West Texas Hustle

By

Robert C. Hutchinson

Before the days of drones and tunnels at the southwest border, the contraband smuggling organizations primarily used vehicles and aircraft. With a lessor level of law enforcement personnel and modern detection technology in the 1970s and 1980s, crossing the Mexican border was frequently easier and safer than today. Old school smuggling via aircraft, vehicle or floating across the river could occur without immediate detection or fast enough to permit a quick retreat back to Mexico if needed. The larger challenge was often the transportation into the interior and storage of the contraband in the United States.

West Texas provided a fruitful area for drug smuggling, storage and distribution. It was a desolate area with few people and even fewer law enforcement resources. Within the vast West Texas area and Big Bend region, Presidio and Brewster Counties were two of the most open areas for north and southbound smuggling.

Presidio County is the fourth largest in Texas with an area of 3,855 square miles; it is larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined. It is wide open country with over 135 miles of river shared with Mexico. Its population in 1990 was 6,637 and 6,131 in 2020. The county has two incorporated cities (Presidio and Marfa) and five unincorporated communities along with five ghost towns. Not too much has changed there in the last century. It was and still is a very isolated area well-suited for smuggling.

Request for Help

In 1990, a U.S. Customs Service (USCS) special agent was requested to assist a local law enforcement task force operating in West Texas. The task force consisted of active and contract or freelance officers operating under an agency authority for narcotic smuggling investigations. The local task force worked a surprisingly broad area of Texas, and well beyond, with a special interest on the border with Mexico. It was a successful group with its arrests, seizures and asset forfeiture. Through its currency and asset seizures, it was a money maker for the participating agency and its confidential informants.

State and local agencies needed to involve USCS or the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to transport or import (smuggle) narcotics and other contraband from Mexico into the United States. The same coordination was required for the outbound smuggling of contraband into Mexico – even though it appeared less likely to be sought after for the southbound smuggling. The

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likelihood of interdiction going south may have been even less for several reasons. That is another story

Hired Guns

At the time, law enforcement officers that departed Texas agencies for a variety of reasons could work as temporary contractors for other agencies and task forces around the state. They commonly functioned as undercover officers or sometimes much like confidential informants with a badge and gun. Often considered guns for hire, a few of these contract officers reportedly had dubious backgrounds. However, there were strong investigators with a stable of confidential informants or cooperating defendants in tow. The challenge was determining the difference.

The average state or local officer does not walk away from a stable career and growing pension to be a travelling narcotic investigator for hire. It was unusual and a reason for consideration.

Big Country

Along with many other agencies, the task force was investigating air and land drug smuggling organizations in West Texas and Mexico; it was an extremely busy area at the time. Their focus and operations appeared to be the western Texas border area from El Paso to Del Rio - especially Presidio and the Big Bend National Park area.

USCS was requested to assist with investigations and drug controlled deliveries focusing on the current Mexican kingpin that commanded the State of Chihuahua border area, with a focus on small border town of Ojinaga. Presidio was the sister city to Ojinaga, both very small poor border towns.

Within and around Big Bend, there were numerous border and river crossing locations that residents and smugglers utilized due to the vast uninhabited area. The river was often shallow and easy to cross. They were not official ports of entry or manned crossing locations, but well-travelled for hundreds of years. The Santa Elena crossing, in the Big Bend National Park, was a busy one used by the area residents and smuggling organizations. It officially closed after the 9-11 attacks. The only legal (part time) port of entry in the park today is Boquillas Crossing providing access to Boquillas del Carmen in Coahuila.

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The Rio Grande at Santa Elena

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The Rio Grande near Santa Elena

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A Lot of Land to Cover

The USCS agent was assigned to the Resident Agent in Charge (RAC) office in San Angelo, an interior field office that was responsible for 48 western Texas counties. The office consisted of a resident agent in charge, one or two group supervisors and eight special agents. There were four older agents and four newer agents assigned to the office at the time. The office grew with the extra resources provided by the growing war on drugs in the 1980s.

