

memorandum

DATE: March 8, 1988

REPLY TO
ATTN OF: Frank E. White
Chief, OTDS

SUBJECT: Operation Snowcap
(FFS: 801-05)

TO: Donald L. Ashton
Chief, OTD

Attached is a copy of my initial memorandum pertaining to Operation Snowcap, in which I listed numerous recommendations that would impact on the safety of our agents.

As we know, the ultimate objective of leadership will always be the accomplishment of the mission. In striving to achieve this goal, the leader must accept full responsibility for all his decisions and must continually assess the situational environment, i.e., Operation Snowcap, in which his agents are operating.

We are violating certain tenets of leadership such as: know your men and look out for their welfare; keep your men informed; train your men as a team, and finally employ your unit in accordance with it's capability.

Unless we immediately revamp our tactical approach to Operation Snowcap, DEA agents are going to agonize along through an excruciating death on an isolated jungle floor. DEA Senior management must decide, if we are to continue Operation Snowcap, a change must be brought about; for the way we are now going will result in the loss of life. Our agents go out on patrol with poor communications, inadequate support, and absolutely no on-site medical capability.

There are eight troop leading steps and we either do them incorrectly or not at all. Apparently a favorite saying in DEA is that, "Operation Snowcap is an irregular war being waged by irregular troops"; a premise that puts us on the path to disaster.

It is not my intention to set forth a litany of failure or finger pointing, but to approach this with a series of sweeping recommendations meant to more safely and effectively accomplish the mission intended for Operation Snowcap. Although, I did find agents who resented the idea that their lives are being put at risk unnecessarily, because someone is not taking into consideration the realities of the situation as they attempt to accomplish the Snowcap mission.

DEA managers must realize that our agents on Operation Snowcap have crossed the line, from the commonly accepted role of domestic narcotic law enforcement, to the role of an infantry combat advisor. This line, whether we want to accept it or not, was crossed when Snowcap agents started to wear camouflage jungle uniforms, and jump out of Huey helicopters, carrying M-16 rifles, which the Bolivians call the "black sticks of death". As of now, we do not train, or operate, to safely accomplish this mission which has been given to the Snowcap agent. If we continue to muddle with indecisions or irresolution, then we should pull out before we get DEA agents killed or kidnapped. If the decision is to stay, then let's start doing it right, now.

The mindset that the leaders have set for the Snowcap agent is one of laxity, complacency, and tactical ineptitude. Harsh, but true, I would hope that I will have the opportunity to explain this conclusion.

Let's compare the physical location and preparedness of the DEA agent to the Special Forces troops. If the narcotic traffickers decided to retaliate against Americans, who would they attack to cause damage to property, equipment, or personnel?

The Special Forces have hardened their living quarters, where they reside with the Umopar. The facility is constantly patrolled, not approachable to a casual stroller, and difficult on which to gather pre-strike intelligence. Each troop has a position to defend and the Special Forces have an escape plan which they have rehearsed. They function as a disciplined team, expert at what they do, with a firm chain of command. Special Forces who leave the compound always go in pairs, armed with the 9-mm Beretta pistol in a concealed holster. Their unit commander knows where they are going, for what purpose, and when they are expected to return.

The DEA Command Post, on the other hand, is a soft target that is nothing short of a death trap. We don't even operate this way in a domestic assignment. The Trinidad Office is within an open framed plane hangar, housing six to eight small planes. The Umopar guard the facility at night. During the day, anywhere from one to as many as eight agents may be in the command post. With the possible exception of one agent, all are unarmed, since the weapons are locked in a large foot locker, in an adjacent storeroom. It is my assessment that, the narcotic traffickers could kill, kidnap, and destroy this command post with no difficulty.

Worse than the absence of the most minimal security measures at the command post, is when agents are off duty, or traveling around Trinidad. No concealed handguns, no chance of defense, not even the survival instinct to avoid trouble. DEA is courting tragedy which is just a matter of time. In the evening, the agents eat at a variety of restaurants, no weapons, no one knows who is with whom, nor where they went. Agents appear to be living in two hotels, spread out by floors, no night time check-in for security. An Agent could be missing for a day before being noticeably absent. Agents openly exchange U.S. currency for Bolivian money in a group, from the back of an open-bed truck, in front of begging children and townspeople, confirming that DEA agents have wealth. This can only serve to antagonize indigents living in abject poverty.

