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Cops Haul In Record Stash—4,600 Pounds Of Cocaine Seized In Maspeth Raid

by Robert Brodsky

Feb 6, 2003



Federal agents have broken up a massive international drug ring which imported thousands of pounds of cocaine into Queens by hiding it inconspicuously inside the walls of a railroad tanker.

Last week's seizure netted investigators 4,600 pounds of cocaine—worth a street value of approximately \$120 million—from a van and a warehouse in Maspeth's industrial neighborhood.

Drug Enforcement agents said the bust was the city's biggest in over 13 years. "This is a record seizure in the New York area," said Anthony Placido, head of the DEA's New York office as he displayed over 1,000 confiscated bricks of cocaine at a press conference last Wednesday.

Four men were arrested for their part in the operation, including two from Glendale. Ricardo Morales, 41, and Pedro Vasquez-Fierros, 37, both of 78th Avenue, and originally from Mexico, were charged with criminal sale of a controlled substance and conspiracy. Also charged were Ramon Caba, 30, a Bronx resident originally from the Dominican Republic and Jose Gutierrez from Guadalajara, Mexico.

The men were arraigned in Manhattan Criminal Court last Thursday and face up to 25 years to life if convicted.

Bridget Brennan, the city's special narcotics prosecutor, said the men were part of a larger drug cartel and could not have pulled off this operation by themselves. An investigation into finding other suspects is continuing.

"It's too complex a scheme and we believe they are members of a more sophisticated organization," she said.

Last January the defendants smuggled two tons of cocaine from South America through Mexico and into the United States through the hollowed out walls of a railroad tanker filled with vegetable oil, Brennan said.

The arrests came on January 28th when a team of investigators followed two vehicles from a Maspeth warehouse, located at 51-18 Grand Avenue, to a nearby parking lot.

During their surveillance, police observed the driver of one vehicle—a silver colored minivan—jump out and transfer into a Ford Explorer SUV.

Caba returned to the minivan later that day but police intervened and the suspect took off, leading authorities through a brief chase through Maspeth.

When he was apprehended at 74th Street and 51st Drive, police recovered about 800 pounds of cocaine from the van alone, worth an estimated \$24 million.

A subsequent search of the warehouse, which is operated by the Four Queens Soybean Oil Co., recovered over 3,800 more pounds of cocaine. All together, the drugs have a wholesale value \$40 million, prosecutors said.

Also uncovered was an instrument utilized to cut open the tanker's interior walls and several barrels of vegetable oil which apparently had been siphoned out to make room for the drugs, police said.

The tanker car, disguised by a canopy, was later found on a rail spur along the side of the warehouse.

Queens District Attorney Richard Brown said the seizure would save lives by preventing drugs from flowing into local neighborhoods and into the hands of children.

“There can be no value placed upon the lives that would have been forever affected by this poison if this shipment had reached our streets,” Brown said. “Vigorous enforcement of our drug laws kept these drugs from our streets and will continue to protect public safety.”

Last week's bust was the largest since 1989 when custom agents raided a Long Island City warehouse, finding 12,000 pounds of cocaine.