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Cocaine Smugglers Jailed After £18.4m Drug Run Ends in High-Speed Sea Chase

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Four men have been handed lengthy prison sentences totalling over 82 years after their attempt to smuggle £18.4 million worth of cocaine into the UK was foiled by Border Force officers in a dramatic maritime pursuit off the Cornish coast.

Scott Johnston, 38, from Havant, and Edwin Yahir Tabora Baca, 33, from Barcelona, were at the centre of the operation, which ended with their rigid-hulled inflatable boat (RHIB) crashing ashore at Gwynver Beach near Penzance. The pair were caught red-handed

following a 28-mile chase at sea, which saw their vessel pursued by Border Force cutters before running aground.

At Truro Crown Court, Johnston received a 24-year sentence while Tabora Baca was jailed for 17 years and seven months. Co-conspirators Michael May, 47, from Brentwood, and Terry Willis, 44, from Chelmsford, were sentenced to 19 years and 21 years and eight months, respectively. All four men were convicted of conspiring to import Class A drugs.

Three other men connected to the operation, Peter Williams, 43, of Havant; Bobbie Pearce, 29, of Brentwood; and Alex Fowlie, 35, from Chichester, are awaiting sentencing, which is scheduled for later in August and September.

The National Crime Agency (NCA), which led the investigation, launched its operation after Johnston, Williams, and Tabora Baca were apprehended when their RHIB washed up on the Cornish coast on September 13, 2024. Officers from Border Force had first spotted the suspicious vessel while patrolling off Newquay and attempted to intercept it, prompting the smugglers to flee.

As the RHIB tried to escape, the suspects threw several packages overboard. Once the boat ran aground, the men attempted to flee on foot but were quickly detained by Border Force personnel. Six bales were retrieved from the water and were later confirmed to contain 230 kilograms of high-purity cocaine.

Despite initially denying their involvement, five group members eventually entered guilty pleas. Among them was Willis, who also admitted to money laundering and unlawful possession of a firearm. A revolver and ammunition were found at his home during a follow-up NCA search, adding further weight to the prosecution's case.

Tabora Baca claimed to be an innocent tourist, saying he had simply joined two strangers on a fishing trip. However, investigators uncovered messages on his phone discussing drug plans and showing photographs of the cocaine aboard the RHIB, discrediting his claims entirely.

Johnston and May opted to stand trial but were both found guilty of the drug smuggling plot on June 23.

Barry Vinall, Senior Investigating Officer at the NCA, said: "These are substantial sentences for four men who didn't care about the misery cocaine causes, they just wanted to make a

profit. Cocaine is one of the most harmful illegal drugs in the UK, linked to thousands of deaths and fuelling violent crime that wrecks communities and lives.”

He commended the collaboration between Border Force and the NCA, which prevented a large quantity of cocaine from reaching UK streets.

Senior Director of Border Force Maritime, Duncan Capps, also praised the frontline officers involved. “It is the job of Border Force to protecting our border and keeping communities safe. Our officers were fantastic and displayed incredible skill during the 28-mile pursuit, despite the suspects’ attempts to get rid of evidence.

“Border Force will continue to work alongside the NCA to prevent dangerous drugs reaching our streets and will ensure criminals caught smuggling face the full force of the law,” he added.

Sentencing for the remaining members of the group will continue later this summer, as authorities maintain pressure on criminal networks exploiting UK waters for drug trafficking.