



MAJOR COCAINE SEIZURE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

A joint Customs and Australian Federal Police (AFP) operation in Western Australia led to the seizure of 100kg of cocaine and the arrest of three men.

This is the largest seizure of cocaine in Australia since 2001 when a South American vessel was caught trying to drop 1000kg of the drug on an isolated beach near Shark Bay in central Western Australia.

The latest operation involved close cooperation with Brazilian authorities and severely disrupted an international drug-trafficking syndicate.

A 50-year-old Bolivian man, a 23-year-old Australian man and a 29-year-old Australian man have been charged.

Customs Officers and Federal Agents recovered the drugs from a beach in Albany Harbour, in Western Australia's southwest, after they were allegedly offloaded from the bulk grain carrier *Marcos Dias* in the early hours of the morning. The ship's journey originated in South America; it arrived in Australia via South Africa.

The cocaine was in powder form in bags buried in sand dunes. Subsequent tests indicate that the cocaine had an average purity of 78 per cent and an estimated street value of \$45 million equating to approximately 227,000 street "hits".

The operation involved extensive covert surveillance of the *Marcos Dias* when the vessel was in Australian waters using a combination of the Customs Coastwatch Dash 8 electronic surveillance aircraft, a Customs patrol boat, thermal imaging equipment and Customs extensive closed-circuit television (CCTV) network in the port.

Customs WA Director Paul O'Connor said the joint operation between Customs and the AFP reinforced the effectiveness of the collaboration between both agencies.

"Using leading-edge technology, Customs and the AFP were able to successfully monitor the vessel and the activities around it from the moment it arrived in Albany Harbour in July," Mr O'Connor said.



Albany District Manager Steve Smith said his office was heavily involved in the operation over two weeks, assisting both Customs officers from Fremantle and the AFP. This involved providing logistical information such as location of UHF antennas, topographical details and other local advice.

"All the agents and officers who visited were easygoing and appreciative of the help we gave them," Steve said.

"I was appointed group commander for the observation post team. Our prime task was to surveil the *Marcos Dias* at anchorage 24 hours a day.

"Albany officer Jill Gibson offered her house as the observation post location and, as it has a vista over King George Sound and the anchorage, it was perfect. Thermal imaging and CCTV equipment was set up on Jill's verandah linked to monitors inside the house.

"This meant officers in the team could watch the ship 24/7 from the comfort of Jill's family room. We did shifts in the observation post which rotated teams every four hours.

"A certain amount of subterfuge was also needed when dealing with inquiries from outside and inside Customs. It was important to maintain the covert status of the operation while being able to give reasons to contacts who might have suspected something different was occurring in Albany.

"After 10 long days at anchorage, the *Marcos Dias* berthed and the observation post was moved to the District Office."

The operation culminated in 45 Customs officers from all around Australia converging on Albany for the ship-search phase of the operation.

The search used two detector-dog teams, a WA-based confined-spaces team, the National Marine Unit and search-training centre officers from Sydney.

"It was an exciting time for our little port and one that both the City of Albany and we will remember for some time to come," Steve Smith said.

Customs and the AFP continue to investigate the full circumstances surrounding this importation, which is still before the courts.

