

# RECORD BUST

AUSTRALIAN police have teamed with US drug enforcers to smash the world's biggest cannabis smuggling operation.

Authorities have told the *Herald Sun* the haul may be worth more than \$500 million.

The US Drug Enforcement Agency today is expected to reveal how the international taskforce busted the multi-national drug syndicate.

It is believed the mother ship used for distributing tonnes of cannabis resin across the Pacific Ocean has been detained in Los Angeles.

By JIM TENNISON

It is also believed the drug haul originated from Pakistan.

The *Herald Sun* has learned the operation was linked to a massive drug seizure before Christmas in Queensland.

More than 100 armed Australian Federal Police and Customs officers swooped on a cannabis shipment at Hervey Bay on Queensland's Sunshine coast.

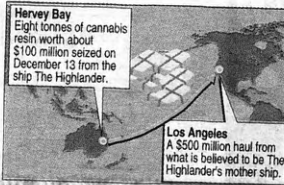
They pounced after about eight tonnes of cannabis was allegedly unloaded from a yacht called *The Highlander*. The \$100 million haul is thought to be the largest in Queensland history.

Seventeen people were arrested on charges including trafficking commercial quantities of an illegal drug.

Before that December 13 raid, the AFP had been liaising with overseas authorities as part of a bigger operation.

The Hervey Bay drop-off is alleged to be only one of a number made by a mothership.

AFP spokesman in Canberra Steve Jiggins said a 12-month operation had involved US, Canadian, Mexican and Australian authorities.



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## AFP helps uncover international drug ring

*Since our story, 'Drugs that never reach the streets', on Page 2 of this issue was written there has been a spectacular conclusion overseas in relation to 'Operation Molotov' featured in the article. US law enforcement authorities have indicted seven people in what they describe as the world's largest hashish trafficking organisation and it is alleged that this syndicate supplied drugs seized in the Maryborough, Qld, area last December. To protect the US phase of the operation, the AFP had not previously commented publicly on the source of the drugs.*

US Attorney for the central district of California, Nora Manella and US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Special Agent in Charge Robert Bender said in a press statement that three of the men charged in the US were thought to be high-ranking members of a drug-cartel that specialised in exporting large quantities of hashish to North America and Europe.

"If successful, the conspiracy would have poured tons of illegal narcotics into at least three separate countries. The disruption of this conspiracy is a tribute to the organisational and tactical skills of international law enforcement," she said.

Mr Bender added that the case was an "outstanding example of the impact of cooperation between local, state, federal and international police organisations".

The worldwide operation involved officers from the AFP, the Australian Customs Service and law enforcement officials from the US, Canada and Indonesia.

"This cooperation resulted in the arrest of the highest-ranking individuals of a narcotics smuggling organisation that has been in operation since the early 1980s."

The drug trafficking organisation allegedly shipped approximately 25 tonnes of hashish to the South Pacific, where eight tonnes of the drug were transferred to a vessel bound for Australia. Law enforcement authorities in Australia arrested 18 people on December 12 last year and seized the narcotics. About 17 tonnes of the hashish were off-loaded from the 'mothership' on the same day to a barge manned by undercover officers from the US Drug Enforcement Administration. It took three hours for crew members of the mothership to toss multi-kilogram packages of hashish on to the undercover vessel.

The 17-tonne seizure was the largest quantity of hashish ever confiscated by US officials during an undercover operation, the press statement said.

DEA officials said the wholesale value of the drug was more than \$150 million.

The drug traffickers allegedly had contracted with DEA agents, promising to pay the undercover officers to move the drugs from the mothership to Los Angeles. The traffickers paid more than \$800,000 in costs, according to the US indictment.

Once undercover law enforcement agents had control of the shipment, the drugs were flown to Los Angeles. Three controlled deliveries of more than four tonnes each were made: one to Montreal, Canada, a second to the New York area, and a third in the Los Angeles area.

As a result of the investigation, in late January seven people were arrested including one Australian. Charles Staunton, 38, a former NSW police officer, arrested in Montreal was indicted and charged with making large payments to undercover officials to move the hashish from the mother ship to the mainland. Also indicted by a federal grand jury in Los Angeles were: David Kulik, 43, charged with obtaining the hashish and arranging for its transportation to North America; Gary Matsuzaki, 43, who was allegedly in charge of the daily operations of the drug ring; Vagn Bo Larsen, 44, who allegedly made plans to have hashish delivered to Canadian distributors; Brian Alan Auchard, 38, who allegedly made arrangements and delivered cash for the transportation of the drugs; Wanda Marie Halpert, 45, who allegedly made arrangements to accept and distribute the drugs in Canada; and Douglas Martin Secor, 45, who was charged with being the southern Californian distributor for the hashish ring.

Richard Crothers follows Australia's role in the operation on Page 2.