

OPERATION BACH – THE £5 MILLION DRUG BUST

A major drug smuggling ring was smashed during the early hours of Monday 3rd November 1986 when Police and HM Customs officers seized cannabis with a street value of nearly £5 million at Aberbach Beach north of Fishguard.



Aberbach Beach

Acting on months of intelligence gathering, a joint Police / HM Customs operation saw officers 'camping out' undercover at Aberbach Beach prior to the swoop that made the national news headlines.

During the early hours, a 75' converted fishing trawler 'Minnou' was seen to hove to off the beach in heavy seas and force five winds - that's when things began to go badly wrong for the smugglers.

More than 80 bales of cannabis wrapped in plastic had been lowered into two rubber dinghies when the dinghies broke free from the mother ship and capsized in the stormy seas. Two of the gang were washed into the sea and onto the shore before being rescued and conveyed under Police escort to Withybush Hospital, Haverfordwest suffering from exposure.

Ron (Coch) Davies was part of the team that worked 12 hour shifts at Aberbach in cold, stormy weather keeping the beach under surveillance. Ron recalls 'When the dinghies broke free we had to break cover and rescue the gang members that were in the sea. When rescued, both were in a poor condition and there's no doubt in my mind that they were left to drown. The crew of the boat made no attempt whatsoever to rescue them – they were regarded as being expendable'.

Three more men were arrested at Aberbach Beach and a further five men and one woman were arrested in simultaneous raids in London and the Home Counties. In all, eleven people were arrested with nine subsequently charged with offences relating to the illegal importation of cannabis and the success was the culmination of four months work by Police and Customs personnel working together which also relied on the co-operation of forces in Denmark and Spain.

Despite the presence of three HM Customs cutters and a RAF Sea King helicopter, the Minnou vanished into the night and turned up at Cork Harbour in the Republic of Ireland the next day.

Unbelievably, after a search of the vessel by Irish Customs officers and questioning by the Garda (Police) the owner of the trawler was told he could set sail again! The vessel was finally stopped off the Scilly Isles, thought to be heading for the Mediterranean. The Minnou was escorted to Falmouth and the 'skipper' arrested and taken to Haverfordwest Police Station for questioning.



Ron 'Coch' Davies with the bales of Cannabis

The remainder of the illicit cargo was swept up the coast eventually coming to rest at the foot of a 60' cliff. Thirty six suitcase sized packages each weighing ½ cwt were hauled up the steep cliff face using a block and tackle pulley system.

The Police side of Operation Bach was headed by Detective Superintendent Derek Davies. Three years previously he led the successful Seal Bay operation where Police foiled a similar international plot to smuggle cannabis into the country - Aberbach being just 15 miles from Seal Bay!



Tony Brinsden

The Ground Commander for the joint operation was DPP NARPO member Tony Brinsden who recalls that following previous similar joint operations, both the Police and HM Customs had come into criticism for their reluctance to share information and intelligence. However, Tony says 'During *Operation Bach* both teams were billeted at Langton Hall, near Fishguard and a great rapport developed. This was an excellent operation which, due to cooperation between DPP and HMRC, led onto a far better working relationship'.



A job well done – on the extreme left of the front row is the late Richie Parry and Ron Davies is sat on the floor leading the celebration!

After a lengthy trial at Cardiff Crown Court during the autumn of 1988, the nine conspirators were sentenced to a total of 91 years imprisonment with the instigator sentenced to 22 years imprisonment.

The judge, Mr Justice Mars Jones took just 15 minutes to sentence the nine and at the end of the trial told them 'The trade on which you were engaged brings on those to whom you peddle drugs – misery, poverty, corruption, ill health and even death'.

The final word goes to Ron Davies:

Just before the start of the joint briefing, Dyfed-Powys (DPP) officers were taken to one side by DS Richie Parry. He advised us that when HM Customs (HMC) management enquired whether DPP had personnel trained in covert surveillance (CROP) we were to acknowledge that we **were** such trained. When this issue arose we went along with Richie's guidance and indicated that we were trained in covert surveillance - although none of us actually were, and as they say the rest is history.

This was the first major operation where Dyfed-Powys used CROP operatives so we had no suitable issue kit for the task that lay ahead. (A senior officer suggested we kitted ourselves with uniform issue Gannex overcoats from HQ stores). Fortunately, HMC personnel willingly shared their equipment / camouflage clothing with us.



Ron pictured on his CROP course

The working relationship with HMC officers was excellent throughout and several friendships were made which still exist today. The photograph taken at the party held at the end of the operation was the culmination of a close and successful working relationship.

On a personal note, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience gained through Operation Bach and continued to undertake CROP surveillance in-force and whilst attached to the Regional Crime Squad.

Finally, the late Richie Parry was the Drug Squad DS throughout the operation and he was highly regarded and respected by all that worked with him. In addition, we were also very fortunate to have Tony Brinsden as our DI – they were great supervisors to work for. Both Tony and Richie fought our corner when it came to ensuring we were supplied with better kit for future CROP operations and also ensured we enjoyed the same entitlements as those enjoyed by our HM Customs colleagues.

Our respect for Tony and Ritchie was unreserved.

Many thanks to Ron for supplying the photos – article compiled by Hugh Colley.