



HELPING PROTECT OUR BORDERS

The United States' international borders are the most unique anywhere: The line which divides us and our neighbor to the north, Canada, is the world's longest, while our boundary with Mexico is the most frequently crossed on the planet.

Charged with protecting those frontiers are a bevy of federal law enforcement agencies who are able to access the latest military technology, experience and know-how thanks to Joint Task Force North, a multi-service command based at Fort Bliss, Texas.

Now in its 20th year, JTF North's team of servicemembers from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard assists federal law enforcement agencies to identify and defeat transna-

tional threats to the contiguous United States. From drug smuggling to human trafficking, weapons of mass destruction to terrorism, JTF North works alongside agencies such as the U.S. Border Patrol, FBI and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to secure the borders against hazards to national security.

Originally established in 1989 as JTF-6, one of several joint commands specifically devoted to constricting the flow of illegal drugs into the country, the task force was at first only responsible for the four southwestern border states — California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. In 1995, JTF-6's area of responsibility was expanded to include all of the Lower 48 states, plus Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Then, 9/11 caused another expansion — this time of priorities, said

Armando Carrasco, a former sergeant major who now serves as JTF North's public affairs officer.

"When U.S. Northern Command was established in 2002, the secretary of defense asked them to look at the mission of JTF-6. We have a lot of experience providing counterdrug support. How could what we do in the drug arena be applied to homeland security? The determination was made pretty quickly; if we're out there trying to provide support to law enforcement to stop the flow of illegal drugs, that meant we could provide support to stop the other threats, too."

In 2004, the task force was renamed JTF North. Now part of NORTHCOM, it is no longer limited to counterdrug operations. Nonetheless, every mission is performed in conjunction with and in support

Left: Two U.S. Border Patrol agents observe the international border near downtown Laredo, Texas, from a new road along the northern levee of the Rio Grande. The river and the city of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, can be seen in the background. The road was constructed by Soldiers from the 103rd Horizontal Company, 94th Engineering Battalion, 4th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade from Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., as part of a training mission organized by Joint Task Force North.

The Soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen of Joint Task Force North assist federal agencies in securing the homeland

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL L. LEWIS

PROTECT ERS

Below: Cpl. Eric Weiler uses a theodolite to survey the new road his unit was constructing along the border near Laredo in February. The road will be used by Border Patrol agents to patrol the Rio Grande levee.

of federal law enforcement agencies.

“Everything we do is based on support requests submitted by agencies that are a part of the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice,” Carrasco said. “Our servicemembers who participate in these missions cannot arrest, apprehend or detain.”

That is because of the Civil War-era Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibits members of the military from acting in a law enforcement capacity.

“They cannot conduct searches or seizures; they cannot collect intelligence on U.S. persons or organizations. We can’t fly over someone’s home in the U.S. and say, ‘Hey, look what they’re doing down there,’” Carrasco said.

Instead, JTF North acts as a sort of military matchmaker, pairing requests



Near right: Staff Sgt. Robert Jacobo, Navy Command Master Chief Petty Officer Robert Cuff and Air Force Master Sgt. Derrick Kimble look over the shoulder of Marine Corps Cpl. Travis Zurick in the Joint Operations Center at JTF North headquarters at Fort Bliss, Texas, in March.



Opposite page, left: Sgt. Christopher Knight and Air Force Tech. Sgt. James Knouse look over a satellite photo at JTF North's Geospatial Intelligence Center at Fort Bliss in March. The office provides maps and satellite imagery to requesting federal agencies.

from national agencies with military units who volunteer from across the country.

“We are the people with the military equipment behind the scenes for all the law enforcement agencies around the United States,” said Command Master Chief Petty Officer Robert Cuff, the senior enlisted advisor for JTF North. “That’s different than all the other joint task forces here in the States, because most of those are only on a standby status. We actually have active missions that are constantly going.”

Indeed, the task force has completed more than 6,000 missions over the last two decades, providing everything from aerial reconnaissance and geospatial intelligence support to engineering and construction. The benefits to the requesting agencies are palpable, Carrasco said.

“Look what we bring to the fight — technology that’s available within the Department of Defense, and our skills and capabilities. Law enforcement doesn’t have those resources; that’s the clearest benefit for them.”

“You get unmanned aerial vehicles finding people crossing the border,” Cuff

said. “You can get Marine sensor platoons to come out and actually help the Border Patrol catch people coming across and even get pictures of them. The Border Patrol has sensors, but those aren’t as advanced as ours; they don’t have any kind of optics attached to theirs. So, if they get a trip, they’ve got to go all the way out to that spot to check it. Many times, it’s an animal, or a herd of cattle or goats coming through, or a false trip on a piece of equipment that’s going bad. But, with these optics, now they can get a visual.”

However, as much as the agencies profit, so too do the units who volunteer, Cuff said.

