Florida's Flourishing Drug-Smuggling Traffic

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By Wayne King
New York Times

Miami

Ten years ago, when David Westrate was 21 years old and just beginning a career as a narcotics agent on the West Coast, a seizure of 200 pounds of marijuana was what he called "tremendous" — something the whole office turned out for.

Now, as the still boyish acting director for the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration for Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, he finds the stakes a lot higher.

"We don't mess with anything, generally, under a ton," he said. "Oh, we might go after two to 800 pounds if the individual is of interest.

"Otherwise, you have just so much manpower, so you go after the big ones."

In Florida these days, there is no shortage of "big ones" for the drug agency to go after, not only cargo planes filled with marijuana, but also suitcases full of cocaine, boat loads of hashish, flight bags stuffed with heroin, all manner of drugs smuggled in huge quantities in every conceivable way.

In the past few years, these three states, especially Florida, have become a major entry point for drugs, second only to the Mexican border in over-all quantities seized, the leader in cocaine, possibly the leader in the total amount of drugs that get through.

"I would say," said Irwin Weinstein, assistant regional director of the drug agency in Florida, "that there is as much coming in here as anywhere in the United States."

Of the 13 regions into which the country is divided by the drug agency, region five, which includes Florida, holds the record for the largest single drug seizures in five categories — 202 pounds of cocaine, 385 pounds of heroin, 20 tons of marijuana, 50 pounds of methaqualone (a depressant favored by teenagers) and 3700 pounds of hashish.

Despite the efforts, there is no question that the law enforcement authorities are making only a small dent in drug smuggling. Most drug enforcement officers are chary of making estimates, but those who do usually say they have probably stopped little more than ten per cent of the total traffic.

Such estimates can be no more than educated guesses, but there are suggestive realities. A single cocaine processing laboratory raided in Colombia in December, for example, was capable of turning out about 100 pounds a week of high-quality drug, or more than 5000 pounds a year.

The laboratory, the largest ever raided in that country, is but one of dozens believed to exist in Colombia alone. On the other hand, U.S. officials seized about 1500 pounds of cocaine in the fiscal year 1974.

Drug agents in Florida are clearly outmanned, often out-equipped, and, it would appear, outsmarted by the drug smugglers, favored as they are by the geography and transportation patterns of the state.

Florida, in fact, seems almost to have been designed by smugglers. It is a peninsula with 1350 miles of coastline. Its shoreline, taking into account rivers and bays with access to the sea, is 8450 miles, dotted with myriad places to hide.

There are more than 200,000 boats registered in the state, with 8200 of them documented with the Coast Guard as commercial, 2800 of them in Miami, 2000 in Tampa, 600 in Key West. Besides these, thousands of other boats sail monthly into Florida ports for pleasure and commerce. Any or all of them, drug enforcement officials have learned, is a potential smuggler.

Lucien Conein is head of the intelligence collection branch of the Drug Enforcement Administration (WXPost, Potomac Magazine, 9 Feb 75 - filed Pentagon Papers).

Teenager's Bizarre Rape of a Cabbie

London

A taxi driver stumbled into a police station and told astonished detectives he had been hijacked at knife-point and forced to have sex with a teen-age girl passenger.

She was wearing a coat and nothing else, the 31-year-old cabbie insisted yesterday.

He said the incident began in East London when a man jumped into his cab with the girl, pulled out a knife and ordered him to drive to an apartment two miles away.

The driver, who has not been identified by police, said he was forced to strip and ordered at knife point to have sex with the girl.

Later a shopping bag was placed over his head and he was punched before he mnaged to grab his clothes and flee.

Police said a 16-year-old girl and a man are being questioned.

Reuters

Then there are the airways. Florida has 255 named and charted airstrips, among them some of the busiest in the world. Beyond these, clandestine fields can be carved out in any one of a thousand wooded and secluded locations in the rural areas of the state.

Florida is the closest point for illegal entry of drugs from the Caribbean and South America, primarily cocaine and marijuana. It has been estimated that marijuana, until a recent crackdown, had become the leading cash crop in Jamaica, equaling or surpassing in cash value its No. 1 legal export, bauxite. Huge quantities continue to come from Colombia.

The coca plant, from which cocaine is derived, thrives in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, Bolivia and Peru, regarded as the primary sources of illicit cocaine coming into the United States, reputedly produce 35,000 kilos of the drug each year.

Although marijuana and cocaine are the state's primary illegal imports, there is also substantial traffic in transshipped heroin, hashish and other drugs, taken from their point of origin in Europe, the Mideast or elsewhere into South America or the Caribbean and from there across the border at Florida in the United States.

The result, as one overworked agent of the drug agency put it, is "dope from every direction, in every way you can imagine, on the water, on the land, in the air." Occasionally, it even rains from the heavens.

It is not unusual for plastic-wrapped bundles of drugs to be dropped offshore from planes or into bays, rivers, swamps and fields so the planes will be "clean" when they land. One tale is of a fisherman whose boat was nearly swamped when a bale of marijuana smacked into the water beside him. More often, bales are simply floated from boats.

Westrate of the drug agency and others estimate that about half the drugs coming into Florida come by sea, half by air.

Although there are some amateurs involved, primarily in marijuana traffic, the vast majority of drugs appear to come into the state through the efforts of well-financed and organized smuggling rings of from two to three up to two dozen individuals.

The enormous profits spawn large operations, often with a grim leavening of violence.

Over the past month, state and federal agents have arrested or were seeking 18 persons, in an alleged $23-million cocaine smuggling conspiracy. Under investigation was evidence or suspicion linking the ring to 14 unsolved murders, a number of beatings and a bombing.

The Miami airport poses a particular problem for drug agents and customs officials, who are the primary line of enforcement. Eleven domestic and 25 foreign airlines land there, with more than two million incoming international passengers a year.

Drugs come into the airport regularly in false-bottom suitcases, in clothing, in camera cases, boxes labeled machine parts and the like, and carried on the person — agents have found up to seven pounds.

Perhaps the drug enforcement agency's most spectacular success came last year in what was called operation Buccaneer, a Coast Guard drug agency operation that involved blockading the Windward Strait between Cuba and Haiti and stopping all suspect American vessels as well as helping the Jamaican government search out and destroy marijuana on the ground.

The agency reported that 450 acres of marijuana, more than 350,000 pounds, were destroyed on the ground; another 250,000 pounds were seized on aircraft and boats; nine aircraft and 18 boats were taken, and 86 persons arrested.

The long-term success of the operation, however, is open to some question.

A middle-level New York marijuana dealer who agreed to talk confidentially to the New York Times by telephone said:

"It was three weeks to a month before Christmas and all of a sudden, people like me had to go to somebody else just to get something for my own head, my own use. There were dealers who were considering going into a straight gig. Florida was a major topic of conversation; there was one word used and that word was 'heat.' I think it got out of hand. The minute the Florida scene got so visible, it was bound to happen. Everything was coming from there."

The operation, he said, created "the most solid drought yet" in marijuana, but he added, "it's unrealistic to think they can stop it permanently."

"Since Christmas, there have been three or four loads of excellent stuff coming in here," he said. "There is something like an old-fashioned gasoline price war."

"There is plenty of product, but no capital. It's the economy. The price is down $50 a pound."