JIATF–South

Blueprint for Success

By RICHARD M. YEATMAN

Over the last 17 years, the Joint Interagency Task Force–South (JIATF–S) has built an unparalleled network of law enforcement, intelligence, and military assets to focus on detecting the movements and shipments of narcoterrorist organizations. With this evolving structure, JIATF–S serves as a model for bringing the most effective assets to bear on complex national policy issues, whether it be illegal drugs, weapons proliferation, or international terrorism.

Fundamental to any task force is a clear mission statement. If the statement, and thus the mission itself, lacks specific goals, agencies may be reluctant to participate for fear they have little to gain. Therefore, JIATF–S must target specific missions and clearly define their objectives, to include detecting, monitoring, and targeting narcoterrorists and the drugs they profit from. Since law enforcement agencies have a vested interest in achieving these objectives, the application of an interagency partnership has been successful.

Integration Promotes Trust

JIATF–S serves as a model that other interagency organizations can tailor to their specific goals. For example, an interagency effort to track military equipment destined for terrorist organizations could include individuals from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Homeland Security, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

For task force participants to feel connected to results, they must be part of the command. Within the JIATF–S organizational structure, representatives from DOD, Homeland Security, and the Justice Department, along with U.S. Intelligence Community liaisons and international partners, work as one team. Interagency personnel are fully integrated within the command structure and serve in key leadership positions. This integration promotes trust and facilitates the sharing of law enforcement investigative information, which is critical for any intelligence-driven organization.

While traditional joint operations focus on efforts among the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force, JIATF–S has gone past these traditional boundaries, becoming a fully integrated interagency command.[1] Whereas most organizations count on liaison officers to represent them, JIATF–S takes this concept much further. The top command structure demonstrates total integration, with the Director being a Coast Guard rear admiral and the Vice Director coming from Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Integration also exists through the lower levels of the command: both the Directors for Intelligence and Operations are military officers, but their Deputies are from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and Customs and Border Protection. Intelligence analysts from the DEA, CBP, and FBI are located in the Joint Intelligence Operations Center to ensure that law enforcement agencies are involved in daily operations and that information is not stovepiped.

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On the operations watch floor, it is not uncommon to see a CBP agent serving as command duty officer, an Air Force captain as the intelligence watch officer, a Coast Guard operations specialist as the intelligence watch assistant, and a Navy lieutenant as the tactical action officer. This diversity of skills boosts the credibility of the organization. For instance, if DEA agents have concerns about sharing sensitive information with allied military partners, they have a certain level of confidence that the DEA Deputy Director for Intelligence will understand those concerns.

JIATF–S incorporates a wide range of governmental and international organizations in addition to those previously mentioned. The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Central Intelligence Agency, and liaison officers from the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and a host of Latin American countries all play an important role in intelligence, operations, and planning. They not only increase the task Force's access to information, but they also act as conduits between it and their respective nations' maritime and air assets. Under a single command, these entities produce a unity of effort that is one of the many reasons why JIATF–S continues to enjoy success. While all work toward the common goal of stopping illegal narcotics destined for global markets, the metrics for success differ greatly among the organizations that contribute to the task force.

The primary metric for DOD is the amount of drugs seized, while the law enforcement community closely follows the number of arrests and prosecutions. These different but complementary objectives could raise disputes in a traditional joint organization, but JIATF–S has overcome this issue by recognizing and facilitating the success of all relevant metrics. Such is the key to unity of effort within JIATF–S. Each member relies on the contribution of others. Without the aircraft provided by Customs and Border Protection or the ships and cutters provided by the Navy and the Coast Guard, the task force would be unable to conduct critical detection and monitoring operations necessary for interdictions

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and arrests. Equally important is the human intelligence information that allows JIATF–S to position its limited assets throughout its 42 million–square–mile joint operating area—5 times larger than the United States—to conduct interdictions. If the law enforcement community limits the flow of information to the interdiction assets, they will be unable to make arrests. If the interdiction assets refuse to react to law enforcement information, they will fail to make seizures. Only by working with each other can all parties meet their respective organizations' goals.