The DEA vehicles are simply parked on the street, in front of the hotels overnight, with no security. One DEA car has no glass in the vent window and two of the vehicles have to be pushed and then jump started. All vehicles are known as belonging to DEA and may stall out at any moment. The OGVs can easily be tampered with or affixed with explosives. Even on the move, agents have no ability to flee or defend themselves. We are in so much peril and continue with a business as usual attitude.

Our tactics both in the towns, as well as, in the field, are not logical, are ill planned, and follow no military text. As the Special Forces have remarked, DEA does not even follow the scant training they have received in Panama. DEA acts on information and does little to substantiate this information into hard, usable intelligence.

The Special Forces conduct basic training for the Umopar in Chimore and advanced training at their base camp in Trinidad. Instead of first allowing the Umopar to complete their training cycle, DEA, with almost no training themselves, take the partially trained Umopar out of class on operations. The Umopar troops we may have to rely upon in a firefight, have not even been set up in fire teams or squads. If we ask for ten troops, that is what we get, ten individuals. But why fault the Umopar, when DEA is not even trained to function as a team, since DEA does not train or function as a unit. The Special Forces have been attempting to correct this, but DEA has not been of much help. One must be impressed with the professionalism of the Special Forces, and the training and teaching methods they are providing the Umopar. The training is based on a most rigorous seven days a week schedule, in such diverse areas as tactics, operations/intelligence, communications, first aid, navigation, and leadership. A point of fact, is shortly, DEA will not be able to advise the Umopar, for they will be more highly trained than DEA.

I spoke at length with four U.S. Border Patrolmen and DEA agents, who were involved in the February incident at Chimore. This incident has been reported, in depth, by the Cocaine Desk, and does not need repeating. Nevertheless, I would urge DEA senior managers take the following corrective measures. ?

*Agents desperately need training in crowd control and negotiations. The Bolivian farmers fired on the agents with shotguns and small caliber rifles, and at the same time threw sticks of dynamite. It is just a matter of time, until the farmers improve their weaponry and encase the dynamite in shrapnel producing material.

*Recommend the immediate purchase of four .50 caliber bolt actions rifles, for use at Clandestine landing strips.

*On certain missions, the agents need ballistic protection, helmets, flashbang grenades, sting ball grenades, CS and crowd dispersal grenades, M-79 grenade launchers with smoke, H.E., CS and flechette rounds, counter-sniper rifles with scopes, Colt SMG - several being suppressed, and gas masks.

*Recommend DEA purchase immediately six, light weight, M-60 machine guns. Two would remain at Quantico for training and four to Snowcap agents in the field. There has already been one incident of a Snowcap agent firing an M-60 machine gun, during an armed confrontation, but the weapon failed to fire after three or four rounds, and the agent was unable to clear

the malfunction, due to a lack of training. Inadequate weaponry and training will result in DEA deaths. Recommend that an appropriate number of Glock .9 mm pistols be purchased, in order to arm all Snowcap agents, pilots, and permanently assigned agents. The revolver now in use, in Bolivia, is the wrong weapon. We can't fault the pilots and agents for not being armed, when there are not enough handguns in the country. This issue should receive top priority.

- *Recommend that DEA M-16s have the capability of firing full automatic. If ambushed, agents must have full auto-selector switch to break contact.

- *Recommend that on all helicopter missions, at least one of the pilots be American.

- *Recommend that ground troops and helicopters have loud speakers.

- *Recommend OT provide training in crowd psychology, negotiations, and retrograde movements.

- *Recommend that prior to Snowcap, DEA or Border Patrol Agents, deploying overseas spend an absolute minimum of ten days training, as a team, at Quantico. This should be mandatory, since tactical skills are perishable. This period of time can be used not only as a physical conditioner, but also to observe personality clashes, and to judge the ability for the team leader and agents to react under stress in a controlled environment. Snowcap can't afford to wait until the jungle confrontation to find out how the agents will perform.

