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Five-Year Federal Investigation Concludes With Sentencing of Four Leaders of Major Cocaine Ring

David C. Weiss, United States Attorney for the District of Delaware, announced today that, this month, a five-year federal investigation into a major cocaine trafficking organization has come to a close with the sentencing of four of its most significant members— Bradley Torrence (a/k/a “Tuffy”) of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Robert Shepherd (a/k/a “Manny” or “Jig”) of Wilmington, Delaware, Vanivan Fuller (a/k/a “V” or “Van”) of Houston, Texas, and Harold Fitzgerald (a/k/a “Fitz”) of Chester, Pennsylvania.

Between May 13, 2010 and December 2, 2010, four defendants who were central players in a large-scale cocaine conspiracy were sentenced in federal court in the District of Delaware. On May 13, 2010, Bradley Torrence, age 35, was sentenced to 6 years in prison, followed by 20 years of federal supervised release. Robert Shepherd, age 34, and Vanivan Fuller, age 29, were each sentenced to six and half years in prison. On December 2, 2010, Harold Fitzgerald, age 35, was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

Several members of the conspiracy had been previously convicted and sentenced. Torrence’s California-based source of supply, Eric Blackmon was sentenced to nearly 20 years in prison on October 15, 2007, and Torrence’s associate, Shawn Williams, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was sentenced to 8 years in prison that same month. Two Federal Express couriers who were paid to deliver cocaine to organization members, Tameka Andrews and Eric Blackson, were sentenced to 18 months and 15 months in prison, respectively. Jeffrey Gray, of Wilmington, Delaware, a distributor of cocaine for the organization, was sentenced to 40 years of imprisonment on December 22, 2008, on cocaine conspiracy, firearms, and money laundering charges.

The cocaine ring shipped more than 250 kilograms of cocaine via Federal Express from Houston, Texas to locations in Delaware, Philadelphia and New Jersey between 2004 and 2007. The cocaine was worth over \$5 million wholesale at the time.

The investigation was conducted as part of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force program, and was handled jointly by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Early Conspiracy Operations

According to trial evidence, the conspiracy began in 2004, when the Houston-based dealer Vanivan Fuller, began shipping kilogram quantities of cocaine to an individual named Andele Johnson, who was selling the cocaine in Philadelphia and Delaware. Andele Johnson and Fuller established a method of shipping cocaine and money via Federal Express. In late 2004 or early 2005, Johnson introduced Fuller to Robert Shepherd and Harold Fitzgerald, who were Johnson's drug associates at the time.

In the fall of 2004, the DEA, FBI, and IRS began to identify a distinctive pattern of Federal Express packages coming from Houston, Texas and going to Philadelphia and Delaware. Packages were being deposited into Federal Express drop boxes in particular zip codes in Houston. The shipping costs for the packages were paid for using stolen Federal Express corporate account numbers that belonged to large companies such as Nike, Nextel, or Southwest Airlines. In addition, on each of the suspect packages, the sender marked the box for "no signature required" on the shipping label so that the package could be left without having the recipient sign for it.

After tracking the pattern of packages, the FBI seized two Federal Express shipments, on January 28, 2005, which contained a total of six kilograms of cocaine — worth roughly \$120,000 on the street in Delaware at the time. Investigators were not immediately able to link Fuller or Johnson to the shipment, but later Fuller confirmed that these packages were part of the conspiracy.

Andele Johnson was arrested on unrelated New Jersey state charges in the spring of 2005. Following Johnson's arrest, the conspiracy continued its operations, with Bradley Torrence joining Robert Shepherd as a partner in purchasing large quantities of cocaine from Fuller. Early on, Shepherd and Torrence used vacant apartments in Claymont, Delaware and Philadelphia to receive the Federal Express packages containing cocaine. Fuller sent the cocaine packages to the vacant apartments and used stolen Federal Express business account numbers and used fictitious recipient names and fake return addresses. His Delaware co-conspirators then sold the cocaine, and shipped the drug proceeds back to Fuller in Federal Express boxes.

