

Plane hangs out at airport, grounded after DEA seizure

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Author: BARRY FLYNN - BUSINESS WRITER

DAYTONA BEACH - Abandoned at the airport here, a Boeing 727 jetliner was quietly seized last summer in a federal drug case that may reach as far as Aruba and the mountains of Mexico.

The aircraft still sits parked at Willman Aviation Inc., a fixed-base operator at Daytona Beach International Airport, and is under seal by the U.S. Marshals Service.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, which ordered the seizure, has been tight-lipped about the matter. It came to light when the DEA listed the plane in a legal notice in The Wall Street Journal as part of the process of the government gaining forfeiture of property in more than 500 drug-related cases around the country.

Everything listed was "seized for forfeiture . . . because the property was used or acquired as a result of a violation of the controlled substances act . . ." the ad said.

"It is a narcotics violation that it was seized under," said Michael Sanders, a DEA spokesman in Washington. "The seizure warrant came out of the Southern District" of Florida.

"I can't tell you why the plane was seized," he said. "There's been no arrest associated with the seizure."

All records of the case in U.S. District Court in Fort Lauderdale are under seal and unavailable to the public.

The seized jet has been parked at the airport for more than four years. Its only flight during that time was a brief, aborted sortie scheduled to end at a small airport in Queretaro, northeast of Mexico City, according to flightaware.com, a Web site that compiles FAA data.

Instead of going to Queretaro, the plane returned to DBIA less than an hour after takeoff with the crew reporting equipment problems.

Nobody here has heard from the owner since.

An obscure company called Rapid Air & Sea Services N.V. and based in Aruba - an island country about 15 miles off the coast of Venezuela - bought the plane only four days before that abbreviated flight in April 2006.

"I never saw the buyers," said the seller, Jack R. Staples, a St. Petersburg businessman who got \$583,000, after commissions, for sale of the plane through an aircraft broker. "I was told these guys were Mexican, and they had a cargo operation out of Mexico City."

Negotiations were unusually long, punctuated by delays in payment and repeated requests for minor repairs, he said.

Staples bought the plane as an investment in 2001. He moved it to DBIA in December 2003.

Staples' New Smyrna Beach broker, Les Brent, said, "This airplane was not a drug plane."

Brent said he never met the ultimate buyer, either, and dealt only by telephone with a California broker whose name and home city he did not recall. Brent said he had thought the buyer was American, but near the end of the sales process the other broker told him the Aruba company was buying the plane for resale to someone in Mexico.

Brent said his records of the transaction have been subpoenaed by the DEA.

From here, the plane's future is uncertain. It usually takes eight to 18 months after seizure for the government to win forfeiture of an aircraft, said Jack Bagwell, whose Midland, Texas, company, Aero-Mod Services, sells planes for the Marshals Service.

Bagwell said he would then move quickly to provide for a two-day viewing period, accept sealed bids and sell the plane to the highest bidder.