- *Recommend that the Umopar weapons be upgraded from the M-1 or M-2 carbine to the M-16 rifle. If the Bolivian military is opposed to improving the Umopar weapons, then more serviceable M-1 carbines must be issued. At the February confrontation in Chimore, I was told that upwards of 70 percent of the Umopar weapons failed to fire. The Umopar is issued three to six bullets and one magazine, some of which are held together by tape. No responsible leader would send agents out in the jungle, without any help on hand, with such ill-armed troops. This certainly is not tolerated in the states, nor should it be overseas.

° Recommend that DEA agents must be leaders, physically fit and tactically sound, for, when the confrontation in the jungle occurs, the Umopar will look to DEA for decisions and guidance. If the DEA agent is found lacking by the Umopar, they will scatter, leaving the agent to face capture, torture, and death.

° Recommend DEA assign an agent to Bolivia, to perform the functions of an S3 Air Operations Officer. Now we waste time, fuel, and flight time.

° Recommend that OT, Headquarters, and on-site supervisors get the agents out of Condition White and into a Condition Orange environment. This must involve the entire chain of command. DEA has lulled itself into believing that the Bolivians are non-violent. We think that because we are American DEA agents, we are impervious to danger. On-site supervisors continually remark that the Bolivians won't strike back until we have hurt the traffickers. What a naive assumption, that one day is going to cause DEA to shed much blood.

° Recommend that OT train agents on how to collect and evaluate intelligence in the environment in which we operate. We waste a great deal of resources flying around, when some good basic investigative and debriefing methods disseminated in a timely fashion, will yield more significant results.

° Recommend that OT instruct Snowcap agents on how to conduct patrols, raids, boat, and airmobile operations. Snowcap has no established S.O.P., as an example, we don't rehearse, we don't inspect the agents and Umopar, prior to the operation, and we don't critique. On some operations, we forget to take along critical equipment. We are so lax and ill-prepared that, in any contact with a trained and determined force, we shouldn't expect DEA to survive.

° Recommend that DEA closely scrutinize the policy of paying the Umopar enlisted troops thirty dollars, U.S. currency and fifty dollars, to the officers, for each lab seized. To the Umopar, this thirty dollars represents about a month's wages. DEA cannot buy loyalty, for the Umopar must believe that their enforcement mission is inherently worthwhile, if they are to be committed. If we regularly reward a task, we often then vitiate commitment to the task. DEA should call for non-monetary incentives, since nothing is more powerful than positive reinforcement. When the firefight erupts in the jungle, don't expect troops to stay with the DEA agents for just thirty dollars. We need to establish an ideal, a cause. Soon, thirty dollars, will not be enough and the obvious question is "what happens when the money stops?"

*Recommend that OT bring to Quantico, selected Umopar officers, and enlisted men for training. This could be a great motivator, excellent training vehicle, and may foster the bond between the Umopar ground troops and DEA, that will save the life of an agent someday. This can only be done by DEA, since it is the DEA agent, who is in the field with the Umopar. If the Umopar are led to believe they can accomplish their mission because of the skills they have been taught by OT, then they are more likely to keep trying.

*Recommend that the numerative, rationalist, approach to management begun by Robert McNamara, which flourished in Vietnam, where success was measured by body counts, not be done by DEA in Operation Snowcap. The Narcotic Assistance Unit wants a fifty percent success rate per helicopter mission. Instead, Snowcap team members should set what they feel are challenging, but realistic goals for themselves. Goals should be set by the team rather than for the team. If the goals are unreasonable and not obtainable, agents may dangerously push themselves beyond their capabilities, and die in the process.

*Recommend that OT instruct Snowcap agents in counter-ambush tactics both on foot and from a vehicle. Methods of driving through an attack, how to recognize sniper and harassing fire, how to fire from a moving vehicle, how to drive in convoy, and how to position troops in three-quarter ton trucks.

*Strongly recommend that a single layer of sand bags be placed on the bed of all trucks. Mines are encountered extensively in Columbia and Peru, and will eventually exact a toll in Bolivia.

