

# DRUG WARRIOR

THE DEA'S GENE HAISLIP '60, B.C.L. '63  
BATTLED WORLDWIDE AGAINST THE  
ILLEGAL DRUG TRADE — AND SCORED A  
RARE VICTORY. BY SARA PICCINI

Gene Haislip '60, B.C.L. '63 retired from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) nearly 15 years ago, but he's never really left the job. "I wake up in the morning and my wife asks me, 'What did you do at the office last night?'" Haislip says with a laugh, describing his vivid dreams of work.

"A few nights ago, I was flying to a conference in some city and the pilot said, 'Did you know you all gotta jump today? We have parachutes for all of you.'" In his dream, he jumped.



Gene Haislip '60, B.C.L. '63 in May 1985 announcing the DEA's ban on the drug MDMA, commonly known as "Ecstasy."

While he wasn't actually called upon to parachute out of a plane, Haislip went on some wild rides during his long tenure as head of the DEA's Office of Diversion Control. Traveling across the globe, he negotiated with Manuel Noriega's henchmen in Panama, drove through the streets of Colombia in a convoy of armored cars accompanied by Uzi-toting guards, and traveled to China as the DEA's first representative there, at a time when "99 percent of the people" were still wearing blue Mao suits.

Clearly, Haislip was no ordinary government bureaucrat.

In fact, he spent much of his time butting heads with Wash-

ington's bureaucrats, politicians and lobbyists, often feeling like Lewis Carroll's Alice talking with the Mad Hatter. Haislip, whom classmate Tom Lipscomb '60 describes as "genial and deceptively tough," was interested in results. At the DEA, he battled to stem the destructive effects of a succession of drugs — ecstasy, Quaaludes, methamphetamine — and warned of the dangers of legal prescription drugs such as Ritalin. Since retirement, he's continued to serve as a consultant for corporations and governmental agencies worldwide, including the United Nations Drug Control Program. His name appears frequently in accounts of the drug



Haislip at home in Winchester, Va., surrounded by mementos from his world travels.

wars, such as the critically acclaimed book *Methland* by Nick Redding, published last year.

Haislip is quick to acknowledge the irony inherent in his ongoing crusade. “It really is an addiction, fighting this,” he says.

Not surprisingly, he identifies with another great literary character, Don Quixote — “because he was always trying to improve the world.” Although Haislip has done his share of tilting at windmills, he’s among the rare individuals, inside or outside of government, who’s been able to score a clear victory in combating the illegal drug trade.

And he did it, he says, by thinking outside the box — something he learned as a philosophy major at William and Mary.

### THE FIRST JOURNEY: AN EDUCATION

Like his literary hero, Haislip has always tended to follow his own path. His route to the College was certainly unconventional.

“In high school, I held the distinction of throwing the biggest teenage beer party in the history of Norfolk, Va. I don’t think it’s been beaten yet,” Haislip says. “Needless to say, this didn’t serve my grades well, and it was suggested I might benefit from doing the 12th grade twice. So here I was, already facing the world a year behind in life.”

At one point, Haislip actually thought of shipping out with a “rough and tough” friend in the Merchant Marines, but he realized in time that he needed an education. He buckled down and attended summer school, got very good grades, and was accepted at William and Mary.

“I came to Williamsburg and in no time at all, it was everything I expected. It was like living inside of a permanent Christmas card.”

Haislip gives special credit to philosophy professor Lewis Foster Jr. and Wayne Kernodle and Ed Rhyne of the sociology department for

developing his maturity of thought. “The greatest qualification in life is to be able to think and analyze, and William and Mary taught me that,” he says.

When he was a junior, Haislip met the woman who would become his wife of 50 years, Patricia “Patsy” Blanton Haislip ’61, an education major. As their relationship blossomed, they began to contemplate marriage. But the timing wasn’t good: Patsy’s father had suffered a serious heart attack, which affected the family finances.

“We thought, ‘If we put this off for better times, we’re going to have to put it off a long time.’” So, in an act of chivalry worthy of Don Quixote, Haislip promised Patsy’s father that he would see her through her senior year. The couple married in the Wren Chapel during spring break in 1960. Appropriately, they have a son named Wren.

Haislip received a law degree from Marshall-Wythe and practiced law in Norfolk for a few years. He continued his legal studies at George Washington University, focusing on how developments in science and technology affect the law.

After receiving his LL.M., Haislip took a position at the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, the precursor to the DEA, that seemed to exactly fit his interests. “Science and technology, criminal law, international law — it was all there,” he says. “But after about three months of reading boring reports, I thought to myself, ‘I have made a terrible mistake.’”

