

CHAPTER 11

THE PIPELINE OF NARCOTICS IN U.S.A.

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From Los Angeles to New York tractor-trailers are being used to haul narcotics through the "Pipeline." (It's the cross country interstate highway connection from Los Angeles north through Illinois and Missouri, across into Canada through the smaller ports of entry and down to New York.)

1. Introduction **Origins and Destinations**

Significant drug seizures from commercial tractor-trailers have been reported along the Southwest border of the United States. California State Police and the Texas Police claim to have the largest seizures in cocaine and marijuana from the Mexican border. The other southwest states such as New Mexico and Arizona have been experiencing more commercial tractor-trailer narcotic running than usual.

Trucks loaded with narcotics from the west are destined to Chicago, Halifax, Canada or New York. The straight line interstate highways that connect the southwest border to the north eastern cities are the preferred routes by drug traffickers. Two states that are transversed more frequently than any other state highways are Missouri and Illinois. Their interstate highway connection was dubbed the "crossroads of dope" by narcotics officers because it was the shortest route to the north and eastern United States.

Pipeline narcotics detectives have seized nearly a billion dollars worth of cocaine, heroin and marijuana reports Glenda Lavergne of Revenue

Canada Customs. The Canadians believe that the trucks they seized made it past the Missouri and Illinois State Troopers.

2. Contraband Concealment

Customs agent Spinelli reports that in the corrugated, one and a half inch valleys of the walls, floors and ceiling of a 40 foot container, smugglers can store anywhere from fifteen to thirty-five hundred pounds of narcotics. With street values of \$125,000 a kilo (2.2 pounds), driving narcotics out of a Customs Terminal across country can be pretty lucrative.

The Transportation Department has profiled narcotic trafficking commercial tractor-trailers as older rigs with state registry's from California, Arizona, Texas, Florida, Illinois, New York and New Jersey. They also look for drivers with criminal records, fraudulent or inadequate documentation, fictitious or no consignee with a light or inexpensive cargo. Many of the drug smugglers, utilizing commercial trucks to move contrabands to will affix bumper stickers which "say no to drugs" and "support law enforcement," as well as religious icons that state "trucking for Jesus" and other items on their tractors and trailers to avoid suspicion. These disclaimers are designed to make the driver appear to be a law abiding citizen. Many of these items are available for purchase at truck stops and police officials warn that these stickers have been used in the past by drug smugglers.

Concealment methods used by smugglers have not changed drastically over the years. False bottoms, internal concealment in cabs including sleeper berths, boxes, under the bed are common places for narcotics to be placed. Truckers sometimes place drugs in the air shield, fuel tanks, heater blowers and false compartments. Some truckers will have the drugs taped to their bodies. Narcotics detectives have found drugs in saturated clothing articles or textiles as well as in hollowed-out items such as chocolate and aluminum ingots. Cocaine has been liquefied in wine/liquor bottles, put into jars of fruit, mixing plastic fruit with real fruit laced with cocaine; ceramic tile, etc.

"In 1993," 8.3 million containers arrived in the United States through land or sea ports of entry, according to Janet Rapaport of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Customs Service. Of these 29 percent (2.4 million) were classified as high risk for narcotics trafficking."

According to Special Agent Spinelli of Port a Elizabeth, New Jersey, the port receives five thousand containers which roll out a day and less than four percent is targeted as a high risk smuggling operation. "We get more

with less,” Spinelli said regarding better sources of information and detection devices in catching narcotics traffickers.

Drug smuggling via tractor-trailers is no surprise. It has been in existence for decades but, the amounts of narcotics being transported into the United States are at staggering proportions, claims a DEA agent.

3. Cover Loads

Smugglers will almost always use a cover load to conceal their contraband as well as lend legitimacy to the purpose of their trip. Suspicious loads may exhibit one or more of the following characteristics: Light weight product, inexpensive products, questionable packing or handling of the product, evidence that the load has been moved or tampered with after initial loading and ineffective cost operation.

Perishable commodities have been used as cover loads in almost half of the interdicted drug-laden commercial motor vehicles to date. Perishable commodities make excellent cover loads because they are readily available in drug origins areas such as the southwest border. The perishables are usually inexpensive and drug smugglers have been known to be frugal in that way. Also, perishable commodities discourage close inspection because of spoilage. Smugglers find fresh produce as a commodity of choice and law enforcement has been given charts of transit and storage properties of produce in order to verify a legitimate trucker from a drug smuggler.