When extra law enforcement resources surged to South Florida in the 1980s, it pushed a large portion of the Colombian drugs to the southwest border. The existing Mexican smuggling organizations expanded their current business operations and corridors to accommodate the Colombian cartels. The infrastructure was already in place.

Another USCS RAC office was located on the border in Presidio and responsible for the land border area that the task force often operated in. They were both small offices with limited resources. San Angelo was not the most thrilling town to live in, but Presidio was surely a hardship assignment. For many basic services or supplies, it required a four hour drive from Presidio to El Paso or Midland. Presidio was a town with few paved roads and many residents that allegedly profited directly or indirectly from the smuggling business.

Air Smuggling

The local task force requested assistance with the controlled delivery (importation) of narcotics from Mexico to the United States via a small private aircraft. The aircraft was reportedly overseen by the task force and stored in an aircraft hangar controlled by the task force. The ownership of the aircraft was vague – allegedly owned by a confidential informant. A task force confidential informant was allegedly going to operate the aircraft for the future smuggling venture(s).

They needed assistance to operate internationally and at the border. That is where USCS came in. It was a standard request for assistance.

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The Smuggling Aircraft

Writer

N9591G was a 1972 Cessna U206F Stationair, also known as a Super Skywagon. The single air aircraft seated six (when not running a drug load) and had fixed landing gear. It could carry up to 1,500 pounds. The Cessna 206 was known for its rugged construction. The aircraft had a large utility clam shell door to permit the loading of oversized cargo to the enlarged baggage compartment.

For the aircraft and crew to be permitted to travel into Mexico to pick up a controlled drug importation, it required a considerable amount of authorization and coordination with DEA and other agencies. Initial contact was made with DEA and other entities awaiting further information to devise a plan. At the time, USCS and DEA had a fluctuating relationship in West Texas and many other places across the United States and world. There was usually competition for cases, funding and credit for operations and statistics. One-on-one relationships and agreements could win the day, but there were persistent operational and personality challenges.

OPSEC

Operational security was also a serious concern due to the amount of narcotics, currency and firearms smuggled over the border at the time. With the numerous federal, state and local agencies working drug, firearms and currency smuggling cases, it could be a challenge to control information and protect confidential informants and undercover agents. West Texas was a wide and isolated area with dozens of small towns. As with many small towns, it could be difficult to keep secrets or conceal movements to avoid observation during investigations. People watched and talked.

To complicate matters even more, there were people whose job it was to watch and report on law enforcement activities to the criminal organizations. Some of these watchers may have also been working for law enforcement and a smuggling organization at the same time. Operational security was a constant concern, but you had to trust somebody.

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More Than a Feeling

As time passed for the smuggling venture to come together, the USCS agent started to have some growing questions regarding the confidential informant and history of one or two of the contract or freelance task force officers. It was just a feeling. The suspicion was supported by the observations of a few other investigators not on the task force. There was nothing concrete, just others with their Spidey-senses tingling.

Since the USCS agent was stationed several hours away from the task force and aircraft, he relied on provided information and worked his other cases around the large area of responsibility. Dope loads can take time. Some just never come together. The Cessna 206 was reportedly safely parked in the task force hangar and the snitch was in California awaiting instructions. The case was on the back burner.

The concerns of the USCS agent increased over time. Something not did not feel right. Another local law enforcement officer hinted that one or two of the contract task force officers should be carefully watched during investigations and operations. It could have been just coffee shop talk or maybe jealousy for the task force was putting dope and cash seizures on the table. As more time passed, the USCS agent's level of concern grew.

On a gut feeling, the USCS agent decided to place a silent lookout record on the Cessna 206 in the Treasury Enforcement Communications System II (TECSII). It was the USCS automated information and records system that was assessable by many other agencies at varying clearance levels. The TECSII green screen technology for its time was quite advanced and permitted instant information sharing and suspect tracking. It was during a time when many other federal, state and local agencies were still using typewriters and carbon paper for their paper reports and files.

The aircraft lookout record was limited access to just a few people – invisible or silent to all others. If the registration or serial number were queried in the system, the USCS agent would receive an immediate notification of who, where and when. It was an excellent computer system. The silent hit record turned out to be a fantastic idea.