*Recommend OT instruct Snowcap in the use of grenades. Agents have several cases of incendiary grenades, but are not sure how to use them. If these grenades are mistaken with white phosphorus grenades, the result will be tragic. OT must also teach the employment of American fragmentation grenades, which the agents have, and grenades of other nations, which may be used against Snowcap.

*Recommend OT set up an extensive program on booby traps to include vehicle, room, and field devices. It is just a matter of time, until these are used against us and we operate like the possibility of booby traps doesn't even remotely exist. A mindset that will lead to a debacle.

* Recommend OT instruct agents on how to set up operational command centers, basic camps, and since some agents live in hotels, how to defend themselves in a room.

* Recommend OT instruct agents and the Umopar on building entries. This is now being done by the Border Patrol.

* Recommend that OT instruct Snowcap on basic operational security, particularly in public places. A simple minded trafficker can hang out in the Snowcap hotel, on the veranda, in the restaurant, or the bar, and pretty well figure out radio frequencies, call signs, future operations, Snowcap problems, frustrations, and informants, etc. Could be the traffickers know more about us than we do about them.

* Recommend that the Special Forces attend all enforcement briefings, from the issuance of the Warning Order, to the Five Paragraph Field Order. Now we don't even issue orders. Possibly our ineptness in planning, briefing, and conducting operations has been pointed out to us, resulting in a schism, developing between units. If anything goes wrong, while the Snowcap and Umopar are in the field, the only force capable of immediate reaction is the Special Forces. As they are wont to say, they can't help if they don't know the plan and radio frequencies. On one operation, we provided the Special Forces with the wrong frequency, which they monitored. We then couldn't even summon help, which to me is bordering on suicide. We have a long way to go. We need a joint command center which should be in the Special Forces compound, covering all field operations, to include naval riverine program.

* Recommend OT instruct hostage rescue tactics and negotiations. We often hear that DEA does not do hostage rescue. As previously mentioned, Snowcap has crossed that line of what DEA normally does stateside. On February 28, 1988, DEA led the Umopar on an attempted hostage rescue mission, near the Brazilian border. No hostages were found because the information/intelligence was not precise. However, the tactics used were faulty and probably would have resulted in death, to the hostages, and the rescue force, with the traffickers easily being able to make their escape.

* Recommend OT instruct on how to set up perimeters, cordon off an area, and conduct proper tactics at the objective site. American military just shake their heads in disbelief. Upon landing from helicopters, we have no support element, nor do we have an adequate maneuver element. The way DEA does an L.Z., it is just a matter of time when we will suffer casualties. We are so far out from a support base, the loss of one helicopter could lead to a debacle. Even realizing this, we continue in a sloppy, negligent fashion.

*Recommend OT instruct importance of equipment checks. One operation was jeopardized because an agent forgot the radio batteries.

*Recommend OT instruct Snowcap as to the duties of an Operational Commander and the duties and responsibilities of the Tactical Commander. Who does what and the separation of assignments.

*Recommend that Snowcap video proposed raid sites to be used at briefing. Also, previous landing sites should be filmed and stored for ready retrieval.

*Recommend agents not drive under plane wings, could decapitate an agent some day.

*Recommend OT establish a training program at Quantico to qualify Snowcap agentson rendering medical assistance. Absolutely no unit should depart on a mission without a trained medic. I cannot reason how, senior managers can send agents out in the field without a medic.

I briefly spent some time with a U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander, SEAL trained, Vietnam veteran. This officer knew his trade, was always armed, tough but cautious. He took different routes, but was faced with a few miles drive down an exposed dike to get to his crafts. To attempt to avoid booby traps or ambushes, he would pick up fishermen who would sit in the back of his truck. Good sources of intelligence, could provide warning, even if they declined the ride, it could cause suspicion.

*Recommend that Jose Trevino, from SEAL Team Six, be sent immediately TDY to work alongside Lieutenant Commander Fitzgerald.

*Recommend OT provide training on the communications equipment now with Snowcap, to include the trafficker Yaesu radios.

*Recommend that no mission be undertaken, unless there is redundancy to replace damaged transportation, and a support element on stand-by, with the means of immediate deployment to the crisis site.

