

Air Bridge Denial: An International and Interagency Success Story.

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2003 started strong for Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) moving their illegal products by air in South America. US assistance in the air interception of drug-trafficking aircraft in the area had been halted after an April 2001 incident in Peru that resulted in the death of two innocent American missionaries aboard a civilian aircraft, mistaken for drug-traffickers (1).

In Colombia, still trying to recover from years of violence by DTO's and illegal armed groups, many areas of the country lacked government presence, with nearly 160 of the almost 1100 municipalities (county seats) lacking any police presence. (2) DTOs were able to move in and out of airstrips to move drug precursor chemicals, cocaine, and other related items. Some observers have used the analogy of comparing Colombia's size to a combination of California and Texas. The California-sized area is located from the Andes to the west. The mostly flat, Texas-sized area located east of the Andes, is home to less than 5% (approx 2.2 million) of the nation's nearly 48 million people, and has a very limited road network that made government access difficult (3). By the end of 2003, there were over 600 illegal flights over Colombia (4).

Most aircraft departed from known or suspected drug trafficking areas. The runways used by the DTOs ranged from legal runways in towns with no government presence to illegal, camouflaged landing strips with fake houses and small mobile structures placed along the middle of the airstrip that were removed when illegal aircraft came in and replaced when the runway was no longer in use. Oftentimes the aircraft were moved to the tree line after landing and camouflaged so that within minutes of landing there was no indication of an aircraft at the location. At one point, the Colombian Air Force (COLAF) estimated the number of illegal runways in the country at nearly 1,700 (5). Aircraft would take off and weave their way through the then-limited radar coverage in Colombia en route to their destination, more often than not somewhere in Central America.



In August 2003, the Colombian Air Bridge Denial (ABD) program started operations, following implementation of a bilateral US-Colombia agreement that featured improved operational safeguards compared to previous agreements(6). Whereas prior illegal flight intercept programs had US aircrews flying radar-tracking aircraft with host nation riders monitoring operations in their country, the new Colombia ABD program had Colombian Air Force aircrews with a bilingual US government safety monitor aboard SR-560 Citation aircraft loaned by the US government. These planes were equipped with an air-to-air radar and a forward looking infrared-equipped camera.

One key aspect of the new program was to have safety monitors whose only duty was to monitor events to ensure checklist compliance and flight safety. These monitors would be located at the Joint Interagency Task Force - South (JIATF-S) operations floor in Key West, Fl, aboard the radar tracking aircraft,

and at the COLAF command center in Bogotá. US contractors serving as safety monitors and Colombian Air Force pilots and mission directors aboard the Colombian Citation airborne tracker aircraft were all required to be bilingual(7). This requirement addressed the language barrier problem that contributed to the tragic Peru accidental shutdown in 2001. A radio network was established for the exclusive use of the safety monitors, ensuring direct communications were available throughout any event, in order to address another problem that occurred during the Peru incident (8). A common checklist was established so that when one participant mentioned a step number from the checklist, all participants knew exactly what he was doing. In order to have a continually improving program, all events were recorded and then reviewed not only by each of the participant organizations, but by a joint US-Colombian team.

The new program presented an international and interagency team to confront the wide-ranging tentacles of the DTOs. On the US side, this included personnel from the Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS). JIATF-S coordinated the operations and provided information on unknown, assumed suspect aircraft tracks obtained by the Relocatable-Over-The-Horizon-Radar from its operations center in Chesapeake, VA. These aircraft tracks met agreed upon criteria published in a bilateral letter of agreement and displayed behavior consistent with drug-carrying aircraft such as not having a flight plan (which is illegal in Colombia), flying at low nonstandard altitudes, flying without communicating with air traffic controllers, etc. The USAF provided E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System surveillance aircraft that expanded the coverage area and improved detection capabilities against low, slow-moving aircraft. US Air Forces Southern coordinated in-country training for Colombian aircrews. Additional training was conducted at the Inter American Air Forces Academy at Lackland AFB, TX. The Customs and Border Protection Office of Air and Marine provided P-3 aircraft coverage as well as training. The Drug Enforcement Administration provided vital information. State provided administrative oversight and funding, including aircraft and facilities, along with a US contractor that provided logistics, training, and safety monitors.