It Did Not Take Long

Not long after lookout entry into TECSII, a silent hit was received from a general system query in the Houston area – on the other side of the massive state. Another USCS agent was suspicious of the Cessna 206 during a routine airport ramp check. The Houston agent did not know he hit on the record and activated the silent alert. The USCS agent immediately contacted the Houston based agent and confirmed that the aircraft was in his area of responsibility at the time. It was observed at a suspect hangar.

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The USCS agent contacted the task force once again only to be reassured that the Cessna 206 was still locked in the task force controlled hangar and had not moved in quite some time. The smuggling case was still coming together.

Finally confirming that the USCS agent and Customs were likely being played, a plan was devised. The focus of the investigation was expanded beyond the Mexican kingpin.

Transponder Time

A unique federal court order was obtained for a law enforcement aircraft transponder to be surreptitiously installed on the now suspect aircraft.

Later when the Cessna 206 returned to the task force controlled hangar, specially trained USCS investigators covertly entered the hangar in the middle of the night. Other USCS investigators conducted protective surveillance and monitored aviation and police radio frequencies around the hanger to safeguard the installers. The USCS law enforcement tracking device was concealed within the aircraft in a location to evade easily detection but permit routine safe operation.

When the aircraft was operated in the future, it would squawk or transmit a designated code to advise the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) of its presence. The FAA would then contact USCS to report the location and movements of the aircraft. In today's world of satellite and other evolving technology, the transponder appears rather archaic. Nevertheless, it worked well when properly installed and utilized back in the day.

Not long after the clandestine installation, the Cessna 206 was observed on FAA radar heading for the Mexican border. The USCS agent once again contacted the task force to obtain a routine status of the aircraft and pending smuggling venture. He was told it was still parked in the hangar hours away. Game on.

In addition to the USCS RAC office in San Angelo, there was a large USCS air branch with various law enforcement helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. The air branch was staffed by pilots and air interdiction officers – all sworn USCS officers. The RAC office was collocated within the air branch building to conserve agency funds and encourage coordination between the different USCS law enforcement divisions. The air branch personnel had been read-in on the suspect aircraft during the installation of the transponder and were ready for the call.

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Time to Fly

When advised of the suspect aircraft movement, the air branch launched a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter, a Cessna Titan 404 and two Cessna Citation 550 jets for the surveillance and intercept – utilizing all of its available air assets. Aviation surveillance and interdiction were their bread and butter.

The USCS agent jumped into the Blackhawk and headed west from San Angelo with the other aircraft. The plan was to stay as high as possible outside of the area where the suspect aircraft crossed the border from Presidio into Ojinaga, Chihuahua, Mexico. For operational security, encrypted radio and general aviation communications were kept at a minimum. The aircraft circled and waited burning precious fuel.

Fortunately, it did not take too long.

It was not the Cessna pilot's first rodeo. The suspect aircraft entered the United States very low at almost a stall air speed (approximately 70 miles per hour) and travelled north over U.S. Highway 67 towards Marfa. Even if someone were to be looking at border radar at the time, the aircraft could have been easily confused with a vehicle travelling on the highway – in West Texas a slow driving vehicle. The law enforcement transponder confirmed what it really was. The suspect aircraft gained altitude and continued north into the open and desolate land. It was heading into the direction of its hangar.

The Intercept

When the aircraft appeared to be preparing to land on a deserted dirt road and the surveillance aircraft were moving in, the Cessna 206 suddenly turned back south and headed back towards Mexico. The USCS surveillance aircraft closed in to encourage the suspect aircraft to land – to no avail.

As the USCS aircraft flew next to the Cessna 206, the pilot quickly placed aeronautical maps up against all the aircraft windows to conceal his identity and load. It was an incredibly simple idea that worked all too well. The USCS agent could not take a photograph of the pilot for identification and evidence. Once again, probably not his first rodeo.

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The Intercept

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The USCS agent transmitted to the fleeing suspect aircraft on the aviation intercom frequency (123.45 MHz) to order the aircraft to land. The only response from the pilot was his middle finger flipped in front to the map against the window. The agent was close enough to clearly see, and not really appreciate, the gesture from his Blackhawk window seat. The USCS agent shared insightful advice and observations with the pilot over the common aviation frequency, some of it not terribly appropriate for an open radio channel. Another aircraft flying in the area was seemingly offended and said so.