His boss somehow got wind of Haislip’s dissatisfaction and gave him some new assignments, which eventually led Haislip to Capitol Hill as the DEA’s head of Congressional affairs. “I always say, ‘Be careful of the superior you choose.’ My career took off at that point and it never stopped.”

## GETTING AT THE SOURCE: METHAQUALONE

Flash forward a decade: After a stint serving as deputy assistant secretary at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in the Ford administration, Haislip returned to the DEA. He was soon being considered for the position of director of the DEA's Office of Compliance and Regulatory Affairs (later renamed the Office of Diversion Control), which oversaw the production and use of legally manufactured drugs.

"When they called me in, I said, 'If you select me for this position, I'm going to change things. I'm going after the criminal diversion of legitimate drugs; I'm going to do things we've not been doing.' And I guess that's what they wanted, because they did select me.

"And the very first thing I got into was the methaqualone problem."

The chemical methaqualone is essential to the manufacture of Quaaludes, then a best-selling sedative. Many people under a certain age may not even remember Quaaludes, or "ludes," but they were widely abused in the 1960s and '70s: in ranking the dangerousness of drugs, DEA statistics placed them among the top three killers, along with heroin and cocaine.

Haislip had first heard of methaqualone, a legal drug, while working as executive assistant to the DEA director. "I had to review enforcement reports that came in from all over the field. And here was a seizure of 3 tons of methaqualone on an airplane coming from Colombia. Three days later, there was another airplane seized, out in Texas, and another 2 tons. Then there was another big seizure in Georgia. So I called down to check the statistics on national manufacture, and they said 7 tons is it for the country for a year.

"Right away, I saw that there was an elephant in the living room."

He knew that Colombians were using methaqualone to create a counterfeit form of Quaaludes. But where were they getting it from? In 1980, he went to Colombia to find out. He ended up in Barranquilla, a major port, flying from Bogota in an ancient DC-3 named *Don Coraje*, or Mr. Courageous. There he met with the head of customs in a grand but crumbling government building. "It looked like the Chinese Army had bivouacked there for 20 years," Haislip says.

"When I started to explain the problem, this official immediately froze up and said, 'We can't talk here.' He put his automatic in his belt and motioned for us to follow him. We went to an area that was completely abandoned, nothing but empty rooms and a few pieces of furniture. We sat over in the far corner of one of these rooms, guns on the table. I knew I was into something fairly heavy at this point."

After securing the cooperation of the Colombian customs official, Haislip returned safely to Washington, D.C. He asked the agency for just one thing: "A seizure on the dock at Barranquilla with all the papers."

Within a month, they had what they wanted: a shipment of

methaqualone from Hungary. "And so I was off to Hungary," Haislip says.

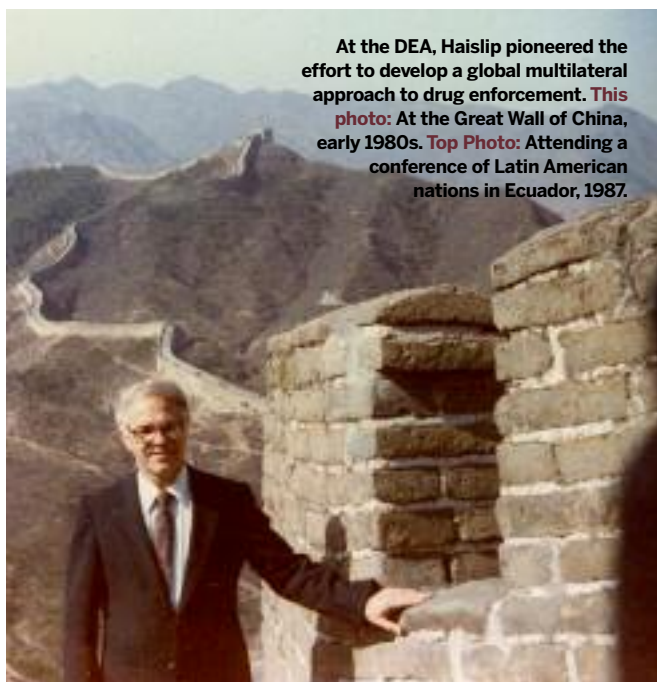
"One by one we found the sources, in Germany and Austria going through the port of Hamburg, and eventually even China," Haislip recalled during a television interview for *Frontline* on PBS. "Each time we were able to deal with these sources, just cutting off the faucets until, in fact, there was no more flow. The Colombians could not get their drug powder; they could not counterfeit the tablets. And that line of \$2 billion or more of illicit drug traffic was finished."

