-month period under review JANUS cases have more than doubled. As of October 1976, the joint prosecution program listed 62 cases pending, the principal targets of which are Mexican nationals, U.S. fugitives, and third-country nationals like Sicilia, all charged with violation of Mexican narcotics laws on the basis of evidence established in the United States.

Before going on to examine the record of events north of the border during the six-month period, let us look at the major trafficking routes as they have emerged from intelligence analysis. Despite continual alterations by those concerned with escaping detection, both air and ground traffic tend to follow one of three general directions. The first crosses the border between Del Rio and Brownsville, bound chiefly for Chicago or Detroit to the northeast. A second crosses the border at El Paso, in the direction of Denver to the north. A third crosses the border between Nogales and San Diego, bound for Phoenix, Los Angeles, and major cities to the northwest. These three prevailing routes point directly to the six cities selected as targets of the Mexican 10-point program.

Operations in the United States

Since May 1976, when SAO/MEX operations got underway, 44 percent of all the brown heroin seized or purchased by DEA has been found in these six key cities: Detroit, Chicago, San Antonio, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

It was announced at noon on October 7 that 230 of the nation's major narcotics traffickers, more than a third of them Class I or II violators, had been arrested after the unsealing of indictments in the six target cities late the previous afternoon. By the following day the number of arrests had

* See **Drug Enforcement,** Fall 1974.

"Spot and Spray" operations have proven lethal to opium poppies without harm to the environment. The kill action of the herbicide may take a few days up to a week, depending on the natural vitality of the plants.

risen to 309.

The two-day strike cast a dragnet across 19 states. So close was the coordination of federal, state, and local law enforcement officers that not a shot was fired. The only incident of note occurred in Kansas City when one suspect, in an attempt to escape arrest, collided with an officer's car.

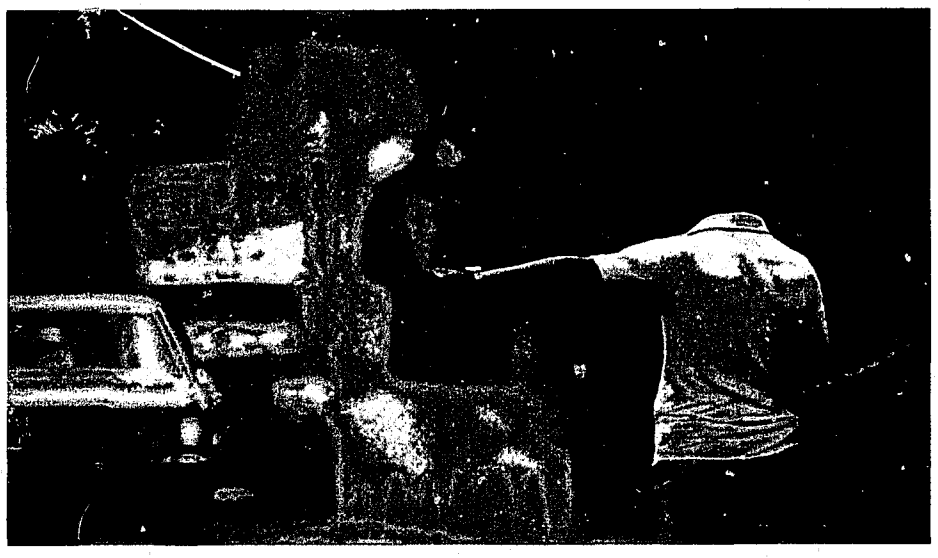
The case of Harold and Irma Hamilton of Beverly Hills, California, illustrates the standard of living of some of the top suspects. A search warrant was executed on their residence, purchased only a few months earlier for $330,000 in cash. DEA agents seized on the premises a $40,000 Rolls-Royce, a brand new $25,000 Jaguar, and $125,000 in cash.

Major brown heroin networks felt the impact of the October roundup. Five of the most deeply entrenched of these were the targets of CENTAC conspiracy investigations. CENTAC 11, which began in April 1976, focused on the Oakland-based organization of Lemmie Daniel Coleman, who it is claimed was responsible for the smuggling of between 400 and 600 pounds of heroin into the country with the aid of five couriers with plastic bags taped to their bodies. Forty-seven arrests were made in this case, hobbling a distribution system that extended into ten states.

CENTAC 13, which began in June 1976, tracked the Los Angeles operation of Henry Duwayne Watson, who, it is claimed, was so well established that his couriers, mostly prostitutes, were required to collect the purchase price before he sent them back with the purchase. Despite his high-handed policy, it is estimated that Watson's couriers managed to deliver 175 pounds of heroin a month to cities across the country over a three-year period.