As a result of the agent's continued intercom orders and comments (and insult to injury), the finger was shared a couple more times on the way back south. It was becoming more personal by the moment. With the four USCS interdiction aircraft operating so closely in the airspace and the various resulting air turbulence, the pilot did an impressive job handling the smaller single engine aircraft. The USCS pilots did an amazing job dodging the Cessna as it played a little chicken with them.

The pursuing USCS aircraft broke off at the border when authorization was not provided to enter Mexican airspace. The request a big lift to realistically execute in the very short flight time back to the border. The suspect aircraft was last seen heading back to the Mexican airstrip

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in Ojinaga. After some time patrolling of the border area, the air branch aircraft one by one returned to San Angelo as their fuel levels declined and transponder remained quiet.



Up Close and Personal
Writer

Source Reports

According to several sources of information and confidential informants for at least two agencies, the aircraft landed back at the same suspect airstrip in Ojinaga. The three Mexican nationals that allegedly helped fuel and load the smuggling aircraft with a reported 200 kilograms of cocaine removed the narcotic load. For their efforts, the three were allegedly shot and thrown into a ditch on the side of the airstrip. There were to be no witnesses. The Cessna 206 was allegedly pushed into the ditch along with the bodies and all covered with dirt by construction equipment. True or not, the aircraft, covert transponder and tail number were not encountered again in the United States.

What caused the smuggling aircraft to abort the mission was unknown. A source of information later reported that the smuggling organization had staged lookouts along the smuggling air route with binoculars and radios. One of these lookouts reportedly observed a reflected flash of light from one of the circling USCS surveillance aircraft and radioed the

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smuggling pilot. When the USCS aircraft converged, it turned out to be a good call by the pilot. If the pilot landed, it would have been difficult to takeoff again. The Blackhawk would have made sure of it.

An Uncomfortable Meeting

After the incident, the USCS agent met with a representative of the task force to find out what happened to the smuggling aircraft. The USCS agent was definitely not pleased. Somehow the aircraft was reportedly taken (stolen) from the locked task force controlled hangar and flown to Mexico. Strangely, no other aircraft or item was missing from the hangar. They were reportedly unsure of the time or date of the theft or how it occurred. It must have happened right before the smuggling venture. The story seemed a little far-fetched.

After an exhausting attempt to obtain information, the conversation dragged on. The USCS agent was able to have a little fun at the end of the meeting. The agent stated that it was a shame to lose the pilot, load and aircraft, but it was also a real pain to lose a law enforcement transponder. That was a lot a paperwork for the loss of sensitive equipment into Mexico.

The task force official on the other side of the table responded that a law enforcement transponder was never installed in the aircraft. The agent replied with a smile "Oh, I forgot to tell you that we broke into your hangar and installed one in the aircraft a little bit ago". The USCS agent was called every name in the book and promptly thrown out of the office. Their working relationship was ostensibly over at that time. There appeared to be trust issues on both sides.

Trying to Make a Case

USCS worked with the DEA, Federal Bureau of Investigation and United States Attorney's Office to build a narcotic smuggling and possible public corruption case. Information was coming in from many sides and the interest was high. Unfortunately, the incident did not lead to a prosecution for the alleged attempted drug importation. There was no physical evidence. It did create a more focused effort by the agencies to pursue other leads and information.

Over the years, heavy rain would reportedly uncover portions of the abandoned smuggling aircraft. Other sources of information would report that a Cessna 206 was buried in the ditch. It is unknown if the aircraft is still there today.

The USCS agent was apparently being played. Suspects, confidential informants and cooperating defendants have been known to play both sides to possibly reduce their exposure to interdiction and arrest, disrupt their competition and/or develop possible legal defenses when they are caught committing crimes. The legal defense option appeared to be the primary driver, but the other reasons may have played a part.

