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NICI Information Paper 92 - 1

Hazardous Situation Warning:

Clandestine Drug Laboratories and the Threat to National Guard Personnel

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NICI INFORMATION PAPER 92-1**HAZARDOUS SITUATION WARNING:****Clandestine Drug Laboratories and the Threat to National Guard Personnel**

National Guard personnel may be in an extremely hazardous situation during joint counterdrug operations that involve clandestine drug laboratories (sometimes called "Clan Labs" or "Meth Labs"). Soldiers and airmen may be subject to death or serious long-term injury if appropriate policies and procedures are not followed when dealing with this criminal activity. Exposure to the dangerous chemicals commonly found in clandestine laboratories can cause death or permanent disability.

Clandestine drug laboratories are covert or secret operations which produce illegal substances through the synthesis of raw chemicals. Methamphetamines are the most common drugs produced by these laboratories. Since clandestine labs are often located in remote areas, drug law enforcement agencies (DLEAs) may request National Guard support to facilitate their investigations and law enforcement actions. This support may include reconnaissance, air transportation into remote sites, LP/OPs, perimeter security, and logistic support. The California National Guard, for example, has provided such support to more than twenty operations in the past year.

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is the recognized national expert on clandestine laboratories. State National Guards are encouraged to consult with their local DEA office before becoming involved with clandestine lab operations. **National Guard personnel should not be allowed to enter a clandestine laboratory unless they have received special entry team training in a program of instruction approved by the DEA.** Special equipment for handling hazardous materials is also required.

Clandestine laboratories are highly dangerous operations. Explosions caused by improper handling of the chemicals used to manufacture illegal drugs are not uncommon. As clandestine labs are usually housed in trailers, barns, farm buildings, or in some cases a

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residence, the hazardous materials they employ create a significant threat to innocent neighbors as well as law enforcement personnel conducting raids. In addition to the threat of explosion, clandestine lab operators usually dump precursor and waste chemicals on the open ground or into pits nearby the laboratory. These chemicals are often extremely corrosive and/or carcinogenic. Pits filled with dangerous chemicals are sometimes used as booby traps. Most DLEAs familiar with the threat approach clandestine labs with extreme care using only highly trained, elite entry teams of police officers and hazardous materials experts.

Many of the chemicals used in clandestine labs are listed as "EH" (Extremely Hazardous) by the Environmental Protection Agency. Experienced DLEAs treat clandestine labs like hazardous materials spills. Special protective equipment must be used to investigate as well as clean-up the labs. **Military protective overgarments (MOPP suits) and protective masks do not provide adequate protection from the chemicals typically found in clandestine laboratories.** Despite equipment and training, entry teams are often seriously injured by inhalation and absorption of processing chemicals. Law enforcement personnel have died from cardiopulmonary complications after inhaling toxic poisons or absorbing them through the skin. Other known hazardous effects of the chemicals found in clandestine labs include brain stem and liver cancers.

Policies and procedures to deal with clandestine labs vary widely between DLEAs. There is no widely agreed upon safe distance for support personnel. Some agencies use special teams to conduct an assessment of the interior of a lab then determine where to position unprotected support personnel. Other agencies decide in advance which areas are considered "safe" based on information from cooperating individuals or on the intuition of law enforcement officers experienced in such operations. DLEAs with little experience in clandestine labs may be more likely to allow personnel to be dangerously exposed to hazardous materials. In 1990, for example, National Park Service Rangers discovered a methamphetamine lab in Death Valley. Because of inadequate training and failure to recognize the danger, investigators who first arrived on the scene needlessly handled and were exposed to hazardous chemicals without adequate protection.

DLEAs experienced in clandestine laboratory operations will only allow specially trained entry teams to go inside a lab. These officers work within what is known as the "hot zone". The hot zone is the lab itself and the immediate surrounding area. **National Guard Plans, Operations, and Military Support Officers (POMSOs) and/or Counterdrug Coordinators should use great care and give special consideration to the hazards involved before allowing National Guard personnel to enter the hot zone.** In well-planned operations, support personnel are only authorized to enter the "warm zone." The size of the warm zone is usually different in each case. It extends from the hot zone outward to a point that is determined based upon the individual situation. The diameter of a warm zone may vary from as little as 100 meters to 500 meters or more. The size of the warm zone may also change due to changes in wind speed, wind direction,

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and other weather factors. A high degree of expertise is required to determine the appropriate size of the warm zone.

Many law enforcement experts believe that the area requiring the greatest concern during clandestine lab operations is actually the warm zone. All members of a counterdrug operation usually recognize that the hot zone is dangerous and requires extreme caution. The dangers of working in the warm zone, however, are less obvious. Counterdrug teams involved in these operations usually operate "in the blind" with little or no intelligence concerning the types and quantities of chemicals present. Therefore, if an explosion occurs or hazardous vapors are released, it could be too late to determine that the warm zone should have been larger. The warm zone is the area most likely to involve National Guard personnel.

Transportation of law enforcement officers and suspects who have been inside a lab, or the transportation of evidence, could result in the contamination of vehicles and equipment. In some respects the chemicals used in illegal drug production resemble the persistent agents used in chemical warfare--contamination can be spread by personnel and equipment that has come in contact with these deadly substances. In operations where contamination has accidentally been allowed to spread, vehicles and even buildings have required dismantling and disposal at hazardous waste storage sites.

It is widely recognized that drug "cookers" (the people who actually make the drugs in the labs) are psychologically affected by extended exposure to hazardous chemicals. The effects of this damage usually include extreme paranoia. Illegal lab operators often equip themselves with automatic weapons, high explosives, home-made booby traps, and very sophisticated countermeasures such as infra-red cameras and viewing monitors. The paranoid nature of well-armed "cookers" adds to the dangers posed by the chemicals used in illegal drug manufacture.

The majority of the clandestine laboratories discovered in the last few years have been in California, Texas, Oregon, and Washington. Oregon and Washington are newcomers to this list and have experienced 40% of the known methamphetamine produced in the United States over the last three years. Even in Oregon and Washington many DLEAs have little or no experience in dealing with clandestine laboratories. POMSOs and/or Counterdrug Coordinators must use extreme care when accepting support requests involving clandestine laboratories. Unlike other areas of counterdrug support, National Guard personnel cannot assume that the supported DLEA is aware of the proper procedures and safety requirements necessary to deal with clandestine labs. Until they can confirm that supported DLEAs have adequate experience with clandestine lab operations (including extensive training, current data on the threat, and periodic medical checks on all personnel), state National Guards should become intimately familiar with the hazards and necessary precautions of dealing with drug labs before approving requests for such support.

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Further information on clandestine laboratories, and recommended policies and procedures for dealing with them, can be provided by the Dangerous Drugs section in each DEA Division. The NICI Research and Analysis Division would be happy to provide you with the phone number for the nearest DEA office or the DEA Division which covers your area.

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