After a while, Fuller began paying Federal Express couriers in Houston to deliver the money packages, and Shepherd and Torrence recruited a Federal Express courier, Tameka Andrews, in Philadelphia to deliver the cocaine packages to them. Instead of shipping the cocaine to vacant apartments, with a paid Federal Express courier involved, Fuller was now able to prepare the cocaine packages with legitimate business addresses in downtown Philadelphia. Andrews would intercept the packages containing cocaine while the packages were still on the truck and would deliver them on the street to Shepherd or Torrence. Andrews would then scan in the packages as if they had been delivered to the business address. Andrews was paid \$2,500 a week for participating in the conspiracy.

On January 13, 2006, the FBI seized two packages going to Houston, Texas which contained a total of \$96,040 in cash – enough to purchase approximately six kilograms of cocaine at the time. After this seizure, Fuller temporarily stopped using Federal Express to send cocaine to Torrence and Shepherd.

Instead, in early 2006, Torrence and Shepherd recruited a truck driver to use a tractor-trailer to transport money to Fuller in Texas and to bring over 60 kilograms of cocaine purchased from Fuller back to the Philadelphia area.

During this time, Shepherd and Torrence employed sophisticated money laundering techniques to conceal the substantial proceeds of their drug enterprise. The investigation revealed that each used their drug profits to purchase designer clothes, to drive high-end vehicles, including a Mercedes Maybach worth over \$400,000, a Range Rover, and an Aston Martin, and to maintain multiple luxury apartments in Wilmington, Delaware, Camden, New Jersey, and Atlanta, Georgia.

California Connection and March 2006 Arrests

In early 2006, Torrence and another drug partner, Shawn Williams, connected with a California-based source of cocaine, Eric Blackmon, and recruited a new Federal Express courier, Eric Blackson to assist in the delivery of cocaine packages in Philadelphia. FBI, DEA, and IRS agents arrested Williams and Blackson on March 8, 2006, after Williams and Blackson made an exchange of two Federal Express parcels containing six kilograms of cocaine in a parking garage in Philadelphia. Both were prosecuted on drug charges in the District of Delaware along with their California supplier, Blackmon, who pled guilty to drug and money laundering offenses. Blackmon was sentenced in the District of Delaware to 235 months in prison, Williams received a sentence of 8 years in prison, and Blackson received a sentence of 15 months in prison.

Shortly after the arrests of Williams and Blackson, in March 2006, Torrence was stopped by local police officers in Philadelphia after disregarding a stop sign. He had three kilograms of cocaine with him in the back seat of his Range Rover, and was arrested. On November 29, 2006, Torrence pleaded guilty in federal court to charges of conspiracy to distribute over five kilograms of cocaine and money laundering.

Conspiracy Continues – Spring/Summer 2006

After Torrence's arrest, Shepherd and Fuller continued to transact business and Shepherd brought Harold Fitzgerald deeper into the conspiracy operations.

In April 2006, Shepherd and Fitzgerald began sending packages of money to Fuller, and in June 2006, Fuller began shipping cocaine packages to Shepherd and Fitzgerald. Now the conspiracy was without any Federal Express couriers, and had to return to sending the cocaine packages to vacant apartments in Claymont, Delaware.

Once again, law enforcement caught the pattern of these shipments, and agents from FBI, DEA, and IRS twice conducted surveillance of Fitzgerald picking up Federal Express packages sent from Fuller in Texas. On August 30, 2006, law enforcement seized a Houston-bound package, which contained \$45,500 — approximately the cost of three kilograms of cocaine. No arrests were made at that time.

Evidence from two search warrants showed, however, that Fitzgerald and Shepherd used luxury apartments – at the Christina Landing Apartments in Wilmington, Delaware and at the

Victor Apartments in Camden, New Jersey — to count and package money to be sent back to Texas via Federal Express in order to purchase additional cocaine.