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This was even more concerning that the task force law enforcement officers would allegedly use the trick. It appeared that the cooperation with USCS could have been a "get of jail free card" if a load was interdicted by USCS, DEA or another agency. It would all be a big misunderstanding when a load was taken off or seized – it was the anticipated load and the wires were crossed on when and where. Sorry about that. It was often enough to scare off a prosecutor or hang a jury. The concept was not new, just not expected with the players and scenario at the beginning of the case.

Questions remained with alleged task force associations and activities, especially along the border counties. It would not take long for an unrelated drug seizure and investigation to occur with different results.

Coke in the Horse Trailer

In 1991, DEA, USCS and Texas Department of Public Safety seized 2421 pounds of cocaine in a horse trailer at the Presidio County fairgrounds in Marfa. It was part of an ongoing joint USCS and DEA smuggling investigation of the Mexican kingpin and a very well-known border smuggler.

The cocaine smuggling suspect was arrested several hours later by the agencies for the load that crossed near his border ranch. The cocaine reportedly crossed the border from San Antonio El Bravo to Candelaria in Presidio County with 20 heavily-armed escorts. It was an isolated border ghost town with just a few residents west of Marfa.



The seized horse trailer.
Big Bend Sentinel

The Cocaine Trailer

San Antonio Express News 04-06-18

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The cocaine smuggler was no stranger to law enforcement. He was reportedly a prolific narcotic smuggler with close ties to several Mexican kingpins. According to popular lore, the smuggler led a 1986 armed raid into Ojinaga to kidnap an inmate from a Mexican jail wanted for a rape in Texas and brought him back to justice. The inmate was left tied to a tree waiting for the sheriff to find him. No one asked any questions.

The smuggler had been previously arrested for federal firearm violations and suspected of much more. According to a letter of support for his previous federal charges, the smuggler was reportedly identified as a "free-lance operative" for a member of the West Texas task force. Media reporting and court records indicated that the cocaine smuggler was allegedly a source of information for several agencies while he smuggled tons of marijuana and cocaine.

Unexpectedly, the seizing agents discovered that the horse trailer was owned by the Presidio County Sheriff's Office.

A week later during a news conference, the Presidio County sheriff claimed ownership of the cocaine load for a reverse sting operation – commonly called a reversal in the law enforcement world. The provided reason for his delay was that the sheriff suspected that he was the subject of a federal investigation for about six months (he was correct). The sheriff stated that he was acting alone in a drug sting operation when he took possession of the cocaine somewhere near the border. The sheriff did not trust the feds or apparently other law enforcement in the area.

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PECOS ENTERPRISE

A sampling of "bricks" of cocaine that were confiscated from a horse trailer found in the county fairgrounds in Marfa, Texas, bear the likeness of a mounted polo player, a "brand mark" of the Medellin Cartel. Authorities discovered about 1,100 "kilo" bricks, or about 2,421 pounds, of cocaine.

The Cocaine Load

El Paso Post Herald 12-28-91

Federal Grand Jury

The Presidio County sheriff was summoned to appear before a federal grand jury in Pecos. The sheriff hired the former local district attorney to represent him.

Several West Texas law enforcement officers and federal agents testified regarding the cocaine seizure and related investigation. Included in the subpoenaed officials was at least one member of the West Texas task force at the time of the failed air smuggling incident. The sheriff reportedly provided testimony that the cocaine load was part of a plan to further a narcotics investigation.

DEA and USCS reportedly had received no information regarding a narcotic importation, controlled delivery or reverse sting and advised the grand jury. The required coordination with other relevant agencies had not taken place for the narcotic importation or smuggling, which was more complicated than a reserve sting.

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Through the testimony, it was discovered that the cocaine smuggler or an assistant reportedly called the sheriff at home to confirm the cocaine's location at the border – it was one of six calls to the sheriff during the morning of the seizure.

According to media reporting, the sheriff allegedly participated in the smuggling and transportation of the cocaine from the border to Marfa. The sheriff allegedly utilized his official police vehicle, a Chevrolet Suburban, to transport the cocaine from the border to the fairgrounds. It took three round trips. Each trip transported 800 pounds of cocaine with two of them reportedly driven right through an active U.S. Border Patrol check point on the highway. The sheriff and smuggler were to reportedly earn $500,000 for the load and delivery to Houston.