Since the chain reaction of arrests, indictments, debriefings, and analysis of accumulating intelligence points for the most part to ongoing investigations, much of the narrative content of the campaign cannot be made public, and it is too early to make an assessment of its total impact. Such is the nature of this profession that there is often more to be done at the close of a successful investigation than there ever was at the beginning.

Roadblocks are a common occurrence on Mexican highways nowadays. Here, MFJP plainclothesmen with rifles on the lookout for drugs search the baggage of passing vehicles.



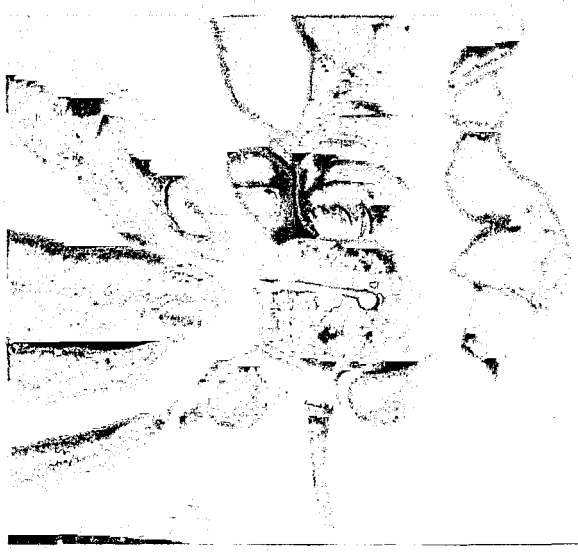
In the half year of its active existence (May 1-October 31), SAO/MEX recorded the arrests by DEA agents across the country of 1,892 persons on narcotics violations, including 263 Class I violators and 330 Class II violators. Seized in the course of the arrests were 685 pounds of heroin, 323 vehicles, 280 weapons, and $1,234,900 in cash.

Despite the tangible achievements of enforcement during this six-month period, the remarkable fact is that purchases and seizures, adjusted in terms of pure heroin, have consistently been going down. Chemical analysis by DEA laboratories indicates that during the period from April through September 1976 the amount of pure Mexican brown heroin removed from the U.S. market has remained well below that recorded in the same months of 1975. In the month of September 1976, for example, DEA laboratory figures show that less than a third as much brown heroin was removed than in September 1975; and because of decreased average purity, less than a fourth as much pure heroin. Similarly, seizures by U.S. Customs in the July-September quarter were down 36.9 percent as compared to the same quarter in 1975. We interpret this to mean that there is a decrease in the amount of Mexican brown heroin available in the U.S. market, and we attribute it to the achievement of international control efforts since November 1975.

In summary, let us turn back to the question with which we began: Can the United States and Mexico together forge the alliance that will turn back the tide of North American heroin in the 1970's as we did together with Europe in the 1960's?

The answer is yes, we can. The upward trend has stopped and the downward purity trend begun. Our job, simply stated, is to see that this trend continues. The better control of brown heroin is taking place, but most of the work remains to be done.

END



All heroin is derived from a single source, the opium poppy *Papaver Somniferum,* which has appeared in an array of forms and colors in most of the temperate regions of the world. The poppy will grow almost anywhere that refuge may be found from the extremes of heat and cold, rain and drought, and the forces of the law. On the slopes of the Sierra Madre in the area of Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango, conditions are ideal at altitudes from 4,000 to 10,000 feet. Here, the temperature remains between 60 degrees and 70 degrees F., the soil is fairly rich, well drained, and may be irrigated from mountain streams. There are traditionally two crops: the winter, or dry season, crop normally planted early in October and harvested in March; and the summer, or wet season, crop extending from June through October.

Since poppy cultivation occurs in areas without access to farm machinery, the seeds are broadcast or systematically sown by hand on contoured slopes. Young plants must be thinned and protected from weeds. Irrigation is most commonly carried out by damming a small stream and digging irrigation canals to the fields. Mexican opium poppy flowers are predominantly red, although white and purple petals can sometimes be seen among them in a single field. About two weeks after the petals have fallen, the light green ring at the base of the capsule will within a day turn brown; this is the signal for scoring. Multiple incisions, a task for the expert, draw a white liquid latex upward from the stalks to the surface of the capsule where it dries to form a brown opium gum. The average yield of gum per acre is reported