

# 649th Military Police Aid Counterdrug Efforts

*By Staff Sergeant Emily Suhr*

*On a July day, with temperatures reaching three digits, a group of Soldiers from the 649th Military Police Company, California National Guard, San Luis Obispo, California, donned Kevlar helmets and black harnesses, boarded a Pave Hawk helicopter, and took to the skies near Springville, California. Minutes later, the helicopter stopped, hovering high above the ground. From there, only the treetops and a small, open field were visible. The field was just large enough to allow two Soldiers to be lowered to the ground. But as the two-person team descended from the aircraft via a hoist cable, they began to see broken trees and foliage, an abandoned, makeshift campsite, and piles of garbage. The swath of broken trees and foliage pointed the way to what once was an illicit marijuana-growing site located on public land. It was the job of the Soldiers—working under state command and in conjunction with personnel from twenty-one other government agencies—to reclaim the land as part of Operation Trident.*

For three weeks during the summer of 2010, the 649th joined forces with Joint Task Force Domestic Support–Counterdrug (JTFDS-CD) and other local and national agencies to help combat the effects of illegal marijuana growth in California’s public forests located in Fresno, Madera, and Tulare Counties. “Illicit marijuana production on public lands is a huge problem throughout our county and participating counties,” said a lieutenant from the Fresno County Sheriff’s Department, who was also the incident commander for Operation Trident. “It is becoming a problem statewide and is probably going to grow into a national problem. It affects people who want to engage in recreational activities on public lands—like hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking.”



**Two members of the California National Guard are lowered into a marijuana-growing site from a Pave Hawk helicopter.**

Seventy-five percent of the Nation’s marijuana is grown in California—much of it on public land. This can lead to dangerous confrontations and severe environmental damage. “[Marijuana growers] are using pesticides and chemicals that are dangerous to the environment,” said the incident commander. “They are polluting the watershed and destroying the land and habitat for animals.”

To help combat the problem, the sheriff’s departments from the three counties called upon law enforcement and land management agencies ranging from the Drug Enforcement Administration to the U.S. Forest Service. The incident commander said, “We really don’t have the money to go take care of this problem, so when you start pulling all the resources from the Forest Service, the Parks Service, Fish and Game, the Bureau of Land Management, the three participating sheriff’s departments, the Campaign Against Marijuana Planting, and the National Guard, then you have enough resources to really address the problem and find permanent solutions.”

Although many of these agencies, including JTFDS-CD, have participated in widespread eradication and cleanup efforts during the past few years, this was the first time that an entire National Guard unit helped. About 120 Soldiers from the 649th Military Police Company assisted with prevention measures, officer safety procedures during highway interdiction efforts (in which law enforcement officers stop suspicious vehicles and check for evidence of marijuana growing or trafficking), and cleanup. The Soldiers provided a unique skill set that other volunteers could not. Because they are trained in police work and authorized to carry weapons, the military police were allowed to ride with civilian law enforcement agents and provide security for officers during highway interdiction missions.

Upon the discovery of a marijuana-growing site, the growers are arrested or escape into the dense woods, leaving behind a nightmare. Eradication teams chop down the marijuana plants, and cleanup crews must often deal with pesticides and other chemicals—as well as makeshift irrigation pipes, which are frequently used to redirect river water to the grow sites. “The reclamation team will . . . take all the irrigation out; pick up all left-behind clothes, toothbrushes, razors, soap,” said a sergeant from the 649th. “They’ll take that all out and try to rebeautify the land back to the most natural state they possibly can.”

Most of the military police, who spend anywhere from a few hours to a few days clearing each illegal growing site, have never before performed a similar mission.

Despite their efforts, some things—such as downed trees used for camouflage or burrow sites and mangled bushes used for sleeping—cannot be fixed. “Only time is going to fix [those things]; but, all in all, it looks 100 percent better than when you first get there,” the sergeant said.

#### Statistics for Operation Trident

Items	Quantity
Marijuana plants	663,896
Pounds of processed marijuana	5,873.26
U.S. currency seized	\$84,506
Weapons seized	60
Vehicles seized	7
Arrests	126
Warrants issued	22
Pounds of debris	84,590
Miles of irrigation line removed	93.3
Tons of fertilizer removed	5.4
Pounds of pesticide removed	239.6
Growing sites reclaimed	100
Acres of public land affected	393.26



**Members of the California National Guard prepare to hoist trash from a landing zone.**

Many of the military police Soldiers also became part of a prevention team. After learning the necessary techniques for teaching leadership and teamwork skills, they went to high schools to talk to freshmen about staying off drugs.

Other Soldiers from the 649th provided support through communications, security, kitchen, and administrative duties.

The addition of the 649th to this year’s counterdrug mission proved to be a huge success; however, according to the Operation Trident incident commander, the Soldiers themselves may be the ones who benefitted the most.

“I’m part of something so big,” said one private. “I feel important helping to do good things for my community. . . . It makes me feel good about the mission—like I’m actually doing something.”

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