Guilty Plea

The Presidio sheriff was indicted for four counts relating to the smuggled and seized cocaine. He was subsequently arrested, held without bond and suspended from office. At his initial appearance, a DEA agent testified that the sheriff's vehicle had been observed at various locations around Marfa, driving without his lights on, just before the early morning seizure. The sheriff was held without bond as a flight risk.

The sheriff would later be released on a $5,000 bond and house arrest after he pled guilty to one count of conspiracy to import the cocaine. He officially resigned as county sheriff. As part of the plea and future cooperation, the government agreed to not prosecute him for any past drug or firearm violations or for perjury before the grand jury. The government would recommend a ten year prison sentence. It was a great deal. Due to the extent of his possible prison sentence, he was returned to detention to ensure his appearance in court.

The guilty plea was a big deal in the law enforcement world since he was previously the chairman of a different El Paso based narcotics task force and former president of the Texas Sheriff's Association. He had been sheriff since 1973 when the previous sheriff was shot to death. He was the law in Presidio County.

Through a letter writing campaign to the judge requested by the sheriff, he still thought there was a chance for probation. Unfortunately for the sheriff, there were apparently more letters against the sheriff than for him received by the judge.

The letters did not help. At sentencing, the judge indicated that the sheriff had been corrupt since 1986 or 1987. The sheriff allegedly took money in exchange for information about law enforcement activities, as well as helping the cocaine smuggler with the importation of over 20 tons of cocaine and marijuana. Due to the amount of cocaine and his status as an

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elected official, the sheriff was sentenced to life in prison. Everyone on both sides in the courtroom was surprised by the stiff sentence.

The life sentence would be reduced to 30 years in 2015. He benefited from recent changes in federal sentencing guidelines for non-violent drug offenders. The former sheriff made the best of his time behind bars by completing 76 prison based programs and even obtaining his commercial driver's license. The Bureau of Prisons automated records lists a release date of April 14, 2018.

Life and Taxes

The cocaine smuggler pled guilty to one count of conspiracy in exchange for his testimony against the sheriff. He reportedly smuggled tons of cocaine and marijuana through the Big Bend area since 1988. The smuggler reportedly coordinated illegal activities with the sheriff while interacting with the previous and current Mexican kingpins who controlled the border.

The sheriff's involvement was reportedly instrumental to safely smuggle narcotics over the border and through Presidio County. Even with his determined cooperation with law enforcement, the cocaine smuggler was also sentenced to life in prison; the government requested a downward departure if the suspect continued to cooperate. Due to his work with law enforcement, he was released after serving 18 years of the life sentence.

To make matters even worse for the cocaine smuggler, the State of Texas billed him more that $253 million dollars in taxes and fines for the cocaine sized at the fairgrounds. Under the Texas Controlled Substance Tax Act, the taxes were due immediately. The rather new 1989 law required all marijuana and controlled substances to be labeled with a special tax stamp and the taxes paid. Like all other smugglers of illegal narcotics, he failed to purchase and affix the tax stamps to the smuggled drug load (the very unique Texas tax statute would be ruled as unconstitutional in 1996).

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Sample Texas Controlled Substance Tax Stamps

Writer 2026

The Former District Attorney

Interestingly, the sheriff's attorney was a former state district attorney who reportedly often worked with the Presidio sheriff and the West Texas task force.

Not long after the arrest of the sheriff, a state grand jury was established to further investigate the former district attorney and his investigator. The defense attorney was later indicted for misusing drug funds, official misconduct and tampering with government records. The charges stemmed from at least one reverse sting operation and the improper payment of confidential informants.

The defense attorney pled no contest to two of the pending misdemeanor charges. The plea carried a stipulation that the state could produce the evidence to support the charges. The former district attorney reportedly received credit for his testimony against his former investigator. Two felony charges were dismissed against him. He was sentenced to two years of probation and a $500 fine.