Diversity of experience can have its pitfalls, too, and overcoming them is not an overnight achievement. Productive interpersonal relationships are a major contributing factor to JIATF–S's ability to overcome many challenges. Sixteen years of continuous operations have allowed the task force to work through many of the issues that arise when numerous agencies and allies work together. This experience is crucial for those who wish to apply the JIATF–S concept of operations to other problem sets. Planners must have a realistic timetable in place and allow the system to develop.

The Basic Building Block

Joint and JIATF organizations should be aware of the task Force's process for targeting and interdicting highly mobile, constantly evolving targets. Within JIATF-S, the process relies on fused intelligence. The basic building block is information provided by either law enforcement agencies or tactical analysis teams who work within U.S. Embassies in-country. JIATF–S also assigns liaison officers to many law enforcement operations. All help to develop the finest interagency information in order to position the finite assets available to the task force. The information collected, processed, and disseminated acts as the initial cueing to the organization that a narcotics shipment will begin a transit to global markets. Law enforcement agency members pass this information to other members of JIATF–S, such as DIA or NGA, for further development.

Again, human intelligence serves as the basic building block for most information at JIATF–S. The vast majority is derived from law enforcement sources. Analysts add other sources of intelligence to build analyses and greater depth. Once individuals analyze and fuse the information, they pass it over to operators, who apportion assets to the threat. On any given day, the JIATF–S intelligence directorate presents more intelligence-derived targets than the operations arm has assets to prosecute. Therefore, it is critical to sift through the myriad of targets and present those that have the greatest probability of ending in a seizure. Adjustments are made to this method of targeting 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Recent operational examples highlight the process. British law enforcement authorities, in one case, developed a confidential informant whose information and subsequent wiretaps led to the realization that an impending narcotics operation was occurring. This shipment was en route from the eastern Caribbean for distribution to European markets. On receipt of this intelligence, JIATF–S detected and tracked the movement of the suspect vessel across the Atlantic via electronic intelligence. Meanwhile, the French navy liaison officer assigned to the task force coordinated affairs from the watch floor. British human intelligence had led to surveillance and tracking by JIATF–S to an intercept of more than two metric tons of cocaine by French operational forces near the Cape Verde Islands.

A second example also began with human intelligence. Developed information suggested an impending drug flight from Colombia to northern Central America or southern Mexico. Alerted Colombian radar operators detected a suspect air target, which led to an intercept by Colombian air forces. As the suspect target was already deep in international air space, the visual identification, tail number, and locating information were passed to JIATF–S, which subsequently reacquired the air target with over-the-horizon radar. The track of the suspect air target was passed to the operation centers of cooperating nations. Simultaneously, flight clearances for cross-border penetrations and end-game responses were coordinated. In this case, U.S. CBP and Belizean aircraft launched. More notably, U.S. military helicopters from Joint Task Force–Bravo transported a combined Guatemalan and DEA tactical response team to the observed landing area where arrests and drug seizures were made— inside Guatemala on a target that launched in Colombia and passed through Belize.

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Since JIATF–S is a DOD command, it cannot conduct law enforcement operations. Detected and monitored targets are handed off to partner nation authorities or to U.S. law enforcement entities, typically the U.S. Coast Guard at sea, for endgame arrests, seizures, and evidence collection. In many organizations, this process would cause a loss of continuity, impacting operations. However, because JIATF–S works so closely with U.S. law enforcement agencies and international partners, the handoff happens with little or no disruption.

Arrests, not drugs on the table, are what continue the vital flow of human intelligence information. Therefore, by helping law enforcement meet their metrics, JIATF–S also benefits. Arrests and prosecutions often open new sources of information that allow interdiction of more narcotics, thus enabling JIATF–S to meet its own metrics for success. Future joint operations should arrange the same type of interagency continuum to promote success and allow growth and adaptation to a constantly changing environment.

The JIATF–S model expands joint operations into combined and interagency operations to accomplish common goals. If organizations want to engage highly mobile threats against both homeland defense and homeland security targets, they must go beyond purely joint operations and adopt this successful model. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] See Christopher L. Naler, "Are We Ready for an Interagency Combatant Command?" *Joint Force Quarterly* 41 (April 2006), 26–31.