



U.S. Department of Justice

RONALD W. SHARPE
United States Attorney
District of the Virgin Islands

Ron de Lugo Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse
5500 Veterans Drive, Suite 260
Charlotte Amalie
St. Thomas, VI 00802-6424

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, February 8, 2012

FEDERAL JURY CONVICTS GRENADA NATIVE **OF DRUG RAFFICKING OFFENSES**

St. Thomas, USVI - After a two-day trial in District Court on St. Thomas, a federal jury found Aundel Benoit, 52, guilty of two counts of drug trafficking, announced United States Attorney Ronald W. Sharpe and Drug Enforcement Administration Resident Agent-in-Charge Timothy Williams.

Aundel, a native of Grenada, was found guilty of conspiracy to possess cocaine onboard a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, and aiding and abetting the possession of cocaine onboard a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

According to the evidence presented at trial, on April 10, 2010, the DEA St. Thomas Resident Office received information from Grenadian authorities regarding a sailing vessel named Laurel, that was traveling from Grenada toward the Virgin Islands. The Grenadian authorities informed the DEA that they were surveilling the Laurel for suspected drug trafficking activities because it had previously been identified as a vessel used to transport narcotics. The DEA St. Thomas Resident Office forwarded this information to the U.S. Coast Guard.

Evidence presented at trial further established that on April 12, 2010, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Reef Shark interdicted the Laurel in international waters, south of Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands. On board the Laurel were Benoit and Carlyle Williams, also of Grenada. Coast Guard officers boarded the Laurel and attempted unsuccessfully to inspect the vessel. Officers from a second Coast Guard Cutter, the Farallon, also attempted to inspect the vessel, but aborted the inspection when sea conditions became too dangerous. The Laurel was then escorted to the Coast Guard Station in St. Thomas for further inspection.

On April 14, 2010, after two Customs and Border Patrol K-9s alerted for the presence of contraband in the stern area of the vessel, the Laurel was transported to Independence Boatyard where Customs and Border Patrol officials ex-rayed the vessel. The ex-ray revealed brick-shaped objects in a compartment located beneath the hull of the Laurel. Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection officers then removed part of the rear hull of the vessel and discovered bricks of cocaine wrapped in black, red, yellow, gray and blue tape. A total of 250 kilograms of cocaine was stored in the hull of the vessel.

Williams, who was on the vessel with Benoit, also was charged in the indictment. He was acquitted of all charges. Benoit's sentencing is scheduled for May 10, 2012. He faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison and a maximum of life in prison. He also faces a fine of up to 10,000,000.

The case was investigated by the U.S. Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection and Drug Enforcement Administration. It was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Delia L. Smith.