Congress soon outlawed the manufacture of Quaaludes, and by 1984, they were no longer a significant problem in the United States.

As a major article in *Rolling Stone* about the drug wars summed it up: "Haislip ... is his own kind of legend; he is still known around the DEA as the man who beat Quaaludes, perhaps the only drug that the U.S. has ever been able to declare total victory over."

Haislip would not have such a clear-cut victory in his next quest, going after the major ingredient of methamphetamine: ephedrine.

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At the DEA, Haislip pioneered the effort to develop a global multilateral approach to drug enforcement. This photo: At the Great Wall of China, early 1980s. Top Photo: Attending a conference of Latin American nations in Ecuador, 1987.



**Man of many hats:** After retiring from the DEA, Haislip continued his international work as a consultant. In 2004, he helped Peru craft a law for the control of chemicals used to process cocaine, which passed the Peruvian Congress 93-0. **Left photo:** Haislip in the Peruvian countryside. **Right photo:** Purchasing a Panama hat in Colombia.



## THE METH WARS

Methamphetamine, or “meth,” has gained such notoriety that it’s hard to believe meth abuse was once a small problem, confined to biker gangs in northern California. If Gene Haislip had gotten his way, it might still be.

In the early 1980s, Haislip recognized that the illegal manufacture of meth was a growing problem, but it was still contained enough to be nipped in the bud. He knew that the criminals were getting their hands on imports of bulk ephedrine, a chemical used to make popular decongestants, but also the principal ingredient in meth. Applying the same strategy he’d used with Quaaludes, Haislip aimed to go after the importation of ephedrine from abroad and to oversee its legitimate use domestically.

In 1985, Haislip proposed a federal law allowing the DEA to regulate ephedrine pills and powder. But the pharmaceutical lobby was able to reach the highest levels of government, forcing Haislip to make a key compromise: letting pills go unregulated. “It becomes a very tricky dance to get what we need, to protect the public, but at the same time try not to interfere or overly inconvenience the legitimate aspects,” he explained in the *Frontline* interview.

Even the watered-down legislation, however, produced results. “Within the first two years, we cut the meth problem by 60 percent,” Haislip says.

Over the next two decades, Congress passed a succession of laws to stem the meth epidemic through control of ephedrine and its counterpart, pseudophedrine, but each time the legislation was compromised because of the pharmaceutical lobby. U.S. meth producers learned to exploit every loophole.

Haislip retired from the DEA in March 1997 without seeing ultimate success in his battle against meth. But eventually, researchers and reporters gathered evidence proving that his strategy of going after the source chemicals was effective. Haislip credits the work of such journalists as Steve Suo of the *Oregonian*, whose 2004 series on meth was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, with passage of the 2005 Combat Meth Act, which finally promised controls with real teeth.

His reward has come from e-mails he receives from former meth addicts. “One woman wrote me recently and said, ‘The best day of my life was when the state took my children,’” Haislip says. “She wanted

to know what she could do to fight the problem.” After Haislip responded, the woman wrote back: “I was so shocked to receive a reply from you, and so honored. I wanted to do something, and now I have a direction to take.”

## AN UNENDING QUEST

Since 1997, Haislip has run a busy consulting practice, advising domestic pharmaceutical companies about compliance issues and continuing his overseas work. With Patsy’s retirement last year from her long teaching career, the couple now has more time for their greatest joy in life: doting on their 4-year-old granddaughter, who lives in Florida. Reflecting back, Haislip says simply: “You’re talking to a lucky guy. I don’t know what I did to deserve it.”

Haislip is also spending more time pursuing another great passion: painting. It’s not surprising that someone with Haislip’s imagination has a creative side. “I get this idea that is so complete, so glowing. I try to get an image that at least expresses it somewhat. The first sketch is always horrid,” he says, chuckling at himself. “But when I finish, I can say it’s out of me.”

The subject of his latest painting? The Man of La Mancha himself: Don Quixote.

Wherever and whenever he can, Haislip continues his quest, advocating for a comprehensive, strategic approach to solving the illegal drug problem — something often lacking or even opposed in the federal bureaucracy.

“DEA is a law enforcement organization, they carry guns and badges, and they arrest people, bring them to trial and put them in jail if they’re found guilty. That’s fine,” he says. “But that’s like trying to eliminate an enemy army one person at a time. It is totally inadequate as a national program.”

Despite the many frustrations, however, Haislip has never shared the sense of futility often felt by former DEA colleagues. “Even if you can’t completely solve a problem, you can improve it. Does it matter if 1,000 die instead of 10,000? You’re damn right it matters, by 9,000.

“That’s 9,000 who will live, and all their kids.” ■