The Sting Operation – October 30, 2006

According to trial testimony, in September 2006, law enforcement began using a confidential informant (CI) who approached Shepherd about the purchase of large quantities of cocaine. The CI dealt in high-end luxury and custom automobiles, and had leased Shepherd a custom, Mercedes Maybach, valued at \$465,000.

Surveillance officers testified that Shepherd arranged to meet the CI on October 30, 2006, to purchase up to forty kilograms of cocaine from him. The arrangement was for Shepherd to bring money to purchase cocaine at an airport hotel on Island Avenue in Philadelphia, PA.

Prior to the meeting on October 30, 2006, Shepherd contacted one of his cocaine distributors, Jeffrey Gray. Shepherd arranged for Gray to bring \$60,000 to purchase three of the kilograms of cocaine from the CI. Shepherd and Gray drove to the airport hotel. While Gray waited outside in his car, Shepherd brought the CI the money, and the two went to a truck parked outside where law enforcement officers had placed sham cocaine. Shepherd was in the truck with the CI inspecting the sham cocaine, when law enforcement converged and arrested Shepherd.

The arresting officers recounted at Jeffrey Gray's trial, how Gray fled in his car at a high rate of speed through the hotel parking lot, nearly hitting several officers, running through a chain fence, and eventually jumping out of the moving car to attempt to escape on foot. Gray was apprehended shortly thereafter. In Gray's vehicle was a loaded, cocked Smith & Wesson 9mm pistol, which was later found to have Gray's DNA on it.

On November 16, 2006, Shepherd was indicted by the federal grand jury for the District of Delaware on charges of conspiracy to distribute five kilograms or more of cocaine. On June 26, 2007, he pleaded guilty to that charge and a two-count Felony Information, which also included money laundering charges.

Jeffrey Gray was indicted on October 11, 2007, on charges of conspiracy to distribute five kilograms or more of cocaine, money laundering, and firearms charges. Gray was convicted of all counts of the Indictment following a jury trial on May 20, 2008, in the United States District Court for the District of Delaware, and was sentenced to 40 years in federal prison on December 22, 2008.

Sentencings

Over the last several months, the remaining four members of the cocaine organization have been sentenced in United States District Court for the District of Delaware. The Texas source of supply, Vanivan Fuller, received a sentence of six and half years in prison, as did Robert Shepherd. Bradley Torrence was sentenced to six years in prison.

On December 2, 2010, Harold Fitzgerald, who was convicted after a week-long jury trial of his involvement in the cocaine conspiracy as Shepherd's partner and distributor of cocaine was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

United States Attorney Weiss, praised the long-term cooperation between DEA, FBI, and IRS, in successfully investigating and prosecuting these defendants to dismantle a major cocaine trafficking organization. Weiss stated, "The investigators were dogged in their pursuit of these defendants, constantly adapting to the changing distribution techniques deployed by this criminal enterprise. The sentences imposed on the leaders of this conspiracy represent a significant victory in our efforts to stem the flow of illegal drugs into our community."

Eric C. Hylton, Special Agent in Charge of IRS Criminal investigation's Philadelphia Field Office, stated, "These sentences represent the concerted and diligent efforts of multiple investigators and prosecutors to close down an organization that represented a substantial threat to the community." Hylton added, "IRS Criminal Investigation will continue to utilize our financial investigative expertise to assist the United States Attorney's Office and our other law enforcement partners in dismantling drug trafficking organizations such as these."

DEA Special Agent in Charge John J. Bryfonski stated "This case and the sentencing of these criminals to long terms of incarceration is proof that no drug trafficker, no trafficking organization, no drug courier or accomplice can hide from the DEA, FBI and the IRS when they work together with the United States Attorney to bring down these criminals who distributed poison for personal gain and greed; not caring about the human tragedies left behind."

This five-year joint investigation was conducted by federal law enforcement agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Internal Revenue Service. The cases were prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Ilana Eisenstein and Shawn Weede of the District of Delaware.

For further information, please contact Assistant United States Attorneys Ilana Eisenstein or Shawn Weede.

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