As to the equipment, I would recommend DEA furnish:

Mosquito bars
Jungle hammocks
Quality knife and sheath
Military compass
Full size shovels

Poncho and poncho liners
More durable watch
Two - two quart canteens in addition to the two
one quart canteens
Four uniforms instead of three
Sunglasses
Ear plugs - agents will suffer hearing damage from
riding in Casa and the helicopters.
Should be enough of a quantity of ear
plugs on hand and appropriate containers
to replace lost and damaged ear plugs.
Top quality back pack and frame of a medium size in
OD green.
Muzzle covers for M-16 rifles
Flex cuffs
Process recommended by S/A Warford to prevent rust to
weapons.
Dog tags with appropriate inscriptions, blood type,
etc., to identify wounded or dead.
Must issue each agent a PRC 96 radio, which has a
short range capability and is able to send out an
international distress signal. The PRC 96 weighs
less than two pounds.

The PRC 96 radio is an absolute necessity. If agents
get attacked and scattered in a remote LZ, there is
no way to locate or more importantly, communicate
with the surviving agent.

*Recommend each agent receive medical briefings on entitlements
if injured or medically disabled on Snowcap, as to exactly who
pays what. Returning agents, regardless of duration of assign-
ment, should undergo a complete medical.

*Recommend mail be delivered promptly to the agents. These are
examples of mail waiting several weeks in country, prior to
delivery. Basic leadership, yes, but it is not being done.
Would also urge that Snowcap agents in the field be permitted to
send personal correspondence in government envelopes. As in
Vietnam, it is almost impossible to affix stamps, due to
humidity and conditions in the field. This was remedied in
Vietnam and should also be for Snowcap.

*Recommend OT provide instruction on how to cope with boredom,
frustration, and fatigue. Also, how to get along with other
agents in a team concept. A physical training program is a must
while in the field.

*Recommend that a medic with Special Forces capability accompany all ground and river operations to be used in a civil affairs program. As we pass through remote villages or search boats, the medic could tend to the most basic of needs. This will create goodwill, may produce valuable intelligence, and may one day prevent an agent from getting killed. Along with this, we should prepare leaflets, so that those with the barest of literacy, can understand what Snowcap is doing. This should present Snowcap in the "positive" and the narcotic trafficker in the "negative". Potentially great possibilities could come from this.

*Recommend that OT establish a language facility at Quantico. DEA pilots should also be included in language training.

*Recommend that OTDT be given the authority to conduct air mobile training. Now we have no way to extract injured agents from the dense jungle. We can teach this.

*Recommend that an NCO be assigned to OT to assist in the ordering, testing, and storing of Snowcap equipment. This will improve the logistics tail so important to the agent trudging through the jungle.

*Recommend that OTDT be directed to study the feasibility of putting together a six man reconnaissance element, to be based at Quantico, and used only on significant laboratory raids. We have failed to gather proper tactical intelligence so necessary for the raiding force. We have wasted and continue to waste inordinate sums of money because we lack the reconnaissance capability. This unit should be under the leadership of S/A Warford.

*Recommend that OTDT receive the proper funding and be given the go ahead to pursue necessary training, in order to more safely and cost effectively support Snowcap, in this most unconventional enforcement mission.

*Recommend that a second senior FBI agent from their Hostage Rescue Team be assigned to OTDT.

*Recommend that a Special Forces Warrant Officer and an E-7 or E-8 Special Forces medic be assigned to OTDT.

In closing, I would like to single out the pilots and mechanics of the DEA Airwing. These men are the heroes of Operation Snowcap, for without their unflinching support, this operation would not be a reality.

Donald L. Ashton

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Chief, OTD

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ADDENDUM

The day I was submitting this report, I received a phone call from a Snowcap agent asking for help. The agent said that he has been blowing holes on clandestine runways with one hundred pound charges of dynamite. These explosives are foreign made as are the detonators and are extremely unpredictable and unstable. We should be using American military explosives. The agent told me that he would also be forever grateful, if I could get him a functional handgun. I have the knowledge, but not the sanction to aid this agent who also happens to be a friend.