

## SOUTHCOM's Podcast Transcript

Episode 1 : Enhanced Counter Narcotics Operations

October 1, 2020



(intro music)

- [Rich] Hello listeners, and welcome to the United States Southern Command's inaugural podcast. My name is Rich Crusan and today we're speaking with Rear Admiral Larry D. Watkins, Joint Planning Group lead for Counter Transnational Criminal Organizations and The Director of Operations, United States Southern Command.

Today's topic is going to be; Enhanced Counter-narcotics Operations. Hello Sir and welcome to the SOUTHCOM podcast. - [Larry] Good day Rich. I'm delighted to be here to discuss this topic. –

[Rich] Sir, before we jump right into today's topic, can you tell us how long you've been here at SOUTHCOM? Describe maybe some of your past experiences and then your responsibilities in your current role here at SOUTHCOM.

- [Larry] Absolutely Rich. But before I get started, I always like to take a moment to recognize we remain a nation at war with combat and forward deployed troops around the world. I want to thank those service members and their families for serving, and it's an honor to serve alongside with them. I've been here at SOUTHCOM just over a year or so. I reported last July. This is my second tour of duty here. I was here, a mobilized reservist right after nine 11 back in September, 2001. I reported back in December. I've been in the Navy almost 30 years, so I've been fortunate to see the world and work with our other services outside the Navy and inter-agency partners.

- [Rich] Sir, thank you for those 30 years of service. Much appreciated, I'm sure the country's very thankful as well. So today's topic is Enhanced Counter-narcotics Operations. Can you tell us what this operation is about?

- [Larry] Yes, sure. First and foremost, it's about saving lives and defending the United States from Narco-trafficking. Narco-trafficking is a \$90 billion-years enterprise in the hemisphere. It's principally fueled by cocaine and other illicit commodities. These Transnational Criminal Organizations take advantage of young democracies, weak institutions and other nations, as do other nation state actors without democratic values to undermine the rule of law and conduct illicit activities. Recognizing these complex challenges in our neighborhood, Secretary of Defense approved an increase in our military presence which was announced by the president back on April 1st. This increase included ships, aircraft and security forces to reassure our partners, improve US and partner readiness, as well as interoperability, to counter a range of threats to include Narco-terrorism.

- [Rich] With all those added assets Sir, can you say that this operation to date has been successful? -

[Larry] It's an ongoing operation so I wouldn't say, it's a bit early to determine success overall but we have kept pressure on these networks; these Transnational Criminal Organizations and prevented them from freedom maneuver. We've seen some success, not just simply in our interdictions and disruptions, but more importantly in our partnerships and with regards to interoperability and collaboration. 20 of our partners, over 20 of them have conducted over 60% of the interdictions with us. They continue to stay engaged and stay on the field despite the challenges of COVID. As of this week, the operation has disrupted almost 179 metric tons of cocaine with our partners, we've seized almost 50,000 pounds of marijuana, detained over 370 drug smugglers and denied an estimated \$4.8 billion in profits to these Transnational Criminal Organizations. And most importantly, we've saved almost over 1800 US lives.

- [Rich] So working with our partners, that sounds like a very good overall effort for the area of operations for SOUTHCOM to have so many partners involved. Sir, not just working with the partners though, has the enhanced military presence changed anything? Has the change of additional assets or more personnel? Has it really? What has it really changed?

- [Larry] It's really, understand, this was an all-domain effort and when we say domains, we talk about the land, the air, the sea, or maritime as well as working with our inter-agency partners and our international partners. So, I would say yes, this effort has definitely changed the way we go after the problem set, and I think we've been successful in building bonds across all of our whole of government efforts to get after this threat.

- [Rich] Sir, can you describe; you've mentioned some types of the activities, but can you describe more specifically about the activities of the operation, about the use of the ships, about, you know, use of any sort of surveillance or the ground operations, any of the training maybe, or the advising that's going on?

- [Larry] When we talk about the operation like I said, it's in all those domains and really though, what we look at in the DOD specifically, is the detection and monitoring aspect that we support our law enforcement inter-agency partners who actually have the interdiction and apprehension aspect of the operation so we support them through the US Navy, with Coast Guard, LEDETs or Law Enforcement Detachments on board that do the actual interdictions. And right now we're working too with our partners in the land domain, the inter-agency partners, as well as our international partners to impact Transnational Criminal Organizations within the what we call the 'Source Zone' where the cocaine is typically produced.

- [Rich] So as we look at the operation too, were there any specified key objectives of the operation? Specific outcomes SOUTHCOM is trying to achieve? An increase in seizures or possibly slow down of drug flow?

- [Larry] Absolutely. The intent is to do all that; reduce the flow of illicit drugs into our country, degrade these Transnational Criminal Organizations and continue to strengthen partnerships with our partner nations and inter-agency partners. Our desired end-state is really to maintain our neighborhood of shared values, the opportunity for security, freedom, and prosperity throughout the Western Hemisphere.

- [Rich] Sir, that's very informative. I appreciate you taking the time out to come and talk to us in this inaugural podcast. I know I'm not sure if there's an end date to what we're doing in this operation, but I'd love to have you back, potentially maybe in a couple months, just to see again where the progress is and the successes that have come out of this operation, if you're willing to do that?

- [Larry] Absolutely, and this operation is ongoing and it's going to be our steady state. I will say thanks for having me, in addition to remember, SOUTHCOM is making a difference in this hemisphere, and our Enhanced Counter-narcotics mission directly impacts national security and contributes to the US as well as regional security, and saves lives both in the US and abroad.

- [Rich] Sir, I really want to thank you for spending time with me today on this inaugural podcast, it's been a pleasure speaking with you today.

- [Larry] It's been pleasure to be here Rich, and once again thanks again to our forward deployed troops and forces along with their families. - [Rich] Yes Sir-- - [Larry] May God bless.

- [Rich] God bless. (outro music)

*Podcast Available on: <https://www.southcom.mil/SOUTHCOM-Podcast/>*