

A mix of Department, contractor and host-nation pilots fly the bureau's 90 aircraft air force, the director said. But you wouldn't know it. The air wing—about 450 technicians, maintenance staff, pilots and managers—is a model of seamless cooperation with no distinction between corporate, contractor or government workers practically or culturally.

"We don't differentiate between contractors, Foreign Service, Civil Service and Department of Defense services," Mr. McLaughlin said. "We promote and enjoy the 'One Team, One Fight' concept."

Spraying, however, is about as close as American personnel get to the fight. Nationals do the close-up work, such as removing the plants by hand or raiding the trafficker's redoubts.

However, there are risks.

BOONDOCK 'TRAINING' HONES SURVIVAL SKILLS

Story and Photos
by Paul Koscak

Alongside a desolate Florida highway, about a dozen pilots step off the bus. The gaggle gathers backpacks and starts walking into the adjoining jungle-like forest on a dirt road leading to their training camp.

It's a leisurely walk as the thick brush and palmetto palms begin to hide much of the morning's warm sunlight. As the group ventures deeper into the growth, birds and muted conversations make the only sounds. But not for long.

Boom!

A thundering explosion shakes the ground.

The crack of small-arms fire rips through the air.

Bursts from automatic weapons erupt.

Red smoke slowly chokes the underbrush.

Shrill shouts in Spanish ring out.

The pilots make a run for it, but a four-wheel all-terrain vehicle roars down the path and cuts them off. Three manage to escape.

Within seconds, the pilots are surrounded by the rebel forces and captured. They're blindfolded. They're interrogated. They're in a real mess.

Fortunately for the startled pilots, the rebels are really members of Patrick's 920th Air Rescue Squadron, who support the Department's three-day escape, sur-

Each day spray aircraft are exposed to ground fire. "There have been more than 70 incidents of eradication aircraft being hit by ground fire this year," Mr. Milavic said.

Much of the bureau's daily work, such as aircrew selection, training, maintenance and mission planning is done by DynCorp, a Northern Virginia Fortune-500 company that was recently selected as the maintenance contractor for Air Force One. The bureau acts as a general contractor, providing guidance and management. "We exercise federal oversight," Mr. Milavic said of the bureau's management role. "We establish the standards."

Currently, the bureau is focusing its resources on Colombia, where the traffickers are aligned with insurgent and illegal paramilitary forces. The FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the largest group, is a highly organized leftist rebel force with a political agenda. It deals

in drugs to equip its members. "They're disciplined and they have automatic weapons," Mr. Milavic added.

Through Plan Colombia, the United States committed \$1.3 billion to enhance Colombia's counterdrug program. The bureau and the DoD are training several Colombian counterdrug battalions.

Night operations will drastically reduce exposure to ground fire. Although operating in the dark is inherently risky, Mr. Milavic said an advanced night-vision goggle being developed by National Aeronautics and Space Administration would minimize that risk. The goggle uses a laser to project the aircraft's instrument panel into the pilot's eye. The pilot actually sees the instruments while focusing full attention outside the cockpit, when at low altitude and high speed, even a split-second glance at the instrument panel could prove disastrous. Adding more sophisticated, armor-protected aircraft would give

"It scared the s— out of me," he said.

The ambush is a surprise, but the syllabus isn't. There are lots of academics at Patrick before the students spend the night in the field. Topics include food and water procurement, first aid and surviving a crash.

"There's a time when you're not flying the aircraft anymore," Mr. Harris cautioned during a classroom session, describing the last few seconds of a crash. "Take your feet off the rudder pedals and brace yourself. The rudder isn't doing anything for you anymore. Otherwise, you could end up with broken legs and not be able to get out of the aircraft."

Most of the course, though, is hands on. There's instruction in camouflage and how to link up with a rescue unit. At night, the pilots orienteer with map and compass, identifying landmarks and pacing themselves. They're advised to probe ahead with a stick to avoid snakes, animals or banana spiders.

Although rescue aircraft trail the sprayers, the pilots receive instruction on an array of survival equipment.

Survival vests include flares that can penetrate the jungle canopy, a night-vision scope, a knife and a 9-mm Beretta—just in case.

The ambush isn't the only time the students get a little action.

They experience being airlifted to safety by helicopter. The scenario, perhaps the most important skill taught in the course, involves learning to use a rescue harness and communicating by hand signals with a hoist operator working from a hovering helicopter.

To practice the extraction, two pilots are hoisted out of

the bureau a formidable tactical advantage while further reducing the danger posed by ground fire.

Ironically, considering the forces, equipment and weapons involved in the counternarcotics operation, the defoliant is, perhaps, the most benign. It's nothing more than Round Up™ a commercially available weed killer, mixed with an enhancer and water. Most of the spray never reaches the soil. Instead, the mixture eats through the waxy coca leaves, allowing the chemical to be absorbed into the plant, which eventually travels to the roots and kills it.

After being applied, the mixture "has a shelf life of five days," Mr. Milivic said.

The bureau's counternarcotics effort will take much longer. ■

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the woods at once. It works like this: The pilots go to the pickup zone. A UH1 Huey swoops overhead and hovers about 150 feet off the ground. The cable is lowered. The two pilots then link the cable through their harnesses. They signal. The helicopter climbs, lifting the two aviators above the trees. Then, with a burst of power, the helicopter climbs away and the dangling passengers are whisked into the sky and into safety.

The two airmen remain like a pendulum at the end of the long cable, as the helicopter makes a wide one or two mile arc at about 1,000 feet before returning to the drop zone and placing the two airborne passengers gently on the ground.

"That was a kick in the a—" were the first words Jack Pegram blurted as he removed his flight helmet after touching back down in the pickup zone.

Mr. Pegram, 56, should know. He's done lots of exciting things throughout his career. A former Navy submariner and retired Army aviator, the barrel-chested Texan recently flew peacekeeping missions for the U.N. in Ethiopia and the Congo before joining the air wing.

Mr. Pegram is typical of the dozen pilots taking the training. They're buccaneer aviators with thousands of flying hours under their belts who crave flying on the edge.

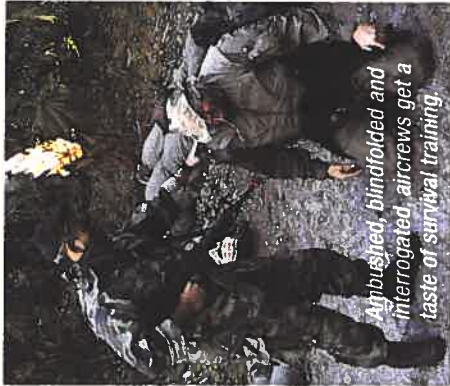
"I could have gone to an airline years ago," Mr. Pegram deadpanned.

For State Department flyers, that's about as thrilling as programming a computer. ■

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Ari incendiary device creates a fiery halo during a staged ambush.



Ambushed, blindfolded and interrogated, aircrews get a taste of survival training.



Aircrews find it takes just a few minutes to go from pilot to prisoner.



Up, up and away: what it's like to be hoisted to safety.