

Press release: Boat skipper convicted over £80 million cocaine cargo

The skipper of a fishing boat has today (Thursday 16 March) been convicted of trying to smuggle more than a tonne of cocaine into the UK.

Michael McDermott, 68, from Waterford in Ireland, was found guilty by a jury at Bristol Crown Court following a 1 week trial.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) and Border Force officers arrested McDermott on 18 August 2016 alongside shipmates David Pleasants, 57, and Gerald Van de Kooij, 27. Two Border Force cutters, the HMC Seeker and HMC Searcher had tracked his vessel the MV Bianca via radar for over 24 hours, acting on intelligence from the NCA that it was carrying drugs.

The Bianca was intercepted as it entered UK territorial waters off the coast of Cornwall, and a joint team of NCA and Border Force officers boarded the vessel, detaining the crew.

The cutters then escorted the vessel into Falmouth where a full search could take place.

Specialist Border Force teams located bales of cocaine hidden under bags of sand and gravel in the boat's fish hold. There were 38 bales in total each weighing between 25 and 30 kilos. It took around two days to remove the drugs from the vessel.

In total the haul weighed 939 kilos. NCA forensic experts found that the cocaine was between 60 and 70 per cent pure. They estimate that if cut to street purity and sold in the UK it would have had a potential value of nearly £84 million.

It was the biggest single seizure of cocaine in the UK in 2016.

Both Pleasants and Gerald Van de Kooij admitted drug importation offences, but McDermott denied the charge, claiming he knew there were drugs on board but had been forced into shipping them. He initially claimed not to know the two men he was arrested with.

McDermott had a previous conviction for drug trafficking, where he had admitted being paid to sail a boat from Spain containing cannabis.

NCA investigators were also able to establish that he had purchased the Bianca in Whitstable, Kent, paying £17,000 in cash just weeks before his arrest, telling the seller that he planned to sail to Spain and use it for diving and chartered angling trips. The bill of sale was also signed by David Pleasants using a false name.

The trial heard how the boat was then taken to Ramsgate for work to be carried out on it. Pleasants was with McDermott while that happened, with the

two men sleeping on the boat. Van de Kooij had flown in from the Netherlands on 12th August, a few days before the trio set off on the Bianca from Ramsgate.

Navigation records show the boat sailed through the English Channel and out into the Atlantic, before turning round and heading back towards Cornwall. NCA investigators believe it was at this turnaround point, south of Ireland, that the Bianca took the cocaine on board from another vessel.

Following McDermott's conviction all three men will be sentenced on Thursday 6 April.

Mark Harding, senior investigating officer from the NCA's border investigation team, said:

This was a huge quantity of cocaine, the biggest single seizure made in the UK in 2016.

Michael McDermott used his specialist skills as a sailor to attempt to evade border controls. We provided solid evidence that led to his conviction and have taken out another means of transport used by organised criminals to bring drugs to Britain.

His was a crucial link in a chain that leads from cocaine manufacturers in South America to drug dealers in the UK. In stopping this consignment we have prevented further criminality by the gangs who bring violence and exploitation to our streets.

Mike Stepney, Director National Operations, Border Force said:

The huge haul of dangerous drugs that Michael McDermott and his crew sought to sneak into the UK had the potential to do untold harm to countless people around the country.

Officers from Border Force and the NCA used sophisticated intelligence and technical expertise to track this vessel and intercept it before its illicit cargo could ever be unloaded.

The prosecution of this crooked captain and his criminal crew underlines once again how our close work with partners like the NCA is successfully keeping communities in the UK safe from a range of threats.

Kate Hurst, CPS Specialist Prosecutor, said:

These men were attempting to import a huge amount of cocaine and prosecutors worked with Border Force and NCA officials from an early stage in order to build the strongest possible case.

Faced with the overwhelming evidence against them, two of the men on the boat pleaded guilty.

Michael McDermott denied his guilt but the prosecution clearly demonstrated how he formed a crucial part of the plan to bring these drugs into the country, resulting in the guilty verdict returned by the jury today.