Government of Colombia (GOC) team members included personnel from the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Fiscalía (Office of the Prosecutor General), the Aeronautica Civil (Colombia's Federal Aviation Administration equivalent), COLAF, Colombian National Police (CNP), Colombian Navy (COLNAV), and Colombian Army (COLAR).

The program began operations with three SR-560 Citation aircraft based from Apiay Air Base, near Villavicencio in Colombia's Meta department. This was the nearest base to an area of heavy drug traffic known as "The Dog's Head." In eastern Colombia, an outline of the Brazilian border along the tri-border area between Venezuela, Brazil, and Colombia resembles a dog's head with the eastern border forming the back of the head and the western edge resembling the dog's open mouth around the Vaupes department of Colombia. Initially the venerable A-37 played the interceptor role in most ABD events. As the DTOs started to move their Dog's Head operations beyond the A-37's flying range, other platforms such as the AC-47 "Fantasma" gunship and forward-deployed AH-60 "Arpia" helicopter gunships were used. With most illegal trafficking based in locations that had no GOC presence, many of the initial ABD events ended with the COLAF destroying DTO aircraft on the ground.

The program also confronted a number of DTO initiatives to protect their illegal operations:

- Many of the drug carrying aircraft had falsified registration/tail numbers that could be changed in minutes.
- DTO aircraft carried extra fuel containers and improvised inflight refueling systems including pumps that increased the aircrafts' range.
- DTOs took action to ensure they were informed when ABD program aircraft took off. It was not unusual to see illegal aircraft change course shortly after takeoff of an ABD tracker aircraft. Operations security became a key aspect of daily operations.
- During night operations from illegal runways, DTO personnel would sometimes light large bonfires in a vain attempt to degrade night vision device effectiveness.

On 1 February, 2004, a Colombian Military air assault of over 600 National Police and Army soldiers seized the village of Caruru, in the Vaupes department, marking the first government security force presence in Caruru in 18 years. (9) The Caruru airstrip is located on the north bank of the navigable Vaupes River, making it a valuable transshipment point in Colombia's remote southeastern plains region, accessible only by air or river. This was part of the GOC's wider strategic operation (2003-04) to establish presence throughout all of the country's 1100 municipalities. The GOC capitalized on its enhanced airmobility, going from 24 helos in 1998 to 285 helos by 2004 (10).

As the GOC increased its ability to deploy ground forces by air and ground in the southeast, illegal air operations from the Dog's Head area decreased significantly. Conversely, illegal flight operations in northern Colombia increased, with many aircraft crossing the border and landing on illegal runways in the departments of Cesar and Norte de Santander in northeast Colombia.

Increased government presence and increased mobility made it possible to do more law enforcement events, involving CNP, COLAR, and the COLNAV in addition to the COLAF. The event of 27 February 2005 showcased the increased joint activity. While conducting an airborne patrol based on intelligence information, a COLAF Citation SR-560 detected a Beechcraft 200 Super King Air just as a group of narcotics traffickers finished loading it with drugs at an illegal airfield known to be used by DTOs in the Cesar department. The Beechcraft 200 took off and the SR-560 guided in an A-37 interceptor. As part of procedures to ensure safe use of weapons, the commander of the COLAF had to approve each phase of the interception event. Phase I is making warning calls on the radio and hand signals, Phase II is firing warning shots, and Phase III is firing shots to disable the aircraft(11). After making warning calls and firing warning shots in accordance with agreed procedures, the A-37 was cleared by the COLAF commander to open fire on the target aircraft. The A-37 hit one of the plane's fuel tanks and a large amount of fuel began leaking. The firing stopped as it became obvious the aircraft would have to land. The target plane returned to its departing runway, dropping packets of its cargo as it went along. It landed shortly after dark and veered at high speed off the runway in a spectacular cloud of dust. Its crew proceeded to offload some of the cocaine packets. Warning shots from the A-37 drove the narcotraffickers away from the aircraft. The nearest Colombian Army unit was notified and sent a ground patrol. However, the limited transportation network in the area made it difficult to estimate their arrival time. A COLAF "Rapaz" Bell 212 gunship arrived at the area escorting a COLNAV Bell 412 helicopter with four COLNAV marines aboard. While the "Rapaz" provided cover overhead, the marines disembarked from the helicopter, chased away the remaining narcotraffickers, and loaded as many of the cocaine packages into the helicopter as it could carry. As the helicopter gunship ran low on fuel, the Super King Air with the remaining load was destroyed before the helicopters departed in order to prevent the narcotics load from staying in the DTO's hands. Shortly afterwards a COLAR and CNP unit arrived and confiscated more cocaine packs found in the area.

