

STATEMENT  
OF  
RADM DONALD C. THOMPSON, U. S. COAST GUARD  
BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

26 OCTOBER 1983

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am Rear Admiral Donald C. Thompson, Commander, Seventh Coast Guard District. I assumed command of the Seventh Coast Guard District in May of 1982. My District includes the Caribbean area, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the U. S. Virgin Islands, Georgia, South Carolina, and most of the state of Florida. On June 17, 1983, I also assumed the duties of Coordinator of the Vice President's South Florida Task Force, as well as the Coordinator of the Southeast Region of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS). I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Coast Guard's role in our government's cooperative program with the Government of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas to control narcotics trafficking.

Historically, much of the contraband moving in the Caribbean has moved through the Bahamas. This was true in the 1500's when Spanish slave-raiding parties ravaged the islands for workers for the mines of Hispaniola, and when Bahamas-based pirate raiders of the 1600's and 1700's made their living by looting transiting Spanish treasure ships. It has remained true in our century, when the nearby waters of the Great Bahama Bank served as a haven for prohibition-era liquor-carrying cargo ships, which anchored and serviced the rum-runners plying the Bimini to Miami run. The wreckage of the cement ship - a popular spot for recreational divers today just north of Gun Cay, bears mute testimony to the areas involvement with bootleg alcohol, for during this ship's lifetime it served as a floating supermarket for illicit whiskey.

This undesired involvement of the territory and waters of the Bahamas in the movement of contraband continues today. Both the Bahamas, whose 700 islands are scattered over 100,000 square miles of ocean, and the Turks and Caicos are presently being used as the primary transshipment and refueling spots for drugs between source countries in South America and Jamaica, and their destination - markets in the United States. Motor vessels

bearing multi-ton loads of marijuana (and frequently companion cargoes of cocaine and quaaludes as well) enter the Southern Bahamas after passing through the Windward Passage and transit either the Caicos, Mayaguana, or Crooked Island Passage. They also enter from the east through Northeast Providence Channel, after navigating the Mona Pass or taking the longer outside route through the Caribbean Eastern Passes. The favorite destinations of these motherships include William Island, the Berry Islands, Andros, Bimini, and the Cay Sal Bank, where they rendezvous with small U.S.-registered contact boats for cargo transshipment and the final smuggling run into the U.S.

Private aircraft inbound from the lower Caribbean enter the Bahamas directly from South America, or after refueling in Jamaica, South Caicos, Great Inagua, or at clandestine strips on uninhabited islands. After entering the Bahamas, they either continue directly into the U.S. or air-drop their cargo to waiting contact boats on the western edge of the Bahamas Bank or off the U.S. coast.

Over the past ten years this illicit trade has expanded and flourished in spite of the efforts of the Bahamian Government. In 1973, when the Bahamas achieved full independence, the Royal Navy patrols provided by the United Kingdom ceased. The Marine Division of the Bahamas Police assumed the responsibility of patrolling this vast area and enforcing Bahamian law concerning illegal migration and fisheries, as well as attempting to disrupt the growing drug trade. In 1976 this Marine Division became the nucleus of the Royal Bahamian Defense Force (RBDF), whose formal establishment was delayed until 1979 because of parliamentary opposition, which focused on fears of the dangers inherent in establishing a military force.

The 1979 Defense Act formalizing the RBDF defined its missions as follows:

- (a) Defense of the Bahamas.
- (b) Patrol of the waters of the Bahamas.
- (c) Assistance and relief in times of disaster.
- (d) Maintenance of order in the Bahamas with law enforcement agencies (police and fisheries departments).
- (e) Other duties as determined by the National Security Council.

The Defense Act further stipulates that members of the Defense Force shall exercise the duties of Customs officers as well as peace officers under the Dangerous Drug Act. They may also be employed beyond the Bahamas or attached to the armed forces of other countries at the discretion of their Attorney General. Their jurisdiction at home is limited to Bahamian territorial waters. The RBDF is further prohibited from exercising jurisdiction in the territorial waters of islands where contingents of the Royal Bahamian Police are stationed, since they have exclusive jurisdiction in these areas. The RBDF's fisheries jurisdiction extends throughout their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The RBDF consists of about 400 officers and men. Its equipment consists of one 103-foot patrol boat, five 60-foot patrol craft, three 29-foot U.S.-built Phoenix patrol craft, and a converted yacht and shrimper. Their air arm consists of one aircraft leased from Bahamas Air and piloted by a British officer seconded to the RBDF. With these limited resources they must police over 100,000 square miles of water. The intentions of the Bahamian Government are good, but as you can see from my remarks, their forces are simply spread too thin to be an effective deterrent against the threats they face.

