

Coasties Take Out Drug Traffickers and Their New Moves

Story by PAC Donnie Brzuska, PADET Jacksonville, Fla.

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. - Coast Guard and Navy personnel transferred more than 9,000 pounds of cocaine and 250 gallons of liquid cocaine to federal agents from Operation Panama Express at Naval Station Mayport, Fla., Oct. 5. Operation Panama Express is a joint Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice investigative task force aimed at providing real time, actionable and tactical drug-related intelligence for counter drug crews on the frontlines of the campaign against drugs.

The offloaded narcotics, which have an import value of approximately \$129,278,032, were seized in five separate busts by the Coast Guard and Navy in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. Coast Guard Tactical Law Enforcement Team South, from Miami, and Tactical Law Enforcement Team Pacific, from San Diego, made the five busts while recently deployed aboard U.S. Navy vessels.

The seized narcotics demonstrate the varying methods used by, and desperation of, the modern-day drug trafficker. Three of the busts were from fleeing go-fast vessels. A go-fast is a high-speed vessel drug smugglers use to attempt to out run Coast Guard or other law enforcement authorities. Coast Guard law enforcement teams also located a fishing vessel laden with liquid cocaine – the first maritime seizure of liquid cocaine. Coast Guard boarding officers also detained four suspected smugglers aboard a semi-submersible vessel that was used to smuggle narcotics.

In two of the takedowns, including the bust involving the semi-submersible vessel, the suspected smugglers apparently attempted to scuttle their cargo.

The drugs were seized as part of an overarching Coast Guard counter drug campaign known as Steel Web.

The campaign is aimed at denying drug traffickers access to maritime routes in more than six-million-square miles of the drug transit zone, which encompasses the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea and the Eastern Pacific Ocean.

Drying up Liquid Cocaine

The Coast Guard made the first maritime seizure of liquid cocaine April 25, when a Coast Guard law enforcement team from San Diego deployed aboard the USS *Rodney M. Davis* located 3,850 gallons of liquid cocaine in the fish hold of the Ecuadorian-flagged *Emperador* in the waters of the Eastern Pacific. Each gallon of the liquid is the equivalent



MAYPORT, Fla. – A Navy petty officer loads 50-pound bales of cocaine onto a conveyor belt so it can be handed over to federal agents for prosecution Friday morning. More than 9,000 pounds of cocaine and 250 gallons of liquid cocaine were offloaded and turned over to federal agents. Each gallon of liquid cocaine can be made into approximately two kilograms of pure cocaine. Coast Guard photograph by PA2 Bobby Nash.

of 1.3 kilograms of processed cocaine. The Coast Guard boarding team detained the 17 crewmembers of the vessel. Sixteen of the crewmembers were from Ecuador, and one of the crewmembers was Colombian.

The Coast Guard, in cooperation with the Departments of Justice and State, has negotiated 26 bilateral agreements with our drug interdiction partner nations in and around the transit zone. These bilateral agreements allow Coast Guard law enforcement teams, like the team that boarded the *Emperador*, to gain jurisdiction over suspected smugglers.

The Coast Guard boarding team and crew of the USS *Davis* transported the vessel to Guayaquil, Ecuador, for further examination by officials from the U.S. Drug



EASTERN PACIFIC OCEAN – A photo of the semi-submersible submarine shortly before the crew of the vessel abandoned and apparently scuttled the vessel. Photo courtesy of U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Enforcement

Administration and Ecuadorian authorities.

The majority of the liquid cocaine, 3,600 gallons, was turned over to Ecuadorian authorities for destruction. The 16 Ecuadorian crewmembers were transferred to Ecuador for prosecution.

The Colombian crewmember is awaiting trial in the United States. A small amount of the liquid cocaine, 250 gallons, was offloaded for use as evidence in the prosecution

of the suspected Colombian smuggler.

According to Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph K. Ruddy, who oversees international investigations of drug trafficking, authorities believe the liquid was going to be processed into powder in Mexico before being shipped to the United States.

Go Fasters Can't Go Far

The most recent go-fast bust of the five was made when Miami-based Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachment 401, embarked aboard the USS *Klakring* interdicted a 45-foot go-fast Sept. 8. The Coast Guard team located 7,000 pounds of cocaine in 140 bales aboard the vessel and detained four suspected smugglers. This was the largest amount of narcotics seized from a go-fast in fiscal year 2007, and the third largest go-fast bust in history.

“The number one thing that helped us have success in this case is the cooperation we have with other agencies, especially the U.S. Navy,” said Ensign Todd Bagetis, the

officer in charge of LEDET 401 from Coast Guard Tactical Law Enforcement Team South and the Coast Guard officer overseeing the offload of the drugs. “Also, the intelligence community provides us with more and better information.”

A U.S. Customs and Border Protection surveillance aircraft spotted a go-fast in the Eastern Pacific Aug. 27 and soon a Miami-based Coast Guard law enforcement team aboard the USS *Halyburton* from Mayport, pursued the suspected smugglers. The go-fast crew was spotted jettisoning their cargo by maritime patrol aircraft before the smugglers reached Costa Rican shores. The Coast Guard law enforcement team and the *Halyburton's* crew arrived on scene and recovered 1,350 pounds of cocaine.

The Coast Guard and Navy stopped 10 kilograms, or approximately 22 pounds, of cocaine from reaching U.S. streets July 22.

The USS *McClusky* and a Coast Guard law enforcement team from San Diego stopped a suspected go-fast boat in the Eastern Pacific. A Coast Guard boarding team searched the vessel and located narcotics. The Coast Guard team detained four Colombian crewmembers.

Shutting Down the Submersible-Super Highway

A San Diego-based Coast Guard law enforcement team aboard the USS *De Wert* from Mayport intercepted a semi-submersible submarine 300-miles southwest of the Mexico-Guatemala border August 20 after it was spotted by a CBP surveillance aircraft.

The four suspected smugglers piloting the semi-submersible scuttled their vessel when they apparently spotted pursuing law enforcement assets. Eleven bales and 60 kilograms of cocaine, totaling 632 pounds, surfaced near the four men. USS *De Wert* and Coast Guard crews rescued the four men from the water. The men were detained by the Coast Guard law enforcement team.

The craft, estimated to be about 50 feet in length, was similar to others that have been seized carrying multi-ton loads of cocaine.



MAYPORT, Fla. - Petty Officer 2nd Class Tom Whalen from Coast Guard Tactical Law Enforcement Team South in Miami hands a bale of cocaine to a Navy crewmember from the USS *Klakring*. Whalen and his law enforcement detachment team seized the cocaine during the largest single go-fast drug interdiction in fiscal year 2007 with the help of crewmembers from *Klakring*. Coast Guard and Navy crews also offloaded drugs from four other busts by various Coast Guard law enforcement detachments in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. The Coast Guard and Navy also offloaded 250 gallons of liquid cocaine from the first maritime interdiction of liquid cocaine ever. Coast Guard photo by PA1 Donnie Brzuska, PADET Jacksonville, Fla.

“It makes you feel good as a military member, and it makes you feel wonderful as a U.S. citizen to know you are making an impact. You get to see the results – getting drugs off the streets,” said Bagetis.

USCG