The defense attorney later pled guilty in federal court for failing to file an income tax return for the years 1986, 1987 and 1988. For the guilty plea for the misdemeanor tax charge, the government agreed to drop two other tax charges. He received six months in prison and a year of supervised release for the federal charge.

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The Investigator

The former district attorney's investigator would also be indicted for the misuse of drug funds; he was accused of taking $38,000 of seized cash during a reverse sting. He was a former state law enforcement officer who became an investigator and confidential informant. The investigator also reportedly worked with the West Texas task force at the same time. The investigator would be indicted a second time for allegedly lying under oath about funds he received from a reverse sting.

The investigator would be found not guilty on the perjury charges. However, after a day of his state trial for the other charges, he pled guilty to two counts of official misconduct. He was sentenced to two years of probation and ordered to pay a $4,000 fine.

Oversight Struggle

Media coverage of the fairgrounds cocaine seizure and grand jury investigations involved alleged activities associated with the West Texas task force. The coverage even included lawsuits filed between law enforcement leadership and county commissioners' court over reverse sting operations conducted in 20 Texas counties and four other states. The commissioners believed that the broad narcotic and reverse sting operations, outside their jurisdiction, were exposing the county to tremendous legal liability.

A Texas Attorney General's opinion stated that a sheriff had no general authority to investigate criminal activities outside of the boundaries of its county. There were exceptions such as a hot pursuit, serving warrants, prisoner transport and inter-governmental agreements. The Texas Attorney General even filed a claim to seize almost $1 million dollars from the reverse stings.

The commissioners would file a second lawsuit alleging that the task force seized and turned over almost a half million dollars to improper authorities. The lawsuit alleged conspiracy, neglect of official duties and violation of budget laws since the funds were not deposited in the state treasury. Without an asset forfeiture agreement with a county or agency, the out-of-county seizures go to the state. However, seized funds were turned over to a county where the Presidio sheriff's defense attorney was reportedly district attorney at the time. The commissioners wanted the funds returned to their county with interest. As a power play, the commissioners even cancelled the gas credit cards for the vehicles utilized for narcotic and undercover investigations.

The lawsuits were finally settled two years later with an agreement for the agency and task force to abide by the budget and other administrative requirements. The commissioners agreed to provide funding for additional resources. The settlement curtailed the out-of-county

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drug stings and set conditions for outside county travel by officials and employees. Future drug money seized would be divided between the county and state.

Cessna Ownership

Many years later, archived FAA records would reveal that the Cessna 206 was last reportedly linked with one of the contract or freelance task force officers at a Monahans address.

According to media reporting at the time, the employment history of the aircraft purchaser ranged from law enforcement officer to contract/freelance officer to federal confidential informant. He regularly worked very closely with the former district attorney's investigator. The two had even become nationally known in 1987 when they worked as reserve officers and confidential informants for a county sheriff while setting up international arms deals involving Iran. The arms smuggling investigation and reverse sting were unknown to the federal government, especially USCS.

The suspect aircraft was apparently sold in April 1989 by a California business. An updated FAA aircraft registration application and bill of sale were submitted with the name of the task force officer in May 1989.

The FAA must have been doing some registration records maintenance in 2014. The agency attempted to contact the believed owner of the Cessna via mail regarding the still pending registration. The previously submitted documents (apparently from 1989) for the aircraft were not sufficient to meet registration requirements. The ownership was apparently in transition or limbo at the time of the smuggling venture. The FAA notice letter for a response was returned to sender by the post office. The expired registration was eventually cancelled by FAA in 2014.

Expanded Oversight

Between the allegations, investigations, prosecutions, lawsuits, media attention and expanded federal law enforcement interest, the more questionable law enforcement activities and practices of the task force members and others appeared to be better monitored or discontinued. Across the state, various officials were more aware and oversight expanded for sting operations and asset sharing. How much changed in the long-run could be up for debate.

The only thing for sure is that the pilot, Cessna 206 and its alleged load of cocaine got away.

It was a West Texas Hustle.

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The writer welcomes any additional information or images regarding the aircraft, suspects, subjects, organizations and events identified in this short story. He can be contacted at oldschoolfloridasmuggling@gmail.com and oldschoolfloridasmuggling.com.

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