'Brazen' smuggling ring shut down

By CHERYL WIERDA
Black Press

A Chilliwack man who police believe was behind the controls of a helicopter that crashed in West Abbotsford last year has been charged in connection to what law enforcement authorities call "one of the most brazen" schemes to smuggle drugs across the Canada-U.S. border.

Dustin Haugen, 24, is one of more than 40 people arrested in a two-year-old police operation targeting drug smuggling.

He is believed to have been the pilot of a helicopter, allegedly linked to the smuggling, which crashed on 58 Avenue in west Abbotsford in 2005.

At a press conference in Bellingham June 29, authorities from the U.S and Canada unveiled the results—so far—from a police operation targeting a network of smuggling organizations that used aircraft to ferry tonnes of drugs across the border.

The investigation, dubbed Operation Frozen Timber, has resulted in the seizure of 8,000 pounds of marijuana, 800 pounds of cocaine, three aircraft, and $1.5 million in U.S. currency.

"I think that the equipment that was seized was certainly the tip of the iceberg," said RCMP chief superintendent Bud Mercer.

"These organized criminal groups were motivated by one thing: greed," said John McKay, United States Attorney for the Western District of Washington.

"With Operation Frozen Timber, we not only cut into their profits with countless seizures of drugs and money, we demonstrated that there is a high price to pay. Drug ring leader Robert Kesling now knows that high price—he is doing 17 years in federal prison."

The B.C. based smuggling organizations used helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft to transport drug loads to pre-arranged drop sites in the U.S. They smuggled marijuana into the United States, and cocaine into Canada, police say.



CTV FILE PHOTO

Authorities believe that accused drug smuggler Dustin Haugen was behind the controls of this helicopter which crashed in West Abbotsford on take-off March 6, 2005, killing Christina Alexander, 22 (inset).

Intelligence gathered by authorities revealed there were several independent aerial smuggling cells that essentially subcontracted their services to other criminal organizations seeking to ferry drugs between the two countries.

So far, the investigation has resulted in more than 40 arrests of both Americans and Canadians in the U.S.

The first charges in Canadian courts came recently, after the May collaring of an Agassiz and a Chilliwack man. (RCMP have also made four other arrests, but they haven't resulted in charges to date).

Daryl Desjardins, 45, of Agassiz, and Dustin Haugen, 24, of Chilliwack, are both charged with importing/exporting a controlled substance and trafficking a controlled substance.

Desjardins is also charged with possession of a firearm contrary to order.

The pair were scheduled to appear in court June 30.

The pair were arrested in Chilliwack on May 9 after returning to Canada following an alleged drug drop in the United States, said RCMP Superintendent Bill Ard.

On that day, police say they tracked a Bell Jet Ranger owned by Desjardins to a landing site in a state wildlife area in Okanogan County, located in north central Washington. After watching the cargo being transferred to a waiting pick up truck, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and other officers stopped the vehicle and recovered 329 pounds of marijuana. Two other men were arrested.

Media reports indicate Desjardins operated the Breakwater Restaurant on the shores of Harrison Lake and flew his helicopter from that location.

District of Kent mayor Lorne Fisher said the restaurant has been shut down for approximately a year and couldn't say who held the business licence.

Ard said Desjardins, who previously owned border property in Abbotsford, was a high priority target for RCMP, but said "it's difficult to pick who was a kingpin or leader" of the smuggling groups in B.C.

His co-accused, Haugen, is also believed by police to have been behind the controls of a Bell Jet Ranger which crashed on a 58 Avenue property on March 6, 2005. The crash killed Haugen's live-in girlfriend, 22-year-old Christina Alexander, and Crown counsel is currently considering whether or not Haugen will face criminal charges.

On June 29, police said they believe the helicopter that crashed was linked to the drug smuggling organizations, and Black Press was told June 30 by property resident Greg McKinley that "border patrol" officers were part of the initial investigation into the crash.

McKinley told Black Press he had been approached back in 2004 with a request for four students to use his property so that they could accumulate hours to get their commercial licences.

Flights originated from his property for a time in 2004, and then, after an approximate six month break, resumed in early 2005.

"There was never any cargo of any sort off-loaded at my farm," said McKinley.

He was told in 2004 that the individuals were also doing some work for the government, spotting forest fires. "It all seemed very legitimate with that," he said.

The chopper always flew north away from his property, he said.

According to an information to obtain a search warrant (ITO) in a separate case, the police investigation showed that former tenant Richard Burton made arrangements to use the property for flying helicopters and Abbotsford resident Johnny Bacon made arrangements to pay $1,000 a month for the privilege.

Six months after the crash, Haugen was convicted of extortion and given a 12 month conditional sentence.

According to the same (ITO), that conviction relates to a 2003 case investigated by Surrey RCMP where a group abducted, tied up and extorted 35 pounds of marijuana from the victim.

The same year as that investigation, Haugen was a suspect at the Peace Arch border crossing for cocaine importation or exportation, the ITO indicates. He was never charged in the case.

At the press conference on June 29, police said they were also concerned about the smuggling scheme because a number of the pilots linked to the plot were not licensed to fly.

They note two helicopters allegedly linked to the network have crashed, including the 2005 Abbotsford accident which killed Alexander.

Police also believe the helicopter destroyed in a crash on September 26, 2005 was linked to the drug smuggling organizations targeted in Operation Frozen Timber.

In that crash, which occurred along mountainous Othello Road in Hope, Abbotsford residents Ove Jensen, 41, and Richard Long, 55, were killed. Police believe the men may have been returning from a smuggling flight to the United States.

Jensen had been a suspect in a 2000 U.S. drug smuggling case, a Whatcom county prosecutor said, and an arrest warrant had been taken out.

He was never arrested in connection with the case.

The Abbotsford police played a major role in the Haugen/Desjardins investigation, RCMP said, with an Abbotsford officer assigned to the border team, and two others joining the investigation shortly before the arrests.

Chilliwack RCMP and Langley RCMP have also helped in the investigation.

Operation Frozen Timber is ongoing, police say.

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