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A Pusher's Paradise

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There's no other state in the Union that can conjure so many different images in peoples' minds.

To the visitor, Nevada is the ringing slot machines and green felt tables of Reno and Las Vegas, the cold, pure water and snowy ski slopes of Lake Tahoe.

To the drug trafficker, at least until the recent past, Nevada has been paradise.

For the pusher, the Las Vegas area, with a segment of its population oriented toward the club life and basically transitory, market conditions have been good.

But for the drug smuggler, Nevada has been a mecca.

For several years now, the Silver State, the seventh largest in the Union, with its open desert and approximately 500 dry lakebeds, has been a vast and largely unpatrolled airstrip for the flying importer of illegal drugs.

More than 30 million people a year pass through the geographical vastness that is Nevada, yet the state's permanent population — currently estimated at 610,570 — is 80 percent concentrated in two areas, with 55 percent in Las Vegas-Clark County in the south and 25 percent in Reno-Washoe County in the northwest.

Despite the concentration of the permanent population, large numbers of people move through the entire state, traveling the many major arterials that cross between its borders, whether for purposes of transit only or to visit one or more of the state's many gaming or recreational areas.

Any element of the transitory segment with criminal designs, operating in or moving through the non-metropolitan areas, immediately taxes the limited resources of rural county or city law enforcement agencies. Small populations provide small tax bases, which by and

large can finance only small local police departments or sheriffs offices.

Add to this some accepted facts among Nevada's law enforcement agencies: This state's legalized, 24-hour gambling and drinking environment, available in almost every community of any size, its high personal income (\$6,033 in 1974, 111 percent above the national average), and its recreational environment draw many people from outside states who are less than desirable and many who are criminally inclined.

Recognizing an unprecedented rise in illegal drug use in Nevada, the state legislature in 1969 created a new state law enforcement agency: the Nevada Division of Investigation and Narcotics.

The division was assigned to:

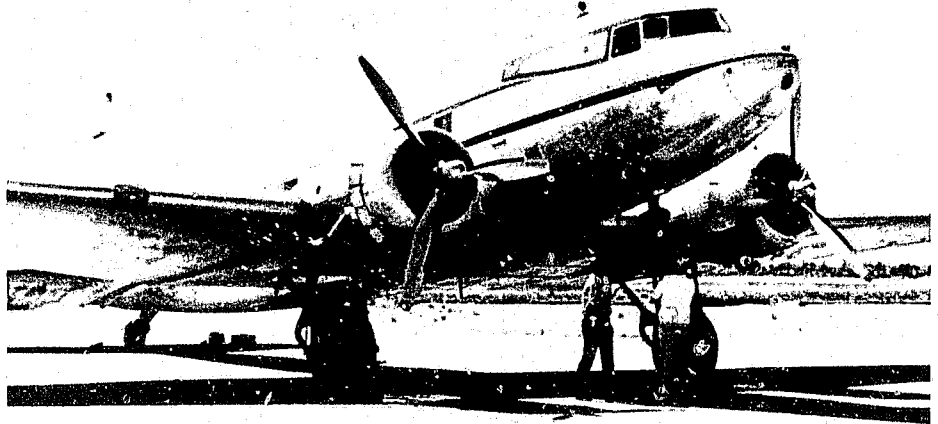
- Detect and apprehend major narcotics violators and sources of supply;
- Enforce statutes related to the legal dispensation of controlled substances;
- Provide special assistance and training to local law enforcement agencies.

With nearly seven years of experience, the division has built a record of success it points to with pride. And in those seven years, the division has become fully cognizant that it still is learning what the full scope of the problem is.

Under its legislative charter and the strong and continuous support of Governor Mike O'Callaghan, the division's work has gone beyond the bounds of narcotics.

When Argentine prizefighter Oscar Bonavena was shot to death on the grounds of Joe Conforte's Mustang Ranch bordello late in the spring of 1976, the Storey County sheriff asked for and received assistance from the division, with up to six of the 22 state

More than two tons of marihuana were seized after being unloaded from this C-47 near Tonopah, Nevada, in November 1975.



agents working on the case at one point.

Likewise, state agents have gone out into Nevada's rural areas to teach local sheriffs and their limited number of deputies how to handle narcotics arrests and how to detect illegal smuggling activity.

Because of their limited manpower, as well as the large geographical areas under their jurisdiction, local sheriffs seldom have been able to make a significant contribution to the control of the widespread use of Nevada as a narcotics landing strip. With this training, the state has high hopes that the small local agencies will be able to take credit for a noticeable increase in the detection of smuggling activity, which, in cooperation with agents from the state division, will lead to a greater number of smuggling arrests.

The El Paso Intelligence Center estimates 150 drug smuggling flights come into the U. S. daily. How many of these land on stretches of open Nevada desert or dry lakebeds? Any attempted answer would be mere speculation at this point.

That the percentage is significant is readily apparent in the massive number of aircraft tire tracks found in remote and isolated areas across the state.

In 1975, however, the honeymoon which allowed aerial smugglers to fly marihuana and hard narcotics into rural Nevada with impunity began coming to an end.

The Nevada Division of Investigation and Narcotics had teamed up with the federal Drug Enforcement Administration and local police agencies in the Reno area to form a Metropolitan Task Force targeted toward breaking up the major smuggling rings using the Silver State as their landing strip.

With aggressive assistance and prosecutions from U. S. Attorney Larry Semenza, the U. S. District Court dockets in Nevada included a heavy caseload of drug-smuggling conspiracy indictments by early 1976, and some prominent citizens were due to stand trial.

The biggest breakthrough and the first of many successes in the task force's initial year of concentration on major operators came in July 1975. After extensive and sophisticated planning, which ended in pursuits on the ground and in the air, the task force had netted a C-47 which had unloaded nearly 4,300 pounds of marihuana near rural Tonopah, approximately halfway between Las Vegas and Reno.

The case had a domino effect. Not only did the agents confiscate the aircraft, marihuana, ground vehicles and sophisticated electrical and electronic gear used in the smuggling operation, but they also turned up evidence that two of the seven defendants had been involved in a major smuggling operation earlier, so elaborate that another defendant in that case, it turned out, even had purchased the fixed-base operation at the Tonopah airport.

The C-47 case led the task force to a conspiracy investigation in which more than 22 defendants in the United States and Mexico were indicted. This, in turn, led to information which helped uncover other major smuggling operations.

By early 1976 the task force's redirection toward breaking up the major

smuggling rings had led to the seizure of five aircraft and the indictment of 45 defendants in Nevada, the Pacific Southwest, and Mexico.

The fruits of each investigation have multiplied logarithmically, with the overall effort succeeding at a far greater rate than any of its proponents originally had anticipated.

Another sign of success came in November 1975 when the Nevada Division of Investigation and Narcotics, working with the Mexican Federal Judicial Police, completed a case that led to the confiscation of 10 tons of marihuana and an aircraft and the arrest of 10 Mexican defendants at the seaport of Los Mochis, Mexico.

The division views this as only the beginning for other major operations as a result of the tremendous amount of intelligence gathered during recent months. The division anticipates that, within perhaps the next year, there will be some significant achievements in penetrating and dismantling other major networks.

While smuggling may be the biggest "impact" area of drug enforcement in Nevada, in terms of the quantity of distribution that can be affected in a single case, it is only one branch of the overall enforcement program for the state Division of Investigation and Narcotics.

Statistically, more than a third of all convictions in Nevada are drug cases. But 55 percent of all convictions, by the same statistics, are drug-related offenses.

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