The RBDF suffered a greivous loss on May 10, 1980, when Cuban MIG-21's strafed and sank the 103-foot RBDF patrol boat FLAMINGO in the vicinity of Santo Domingo Cay. At the time of this incident FLAMINGO was escorting a Cuban fishing vessel seized for poaching in Bahamian waters back towards Nassau. Four RBDF crewmembers were killed in the attack.

The U.S. Government has moved on several fronts to aid the Bahamians in confronting and controlling the drug trafficking in their region. The Department of State, through the Bureau of International Narcotics Matters (INM), has provided some aid, and maintains a continuing dialog with Bahamian officials at the highest levels of government concerning these problems. INM also sponsors the Inter-American Maritime Intelligence Network (IAMIN), a communications system developed to enable Latin American navies to exchange information on suspected smugglers. The Bahamas are a member of IAMIN, as are the navies of Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) maintains personnel in-country to assist Bahamian authorities and to collect narcotics-related intelligence useful to stateside enforcement agencies. U.S. Customs, which has no statutory jurisdiction beyond our contiguous zone, is not involved in these efforts. However, their air interdiction activities frequently call for Customs aircraft to patrol international airspace around the Bahamas. This patrol activity occasionally aids the Coast Guard by yielding incidental surface vessel intelligence when suspicious vessels are sighted by the Customs pilots. Customs also maintains a presence in the Bahamas by assigning patrol officers at selected airports to pre-clear U.S. citizens back into the United States.

The Coast Guard plays a major role in this bilateral effort through a program of frequent contacts with the RBDF, and by sustaining a continuing high level of patrol activity in the

international waters surrounding the islands of the Bahamas. Additionally, we have offered training to the Bahamas, as we have to all friendly countries. In the past five years the only formal training provided has been for one person to attend the National Search and Rescue School. The Coast Guard has also sent guest instructors to DEA International Drug Enforcement Courses taught at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center at Glynco, Georgia, where many Bahamian Police Officers have received training.

The primary resources I have permanently assigned to carry out all Coast Guard missions in the Seventh District, including law enforcement, are: nine medium endurance cutters, fifteen offshore patrol boats, three surface effect ships, forty-six utility boats, ten fixed wing search aircraft, thirteen helicopters, and twenty multi-mission stations. Additional aircraft and vessels are made available from other Coast Guard Districts from time to time, and are placed under my operational control. We coordinate the deployment of these assets with the efforts of other Federal agencies through NNBS, which I have found to be an extremely effective mechanism for insuring that we get the best possible use from all available resources. But I must reemphasize that all Coast Guard resources, are multimission resources, and conduct their patrols in a manner designed to satisfy the needs of several mission areas. The possibility always exists that a cutter may be diverted from patrolling for law enforcement to another mission of higher priority.

The Coast Guard recognizes the important and unwilling link that the Bahamas plays in narcotics smuggling, and has responded accordingly. As the threat has grown, the resources we have committed to patrolling in the vicinity of the Bahamas have also increased. Over the past year, we have averaged 29 cutter days of High Endurance/Medium Endurance (WHEC/WMEC) time and 27 cutter days of patrol boat (WPB) time per month devoted exclusively to the Bahamas area. This is a significant portion of the cutter

time available to me to prosecute our drug interdiction mission in the Seventh District. Additionally, we conduct daily surveillance flights over the international waters surrounding the islands of the Bahamas using HU-25 Falcon jets from Air Station Miami, and frequently task the fixed wing aircraft deployed to our aviation detachment in Guantanamo Bay Cuba in support of the Haitian Migrant Interdiction Operation (HMIO) to fly combined alien/narcotics surveillance sorties in the Windward Passage and Southern Bahamas. Our HMIO cutter in Windward Passage also helps our efforts in the Bahamas by conducting drug interdiction operations as a secondary mission.

The results of this level of activity are impressive. Over the past three calendar years, the following results have been achieved by the Coast Guard in the Bahamas:

- o 78 vessels seized - 17% of CG-wide seizures.
- o 1,534,326 pounds of marijuana seized - 18% of CG-wide seizures.
- o 467 arrests - 19% of CG-wide drug related arrests.

These statistics do not include the efforts of the HMIO cutter. Since commencement of HMIO patrols in October, 1981, these ships have seized 15 vessels and interdicted a total of 233,767 pounds of marijuana.