4. Blind Mules

Some drivers are being used as ‘blind mules,’ (carriers of narcotics without their knowledge) . Customs Agent Spinelli explains, “The more sophisticated drug smugglers like to go through legitimate channels to hire drivers to roll out, sealed, insured containers off the docks. Generally, the driver wouldn’t have any indication of what he’s hauling. He just takes it from point A to point B. When a targeted ‘rollo’ (roll on - roll off) container is carrying contraband the driver would be asked to sit it out while a Special Agent drives the ‘hot’ (stolen) truck to its destination to give its recipients an unwelcomed surprise.

Narcotics conspirators whether working at the dock or off dock try not to get the driver involved but sometimes the commodity is high and the conspirator will clue the driver in for more money. They will contact the shipping lines, use customs brokers that they’ve used in the past and then place their own private trucker to pick up. Many times these drivers know

exactly what they are hauling.

5. Southwest Border

At the Southwest border the Mexicans move the drugs across the U.S. border by land using tractor-trailer trucks, cars with hidden compartments, recreational vehicles and people on foot.

“Anything that moves is fair game,” Vincent Klink resident agent in charge from the United States Customs in Houston said. “They can put thousands of trucks on the road each day, and leave it to us to try and pick out the few that are carrying narcotics.”

Customs Agent Dave Thompson told of the Cali cartel opening up legitimate tie businesses in Mexico and Canada and sending ten trucks a day through the border. Nine of the ten will be tile and one will be full of narcotics. The border inspectors see the same trucks daily. They see the same drivers. The first three or four tractor-trailer’s are clean and to speed up the traffic line will allow the rest to go through, this is called ‘Line Release.’ It has been rumored that this procedure was going to be eliminated.

“Drug trafficking is not a problem of Columbia or of Mexico but of transnational corporate structures,” Douglas Farah of the Washington Post stated in his report on the lack of control in stopping the drug trafficking at the Mexican border. It’s happening on our northern borders as well.

6. Northern Border

Canadian law enforcement authorities have interceded tractor-trailer drug traffickers moving through Canada enroute from Los Angeles to New York to avoid interdiction on the U.S. highways.

Revenue Canada Customs has programs in place to detect narcotics. With the use of modern technology and intelligence information there has been a dramatic increase in drug detection activities. However, the seizures affected represent only a small fraction of a multi-billion dollar industry. The Canadian drug interdiction techniques have become as sophisticated as concealment of narcotics have become more devious.

Smugglers have increased their knowledge of Customs and freight handling procedures by developing smuggling techniques, concealment methods, circuitous routing, changes in drug courier profiles, and falsified documentation.

7. Detection

A commercial motor vehicle training course on targeting and examination techniques concentrating on commercial vehicles has been designed and is given to land border officers. The Customs Service has begun "Operation Hard Line" with an infusion of cash, investigators, technical support and infrastructure improvements that will permanently harden counter-narcotics initiatives at the Southwest border ports of entry.

"Our plan is a pivotal part of the hard line that this Administration is taking to stop the flow of illicit drugs across the Southwest border. Drug abuse is a national problem, and it requires a national response," Mr. Weise, U.S. Commissioner of Customs said.

Operation Hard Line, reviewed the commercial programs such as line release. There have been capital improvements such as the installation of concrete barriers, fixed and hydraulic bollards, pavement lighting and video cameras. There is also a cargo x-ray system at the El Paso port of entry and in Otay Mesa.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy estimates, 60 to 70 percent of the cocaine that gets distributed in the United States enters through the 2,000 mile U.S. Mexican border in tractor-trailers.

In 1994, Customs reported 795 instances of "port running"—the act of a drug runner barreling through the U.S. Customs gates.

In total southwest region, nearly 38 million dollars worth of narcotics were taken from drug traffickers. The increase in freight carriers through the border in 1995 was up fourteen percent. Nearly over a million freight carriers pass through the Mexican port of entry a year.

Customs seized in that region alone \$37,588,027 worth of contraband. But, the Department of Transportation's Drug Interdiction Assistance Program has bragged of seizing 222,414 pounds of marijuana, 46,236 pounds of cocaine, 19.75 pounds of methamphetamine and 1.2 billion in related seizure activities that Customs missed. By Department of Transportation standards, the largest value of a single commercial motor vehicle seizure was 4.5 million dollars worth of narcotics.