

COMMET has pot in sights

Eradication team has been bane of growers since 1993

By **KIMBERLY CHASE**
The Salinas Californian

Since the formation of the County of Monterey Marijuana Eradication Team in 1993, local marijuana growers haven't had it easy.

COMMET consists of sheriff's Deputies Terry Rahiri and Robert Gonzalez, and Deputy District Attorney Todd Hornik.

Gonzalez, who's been assigned to the task force since October, said he enjoys the work, which picked up speed right away.

"The first week, I was in a helicopter all day, every day, looking for marijuana," he said, "and we found a big old garden, and we went in and chopped it up."

The group works with county narcotics detectives to form a significant force against pot production.

Some of the group's key raids have taken place in Los Padres National Forest in south county.

"The detectives are cross-trained to help with the marijuana eradication," said Monterey County Sheriff's Sgt. Doug Dahmen, who runs the narcotics unit.

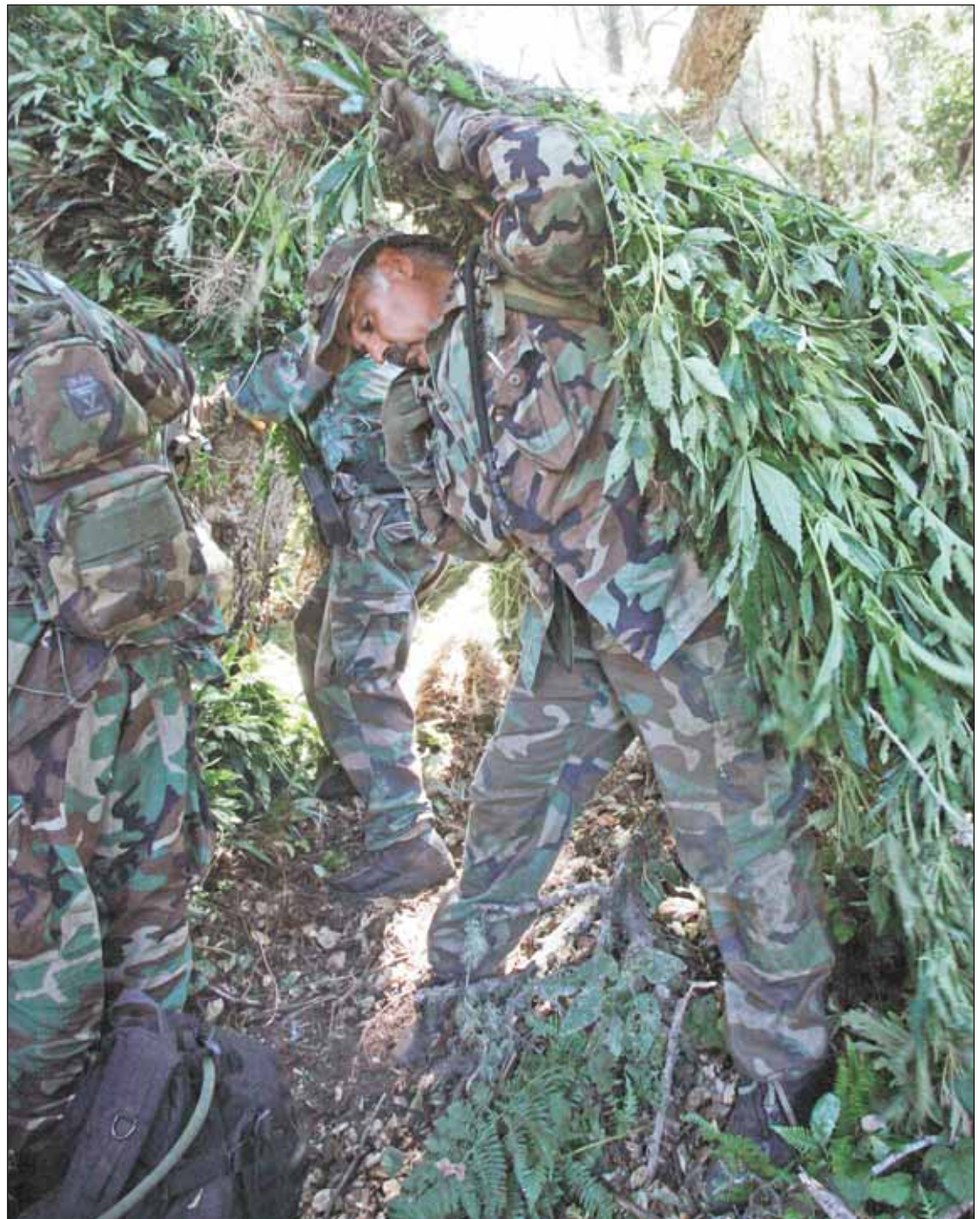
COMMET is funded by the governor's Office of Emergency services, and it received \$193,333 for the 2005-06 fiscal year, Dahmen said.

"It fluctuates every year depending on a variety of issues, and we were told that this next year that it may be reduced," he said of funding.

COMMET destroys the majority of the pot it finds but also stores samples for trial, Dahmen said, adding that the group provides storage for law enforcement agencies that ask the team to take over for larger investigations.

"The storage of large quantities of marijuana becomes a problem," he said. "A lot of agencies don't want to deal with that."

This spring, COMMET deputies will speak in Monterey County schools about



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO

Along with deputies and detectives of the County of Monterey Marijuana Eradication Team (COMMET), Captain Ray Gould of the U.S. Forest Service prepares to carry two large bundles of marijuana plants down a precarious trail to Highway 1. More than 1,900 marijuana plants were sized in a garden at Redwood Gulch in the Los Padres National Forest south of Gorda, with a potential street value of over \$6.7 million.

individual responsibility when it comes to drug use. The group also is trying to secure a helicopter for a demonstration in Salinas, Dahmen said. It all keeps COMMET's deputies enthusiastic.

"It's a lot more fun than patrol," Gonzalez said.

COUNTY OF MONTEREY MARIJUANA ERADICATION TEAM

- n **LOCATION:** 1414 Natividad Road, Salinas.
- n **STAFFING:** Two deputies and one prosecutor.
- n **HISTORY:** Established in 1993.
- n **ONLINE:** www.co.monterey.ca.us/sheriff/contact.htm.