

# Press Release

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## COAST GUARD TO OFFLOAD 9,500 POUNDS OF COCAINE

KEY WEST, Fla. -- The Boston-based crew of the Coast Guard Cutter *Seneca* will offload more than 9,500 pounds of cocaine with an import value of more than \$300 million here at 9 a.m. tomorrow. The drugs were seized along with 17 suspected smugglers taken into custody from four separate smuggling attempts in the Colombian Basin between Feb. 3 and March 10.

*Seneca's* hot streak began the night of Feb. 3 when a maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) flying for Joint Interagency Task Force South, based here, spotted a northbound go-fast vessel. JIATF South alerted the Seventh Coast Guard District in Miami who diverted both *Seneca* and the USS *Halyburton* with an embarked Coast Guard law enforcement detachment (LEDET).

Both vessels launched their embarked helicopters to pursue the suspect vessel, including *Seneca's* armed MH-68 Sting Ray helicopter from Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) Jacksonville, Fla. The suspect vessel was intercepted by the crew of the Sting Ray, ignored their verbal and visual signals to stop and began dumping their cargo overboard. Disabling fire was used by the helicopter's sharpshooter to disable the vessel.

A boarding team was dispatched from *Seneca* while *Halyburton* searched for the jettisoned cargo. *Seneca's* boarding team detained five suspects, claiming to be Colombian, and *Halyburton* recovered 70 bales of what was later determined to be cocaine, weighing approximately 3,150 pounds.

Feb. 27, *Seneca* completed a double play, taking down two smuggling boats in a single day.

Midnight, Feb. 26, they were diverted to pursue a suspicious vessel reported to the Coast Guard by JIATF South. The morning of Feb. 27 the cutter crew launched its armed HITRON helicopter and deployed a boarding team in their pursuit boat.

Once the Sting Ray crew intercepted the go-fast, the suspected smugglers began dumping the contraband into the ocean while fleeing. The helicopter crew directed the vessel operators to stop but was ignored, so warning shots then disabling fire were used to stop the vessel.

The boarding team in *Seneca's* pursuit boat recovered one bale of suspected contraband from a debris field in the water before heading to the go-fast. Four suspected smugglers were taken into custody and transferred to *Seneca*. The cutter headed back to the debris field and collected 47 bales of contraband from the ocean, weighing approximately 3,000 pounds, that later tested positive as cocaine.

*Seneca's* second bust that day came later in the afternoon, 70 miles north of the location of the first chase. A Customs and Border Protection, Office of Air and Marine Operations (CBP AMO) P-3 airplane located and tracked another go-fast while the team on *Seneca* maneuvered to intercept the vessel, again using their armed helicopter and pursuit boat.

The helicopter was overhead the go-fast shortly after 5 p.m., and bales of suspected contraband were visible in the boat. The suspect vessel ignored the helicopter crew's directions to stop and attempted to flee. The MH-68 Sting Ray crew again safely used warning shots and disabling fire to stop the boat.

A boarding team arrived on scene shortly after the go-fast was stopped and took control of the four suspected smugglers and 3,300 pounds of cocaine.

The most recent case happened March 10. The Seventh Coast Guard District was again alerted by JIATF South that a suspicious vessel had been located in the Colombian Basin by a patrolling CBP AMO P-3. *Seneca* and *Halyburton* were again tasked to intercept the vessel.

While *Seneca* and its HITRON crew maneuvered to intercept, the CBP aircrew observed the suspect vessel jettisoning what appeared to be bales overboard.

The Sting Ray helicopter team from *Seneca* was vectored into the vessel's position and directed the suspected smugglers to stop. They ignored the warnings and continued on until disabling fire was used to safely stop the vessel.

*Seneca* launched a boarding team to inspect the vessel. Four people claiming to be Colombian were on the go-fast but no contraband was found on board. A search for the jettisoned items was conducted by *Seneca* and *Halyburton*, with *Seneca* locating two bales of cocaine, weighing approximately 100 pounds.

The four suspects from this most recent case will be turned over tomorrow to agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement for prosecution by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Florida.

The other 13 suspects were previously turned over to federal agents from Operation Panama Express, a joint investigative effort by the Drug Enforcement Administration, FBI, ICE, Tampa U.S. Attorney's Office, Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Pinellas and Sarasota County Sheriff's Office. They will be prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Florida.

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