“We go to the different services and say, look at this unit that came out. This is what they produced to help the Border Patrol or the FBI or CIA and this is the training they received and how well it helped the unit. Because, nothing is better than the real world when it comes to training.”

When a unit volunteers for a mission, JTF North funds all mission-related expenses, including transportation to the mission site, lodging, food, fuel and even equipment rental. And, while the missions

themselves are unparalleled training opportunities for the assisting units, commanders can tack on additional training activities to take advantage of the mission locations, Carrasco said.

“The reason they go to places is to provide that support [to federal law enforcement agencies]. We pay for that,” he said. “The added benefit is that they can do concurrent training as well. We afford them the opportunity, after we bring them down on our nickel, for the commander to take advantage of other training opportunities while they’re here.”

“We had a unit out of Hawaii flying UAVs,” Cuff said. “Because of Federal Aviation Administration regulations, they can only fly them in restricted airspace, and out there, there’s very little of that. So, they get maybe an hour or two a month to fly them. They come here, on the other hand, and they can fly all day and all night out at Fort Huachuca or at Fort Bliss with their huge areas of restricted airspace.”

JTF North also utilizes its own internal assets to provide support. One of the most oft-requested capabilities is geospatial intelligence — maps and satellite



Right: Cuff holds JTF North's colors as Lt. Gen. Thomas Turner, commander of U.S. Army North, left, presents Brig. Gen Sean MacFarland, commander of JTF North, with a Joint Meritorious Unit Award streamer at the unit's 20th anniversary celebration at JTF North headquarters last November.

imagery that aid current and planned law enforcement operations.

"This can provide a bird's-eye view for agencies that don't have these resources or need imagery more accurate and more current than what commercial tools like Google Earth can provide," Cuff said. "Our staff, which includes highly skilled and experienced intelligence officers and NCOs from all four services, is committed to providing our law enforcement partners with the intelligence products that will enable them to accomplish their homeland security missions. It can be very high-paced here; we're constantly going."

"We can execute missions on short notice, but many times a mission's planning cycle will be for an entire year," Carrasco said. Such long-term planning is typical of the many engineering missions JTF North arranges along the southwestern border, such as constructing fences, lighting, vehicle and personnel barriers, and bridges and culverts on roads used for patrolling by the Border Patrol.

"There are areas on the border where drug traffickers used to just drive across," Carrasco said. "Why? Because there might

JTF North: What it does

Joint Task Force North coordinates missions in support of federal law enforcement agencies like the U.S. Border Patrol and FBI in six main categories:

OPERATIONAL SUPPORT: The task force provides aerial reconnaissance using UAVs and Civil Air Patrol aircraft. Past missions involved helicopter surveillance for the U.S. Forest Service to discover marijuana being cultivated in national forests. Additionally, new ground sensors have reduced false positives for Border Patrol agents.

INTELLIGENCE SUPPORT: Using geospatial resources, the task force offers maps and satellite imagery, and can provide link analysis and information-sharing advice.

ENGINEERING SUPPORT: To improve mobility for law enforcement, the task force coordinates construction missions that build bridges, culverts, roads and lights along the southwest border. Other missions hamper mobility for smugglers and traffickers by constructing vehicle and personnel barriers.

GENERAL SUPPORT: From training to transportation to sustainment, the task force offers law enforcement agencies the resources and expertise of the military. For example, working with the U.S. Border Patrol, a military mobile training team conducted emergency response training for Mexican first responders in Chihuahua, Mexico.

INTERAGENCY SYNCHRONIZATION: Building on the experience gained through joint operations, the task force helps identify synergies and processes for information sharing and operations integration, tying together previously incompatible computer systems, for example.

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION: Leveraging the huge research and development resources of the military, the task force contributes the latest in tactical technology for fighting drug smuggling, human trafficking and terrorist threats. The rate of return is significant: the Department of Defense's investment of less than \$10 million has directly contributed to more than \$2 billion worth of drug and other contraband seizures.



Above: Staff Sgt. Ray Bevins directs a Soldier on a rented road roller as his unit works on the levee road in Laredo in February.



Right: The project's safety NCO, Sgt. John Mason, stands watch as a Soldier-driven road grader scrapes the levee road. The unit was in Laredo for about a month working on its segment, which will be used by the Border Patrol for surveillance of the international border with Mexico.

be just one strand of wire there [marking the boundary]. So, we built the Normandy-style barriers out of railroad ties; each section weighs a ton.”

Off the Streets of Laredo

A project typical of the engineering missions JTF North coordinates was conducted this February in Laredo, Texas, where Soldiers from the 103rd Horizontal Company, 94th Engineering Battalion, 4th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade out of Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., spent a month constructing a road along the northern levee of the Rio Grande. Laredo, the largest inland port in the United States, is home of the busiest international bridge in the nation, through which more than 9,000 trucks enter the country every day.

