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# Amphibious Planes as a Preferred Trafficking Method in Argentina

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### **Author Background**

Brenda Fiegel is a researcher at the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Her specific research expertise includes: "U.S./Mexico foreign relations," "U.S./Mexico border security threats," "Mexican and Central American violence/extremist groups to include drug cartels," and "Conflict resolution and peacekeeping in Mexico and Central America." She has lectured on these topics in professional military education settings, at Interagency Security Conferences, at Customs and Border Patrol Facilities, and at academic forums.

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# **AMPHIBIOUS PLANES AS A PREFERRED TRAFFICKING METHOD IN ARGENTINA**

*Brenda Fiegel*

Argentinian web daily *Diario Popular* reported that international drug-trafficking organizations in Argentina are now using amphibious aircraft to deliver shipments of marijuana and cocaine to awaiting fast-boats along the Uruguay and Parana Rivers.<sup>1</sup> This is significant because it represents a change to historical fluvial trafficking along these waterways. At present, Argentinian security officials have not confirmed the use of amphibious aircraft along fluvial routes, but this modus operandi is likely, as the Uruguay and Parana Rivers merge major shipping routes which have been used by traffickers for decades.

## **Historical Fluvial Trafficking Operations**

Drug trafficking operations along the Uruguay and Parana Rivers are nothing new and consist of concealed contraband in cargo ships, fast-boat transfer from one location to another, aerial dead drops, and, in some cases, even floating packages down smaller waterways, as discussed later in this section. In short, fluvial operations along the Uruguay and Parana Rivers are widespread and extend from Brazil to Paraguay and finally into Argentina, where these rivers form 20 major ports that flow directly into the Atlantic Ocean. From there, large-scale cargo ships transport exports and contraband to Africa and Europe.

## **Parana Delta**

Of key importance to fluvial operations in Argentina is the Parana Delta, as it provides direct access to La Plata River and, hence, the Atlantic Ocean. However, the Delta offers more than just location. Argentinian daily *El Tiempo* indicated that the Parana Delta provides traffickers an advantageous geographic layout, as it forms a maze of rivers and over 1000 tiny islands that are used to store large-scale shipments awaiting export.<sup>2</sup> *El Tiempo* further reported that locals support traffickers in the Delta region by storing shipments and not reporting illicit activity. Those who dare to speak out against illegal activities do so anonymously for fear of their lives, as lawlessness and impunity reign in this small geographic region. As per *El Tiempo*, this is evidenced by the fact that impermeable drug packages are commonly seen floating from one location to another within the Delta.<sup>3</sup>

## **Amphibious Aircraft and Fluvial Trafficking**

During an interview with Paraguayan news source *La Nacion*, Claudio Izaguirre of the Argentinian Anti-Drug Association indicated that historical fluvial operations on cargo ships and through the Parana Delta are still being utilized, but reported amphibious aircraft that are able to land directly in the Parana and Uruguay Rivers are gaining popularity.<sup>4</sup> He further stated this his organization detects up to 20 amphibious flights a week, many of which depart from Pilar, Paraguay. Night flights are the most popular, but day flights have been noted as well.

According to *La Nacion*, the amphibious shipments belong to Bolivian and Paraguayan traffickers, who are well aware of terrestrial Federal Police checkpoints and radar systems that actively scan Argentinian airspace for incoming narco flights. To avoid radar detection pilots are

told to fly at low altitudes. Regarding coordination and drop points, Izaguirre indicated that pilots use GPS coordinates and drop shipments to awaiting fast-boats only if there is no sign of police or military activity in and around the area.<sup>5</sup>

A spokesperson for the Prefectura Naval of Argentina stated the use of amphibious aircraft along fluvial routes is not surprising because traffickers realize it is impossible for authorities to monitor all coastal and river activity at all times, as the Prefectura is responsible for more than 5117 km of coastline and rivers. During an interview with *La Nacion*, the spokesperson indicated that “there are large extensions of unmonitored river systems in the north, northeast and eastern sectors of Argentina which drug traffickers have taken advantage of. From these locations, they are able to drop their shipments for local distribution and foreign export.”<sup>6</sup>

In closing, it is likely that traffickers are opting for amphibious flights to bring shipments closer to Argentina’s 20 major export hubs. Furthermore, change is always necessary, and the introduction of amphibious aircraft is likely related to effective destruction of clandestine airstrips, aerial radar systems, and successful Argentinian police operations along the northern border where drug shipments commonly enter. Still, it is to be expected that traffickers will use the new amphibious method as an adjunct to traditional methods involving fluvial, air, and terrestrial routes, as no single method is perfect. Instead, it is the element of change that represents the most diverse challenges to authorities, especially in a country like Argentina, where multiple international borders, significant river systems, and direct access to the Atlantic Ocean lure traffickers from all over South America.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “Los aqua-narcos de Argentina. (Amphibious Planes in Argentina).” *Diario Popular*. Accessed from <http://www.diariopopular.com.ar/notas/242691-aqua-narcos-ahora-traffican-droga-avionetas-anfibias>

<sup>2</sup> “Los isleños del Delta del Paraná viven acosados por el narcotráfico (Islanders in the Parana Delta Live in Fear of Drug Traffickers).” *El Tiempo*. Accessed from <http://tiempo.infonews.com/nota/13388/los-islenos-del-delta-del-parana-viven-acosados-por-el-narcotrafico>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Los aqua-narcos: ahora utilizan avionetas anfibias para traficar (Amphibious Planes as a Preferred Trafficking Method in Argentina).” *La Nacion*. Accessed from <http://www.lanacion.com.py/2015/11/16/los-aqua-narcos-ahora-utilizan-avionetas-anfibias-para-trafficar/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “La fragil frontera norte (The Fragile Northern Border).” *La Nacion*. Accessed from <http://servicios.lanacion.com.ar/archivo/2013/11/17/024/DT>