

Air Guard may fight drug smugglers

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When and if the Pentagon sends Air National Guard planes to intercept suspected drug smugglers, it'll be old hat to four Fresno-based F-4D Phantom crewmen.

They've already been credited with intercepting and helping convict a pilot who skimmed below the range of radar — or so he thought

— into the U.S. from Mexico with what U.S. Customs Service officials suspected was a load of cocaine.

The airborne chase ranged across urban Southern California, the Kern County desert and up to Porterville. Until this past week, the participants and Guard officials weren't talking about it.

Congress last month voted to officially involve the military in the war against illicit drugs. Both Air and Army National Guard and military

Reserve units have been mentioned, but their roles, if any, haven't yet been defined.

In Fresno this past week, Guard Maj. Danny Cerna revealed that he became involved in the drug war two years ago, almost by default. Cerna, Maj. Bill Gore, Maj. Brad Kight and Lt. Tony Gaedicke were on five-minute alert at George Air Force Base near Victorville when

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the scramble klaxon sounded.

Cerna and Gore were pilots, Kight and Gaedicke their weapons systems officers. Fresno-based Phantoms routinely stand alert at Victorville.

Soon after the two Phantoms roared aloft, military radar controllers told Cerna and Gore to contact Federal Aviation Administration radar controllers for vectors to their "target," which had climbed to 10,000 feet in an apparent attempt to blend with other civilian air traffic over Riverside.

The then-unidentified "target" moved fast and made radar-evasion turns, traveling across the Ontario Airport traffic pattern and through the San Gabriel Mountains.

The military Phantoms caught the intruder south of Palmdale.

"I don't think he was aware that he had fighter-type aircraft in pur-

suit," Cerna said, "until we pulled up alongside."

Only the pilot was visible in the executive-type, twin-engine Cessna 421, Cerna said.

The Guard fliers relayed a description of the plane and its pilot along with its identifying numbers to the FAA controllers. Back came the message for the interceptor pilots to end the pursuit.

Had the military at that time been officially assigned to intercept smugglers, additional aircraft could have been scrambled to continue the chase, said Guard spokesman Lt. Col. James A. Arthur in Fresno this week.

As it was, the intruder escaped — for a while.

"There was nothing about the airplane that we didn't pass on to the FAA," Cerna recalled.

Officials, unsure if Phantoms should chase civilian aircraft, ordered the interceptors back to Victorville after identification was made. FAA radar in Oakland

tracked the suspected smuggler northbound from Porterville up the San Joaquin Valley, but lost its blip in the mountains near the Oregon border.

By the time Customs Service agents found the plane on the ground at an airport near Seattle, it was too late for an arrest. It had been unloaded.

But they had identified the suspect plane. Two weeks later when it landed in Washington State after another trip south of the border, agents arrested the pilot. The plane was loaded with cocaine.

"It's always been a surveillance situation," Arthur explained.

He wasn't sure how current legislation would change the Guard's role beyond identifying intruders in U.S. airspace, but he expects current legislation will spell out each agency's role in drug interdiction.

"It's our role to do what Congress and the federal government mandate for us," Arthur said.