Our interdiction activities are aided by the Bahamian Government. Whenever a patrolling cutter detects a suspicious vessel in Bahamian territorial waters, we use well-established procedures involving the State Department, Embassy Nassau, and the Bahamian Ministry of External Affairs to gain rapid approval to enter Bahamian waters to further investigate the suspicious vessel. If the vessel proves to be of U.S. registry, we board, search, and if evidence warrants, seize the vessel. If the suspicious vessel is stateless or foreign flag, we maintain overt surveillance and

pass the information to Bahamian authorities, since further overt action against the vessel by the Coast Guard is precluded by the current interpretation of the "Mansfield Amendment" (22 U.S.C. 2291(c)(1)), which prohibits U.S. law enforcement actions against foreign nationals in foreign territory. The Bahamians respond to these cases when they can, but in many cases the limits of their resources and their geographic dispersion preclude any effective action.

In addition to our patrolling activities, the Coast Guard has traditionally extended a helping hand to our colleagues in the RBDF in other ways whenever possible. For example:

- When "Operation Antilles" (a DEA-sponsored program designed to curb air and surface smuggling in the Bahamas by making their forces more mobile) began in 1980, we provided C-130 transport aircraft to move people and equipment around the Bahamas, and dedicated HH-3F helicopter time to transport DEA and Bahamian enforcement personnel to the scene of suspected smuggling activity. This assistance continued when Operation Antilles became Operation BAT (an acronym for Bahamas and Turks and Caicos) and ended only recently when the U.S. Air Force assigned two helicopters, pilots, and ground support personnel to OPBAT. We may again be involved in OPBAT in the future, since the Air Force has indicated that its involvement is not open-ended, and may terminate within a year because of higher national priorities.
- We have engaged in joint operations with the RBDF on several occasions.
- We maintain frequent contact with the RBDF Operations Center at Coral Harbor in order to exchange intelligence.
- In 1981 we hosted a Coast Guard/RBDF seminar in Miami to discuss mutual concerns. A follow-on conference was held in Nassau in 1982.

- Coast Guard officers from Miami routinely visit the Bahamas to establish and maintain personal contact with their counterparts at the Embassy, within the RBDF, and with appropriate Bahamian officials.
- We have offered to conduct a short-term exchange of officers with the RBDF for familiarization purposes.
- Members of my staff meet with representatives from Embassy Nassau, Bahamas Air-Sea Rescue (BASRA), the RBDF, Bahamas tourism officials, members of the Florida Marine Industries Association, and various boating and yachting magazines who have formed the Bahamas Marine Council. This Council meets on a bi-monthly basis to develop methods of increasing the tourism appeal of the Bahamas by resolving some of its long-standing problems. One concrete result of this venture is its recent purchase (through donations) of a comprehensive VHF communications system for the Bahamas, which is presently being installed. This will have a very positive impact on our joint operations with Bahamian forces, by providing a radio communication system with common frequencies where none exists today
- Coast Guard representatives from Miami, Puerto Rico, and Washington attended the first seminar on Illicit Drug Traffic for Law Enforcement Officers of the Anglophone Caribbean, held in Nassau in March of this year. This conference was attended by delegations from 15 Caribbean nations plus the U.S., the U.K., and the UN Division of Narcotic Drugs. The Bahamas, as you can well imagine, had a very large delegation in attendance at this conference, whose end result was a compilation of non-binding recommendations in six topical areas:

(1) Coordination

- (2) Legislation
- (3) Communication and Inter-communication
- (4) Equipment
- (5) Training
- (6) Development of Public Awareness

Glaring deficiencies were noted in these areas by all delegates, and the recommendations in general called for participating nations to give higher national priorities to solve these problems. The Coast Guard again expressed our willingness to help in sharing intelligence and by making our Caribbean communications network available to facilitate exchanges of information whenever other channels of communication are unavailable.

We find the Bahamians generally cooperative and sincere in their desire to rid their country of the unhappy distinction of being the Caribbean's foremost narcotics transit state, and of all the spin-off problems that the drug trade and this international perception cause. They are, however, extremely limited in their ability to control their own waters and airspace because of the limited law enforcement assets available to them. They are dependent, to a large extent, upon others to render levels of assistance that will allow them to make headway against the problem without impinging on their national sovereignty. They are naturally unhappy about this state of affairs, and would like to be able to do more on their own.

You can be assured that the Coast Guard will continue its efforts to build upon our good relationships in the Bahamas, and to assist whenever and however we can - for our mutual benefit.

This concludes my prepared testimony, Mr. Chairman, I will be happy to answer any questions you or the other members of the committee may have.