On another occasion, an aircraft was located on an illegal runway. Phases I and II of the intercept procedures were completed, but before the aircraft was destroyed during Phase III, a Colombia CNP unit reported their approach to the site and proceeded to impound the aircraft, finding hand-drawn maps of runways with coordinates. When another aircraft departed from a nearby illegal runway within days and headed to Central America, the COLAF passed the coordinates to the destination country. Seven hours later, the suspect aircraft landed at an illegal runway at the coordinates. A firefight ensued after which five suspects were arrested and 420 kilos of cocaine were impounded.

The program grew to the point where it had five SR-560 aircraft and two SR-26 aircraft, with two more main operating bases at Barranquilla, in northern Colombia, and Cali, in southwestern Colombia. Aircraft regularly deployed to points throughout Colombia, including San Andres Island in the northwest Caribbean, providing a refueling point when intercepting drug-carrying aircraft in the Caribbean. The GOC also took steps to improve radar coverage throughout the country, increasing the number of civilian and military radars.

As the presence of the GOC extended, additional measures were taken such as destruction of illegal runways. These measures were conducted in coordination with different entities such as the COLAF, COLNAV, Fiscalia, CNP, and COLAR. Legal actions were also taken against owners of illegal runways used regularly for narcotics trafficking. In earlier times, DTOs had been able to repair destroyed runways practically overnight, but with the expanded government presence repairs took longer and in some cases proved impossible.

An important part of the ABD program was improving control over airports, aircraft, and pilots. With specific requirements (12) for operation of runways, inspection requirements for aircraft, and security checks as a part of the pilot licensing process, the Aeronautica Civil and Colombian National Police oversaw the legal operation of aircraft over Colombia. Visits to civilian airports throughout Colombia were scheduled to include ABD personnel meeting with air traffic controllers and aircrews in order to verify the dissemination of ABD information throughout the country. The CNP established a program to inspect aircraft arriving or departing from airfields throughout the country.

The success of the program allowed its aircraft to be used to augment the COLNAV's air arm with operations against illegal traffic overwater, the route used most by the DTOs (13). Flight training of ABD aircrews was conducted by US contractors, with the COLNAV providing their expertise on maritime survival, and the DHS Customs and Border Protection Office of Air and Marine

presenting a week-long course on maritime patrolling operations that provided vital information on what to look for on suspect vessels. The additional mission was a timely one, as the COLNAV and COLAF aircraft worked with US P-3 and E-3 aircraft to locate a number of self-propelled semisubmersibles that could carry tons of cocaine from Colombia to Central America, the latest initiative of the DTOs.

The ability to operate in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific allowed ABD aircraft to intercept illegal aircraft enroute to Central America and pass on a description to law enforcement authorities of cooperating nations. This cooperation made it easier for nations with limited air-to-air capabilities to assign assets to intercept the illegal aircraft and complete a law enforcement action. Now instead of just receiving information that a DTO aircraft was going their way, countries could get specific information on aircraft type, registration number, color, probable cargo, and crew aboard.

After five successful years and more than a 90% reduction in illegal flights over Colombia, the program was selected to be the first in US security assistance to Colombia to be nationalized (14). The aircraft and program assets were transferred to the GOC. An extensive training program was established using a train-the-trainer concept to ensure continued operations using Colombian assets and personnel. Colombian maintainers were qualified to perform their own maintenance on program aircraft and these duties were transferred from US contractors to the COLAF maintainers. Mission training was provided to Colombians assuming safety monitor duties. An English language training program was setup to ensure positive communication with JIATF-S and any international counterdrug assets. Colombian pilots took over the program's flight instruction duties.

With cooperation between several countries and government agencies, the COLAF has been able to exclude the DTOs from its air routes and exert control over its airspace, forcing the DTOs to use alternative means of transportation that are more time consuming and increase the exposure of their traffickers to law enforcement authorities throughout the region. This change has also improved the flight safety of legal aircraft operating in Colombian airspace. Through coordination with the JIATF-S, Colombia can be an important partner in the group of nations that form an international front against the DTOs. As the program progresses in its nationalized phase, increasing engagement with Caribbean and Central American nations is certain to deliver a hard blow to the DTOs operating in the area.

Notes

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