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Drugs smuggling on board vessels - Forensics Case Example

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Packages of cocaine were discovered on board a vessel during cargo discharge at port A, Mexico. It is alleged that the drugs were loaded on board the vessel at a port in Colombia, at which point the vessel was scheduled to call at port B, Mexico, before being diverted to Port A due to congestion.

The vessel was one of a number to have been caught up in drug smuggling from another port in Mexico, at which each vessel had recently been loaded or discharged and the drugs were discovered at port B, Mexico.

On another occasion customs officials discovered two packages with a gross weight of seventy-four kilograms (74 kg) of cocaine hydrochloride in a container on board a vessel. The vessel had started its voyage in Brazil and had stopped in Peru and Panama before berthing in Mexico.

Our opinion and advice were sought about how the drugs were most likely loaded on both vessels, and the reasonableness and adequacy of the vessel's security measures to prevent drug smuggling.

Many shipowners and their P&I Clubs will no doubt be familiar with such circumstances as described above and aware of such incidents where drugs have been found on board vessels in Europe. For example, in the Canary Islands a vessel was found to have illegal narcotics on board and as a result the vessel was detained and 11 crew were arrested or detained. This is just one of many vessels in either Europe or Mexico that has been detained over the last 12 months.

Dire consequences

The consequence of the Criminal Code of many countries is that any crew suspected of being involved must serve time in prison whilst awaiting trial whether guilty or innocent. This can be a considerable period given the lengthy process involved and in addition due to the inevitable delays posed by the COVID 19 pandemic.

How we can help

Qwest Forensics are uniquely placed to offer advice to shipowners and operators as to how to prevent such contraband being smuggled on board in the first place or how to show/prove that in all likelihood if drugs are found, the crew were not to blame.

Our team are all former senior members of the UK military or law enforcement, many of whom have worked undercover and some of whom have posed as criminals with the knowledge of law enforcement working with the drug cartels smuggling such contraband on board vessels into the USA and Europe.

In essence, we understand the nature of the criminality, the landscape and the methodology involved.

This unique experience has allowed us to develop a bespoke service utilising dedicated experienced advisors, standard operating procedures and tailored advice which all owners can use and adopt to prevent drugs being smuggled on board in countries or at ports which pose a high risk. Our advisors are trained and ready to advise owners, Clubs or to join a vessel at any time during a voyage where such a high-risk route or destination is anticipated to ensure that no illegal contraband is brought on board.

In addition, where in unfortunate situations drugs are found on board and the authorities have detained a ship or crew have been arrested, we also have experience in being able to provide owners with robust evidence and, if required, expert opinion to any legal team to show that their crew were in all likelihood not to blame. In our experience, drugs are most commonly smuggled on board by port agents, stevedores and officials who have been compromised by the drug cartels on most occasions.

This service is available to all owners and Club Members and can be provided on a one-off basis or as part of a subscription service. If interested, then please contact us.

Qwest Forensics

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