It was in the shadow of this bridge where the battalion built a graded dirt road and three culverts to aid in drainage. It was a vast improvement over the muddy ruts that agents had to endure when patrolling along the river. The new road drastically reduces response time for Border Patrol agents surveilling the river.

“In this area, we follow people. We

run after them and we catch dope; we catch cocaine; we catch heroin. It's a hot area and not just [people crossing] who want to come over here to work,” said Border Patrol Agent Larry Ramirez during his shift providing force protection for the unit while they worked. “Before, it was so easy to go off-road and onto the side, or into a ditch by the river. And, when you're traveling up and down this road at all hours every day, when it's bumpy and muddy and the Carrizo cane is hitting your vehicle, those extra seconds could mean the difference between us catching a guy or not, or saving a life in an emergency.”

In conjunction with a civilian engineering firm and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Soldiers used a fleet of rented equipment to build a road to civilian and Corps of Engineers standards. For Soldiers used to building roads quick-and-dirty in Iraq, this was a different way of doing things, said Sgt. Quinton Hollaway.

“We're all new at this; we've never really had a mission like this before. We're used to, in Iraq, building a road in a hurry, just to get the job done. But this, we've got actual plans. If we were in Iraq, we

wouldn't be spending this much time on surveying or grading, for example.”

“In a combat situation — which is what we're used to — we build it to a standard, but not the Army Corps of Engineers standard,” said Staff Sgt. Ray Bevins, the project's NCO in charge. “This is great training for us, so if we do get deployed, we already know how to do it to the civilian standards. It works out to our benefit, and to the benefit of these new Soldiers who are coming in, too.”

The unique training opportunity was something they can't get at Fort Leonard Wood, said Sgt. John Mason.

“I see the Soldiers here developing their skills to become more well-rounded overall. To do the training at Fort Leonard Wood, you can only go so far. Back there, they work with the same material constantly and can only do so much. Here, they get a different variety, and they can use that when they go downrange. They don't feel like they're just pushing dirt from that point to this point. Now, they understand the flow and why we do this or that and how all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fit together,” Mason said.



Left: Soldiers work with machinery and by hand to break up rock to be used in a culvert at the Laredo project site. The Fort Leonard Wood engineering unit, experienced in building roads in Iraq but not “to standard” in the United States, used the project as a training exercise.

The opportunity to train while executing a mission for the benefit of a federal agency was a huge bonus, Bevins said.

“Anything we can do to secure the border is better for the nation; that’s why we’re here. If they want us here to improve a road so we can keep us safe and the rest of my family safe, I’m all for it. It can’t get any better than knowing you’re doing something, your little part to benefit. Here, you get real-world training, and doing something good on top of that? I mean, we’re doing a mission for our country instead of just doing normal training for ourselves at home.”

A Team Effort

JTF North remains the only unit of its kind in the military. Similar task forces — Joint Interagency Task Force West in Honolulu and JIATF South in Key West, Fla. — are focused more on marine threats to the United States and thus, are under Coast Guard leadership with representatives on staff from both the sister services and various federal law enforcement agencies.

But regardless of the venue, all such

operations are necessarily a team effort, Carrasco said. “The biggest change we’ve seen in the last 20 years is that nobody goes to fight by themselves anymore. Everything’s a joint operation.”

Still, adapting and translating the military’s way of doing things to civilian law enforcement agencies takes effort, he said. “How do you take your local, state and federal agencies and your military support and synchronize them? How do you bring them together so they work together?”

“The military is fantastic with collaborating intel,” Cuff said. “But, with some law enforcement agencies, it’s not that way, because in their culture, they advance by how many busts they get. So, they want to keep all that information themselves. It’s a culture change, and anything like that takes a long time.”

There’s no lack of cooperation among the military services at JTF North, he offered. Yet, each service has intricacies and idiosyncrasies that must be gleaned and appreciated.

“There are differences — [physical training], evaluations and specific training that have to be done. That’s the biggest

challenge, trying to grasp all that and learn it. I’ve spent a lot of time reading other [services’] instructions, because I’m an expert for the Navy but not for the Army or the Marine Corps, or the Air Force or now the Coast Guard.

“One thing was this uniform,” he said, pointing to his blue, digital-print Navy Working Uniform, the equivalent of the Army Combat Uniform. “How do you properly wear it and where can’t you? Each service is a little bit different. I rely on my enlisted senior service reps, the highest-ranking person from each service, and I tell them that I’m going to be going to them a lot.”

Still, Cuff said Soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines should jump at the chance to work in joint commands like his.

“I would encourage it. For one thing, you’re going to learn about the other services. Once you come into a joint environment and do well at it, you’re actually wanted a lot more — you’re a lot more marketable.” 

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