

Cutters Interdict 3 Suspected Smuggling Vessels, \$156M of Cocaine in Eastern Pacific



Coast Guard Cutter Munro (WMSL 755) boarding team member sits atop an interdicted low-profile vessel in the Eastern Pacific Ocean after crews seized 3,439 pounds of cocaine from the LPV, Jan. 27, 2021. U.S. Coast Guard

ALAMEDA, Calif. – Crews aboard two Alameda-based Coast Guard cutters interdicted three suspected drug smuggling vessels in the Eastern Pacific Ocean between Jan. 26 and Feb. 1 and seized more than 9,000 pounds of cocaine worth an estimated \$156 million, the Coast Guard Pacific Area said in a Feb. 17 release.

Conducting the operations were the crews of the Coast Guard Cutters Munro (WMSL 755) and Bertholf (WMSL 750).

Munro's crew boarded a fishing vessel Jan. 26 suspected of smuggling illicit narcotics. Exercising a bilateral agreement with a partner nation, the boarding teams searched and discovered 1,300 pounds of cocaine concealed within the vessel.

Munro's crew interdicted a second suspected drug smuggling vessel hours later after a maritime patrol aircraft detected a suspicious vessel and directed Munro's crew towards it. Munro launched a helicopter aircrew and boarding teams, and together they interdicted a low-profile vessel. The boarding teams discovered 3,439 pounds of cocaine aboard the purpose-built drug smuggling vessel.

"Having back-to-back cases lasting 31 hours pushed our limits, but our crew took on the challenge," said Capt. Blake Novak, commanding officer of the Munro. "Cartels are cunning and

sophisticated, and this is a dynamic environment, which required interagency and international coordination which yielded results. I am proud of our crew, but these successes would not be possible without our Central and South American partnerships.”

On Feb. 1, Bertholf’s boarding teams also interdicted a low-profile vessel, seizing more than 4,380 pounds of cocaine.

Cartels design low-profile vessels specifically to evade law enforcement by being difficult to detect. These vessels are built to ferry large quantities of illicit contraband while riding low in the water.

“The crew continues to impress me as they rise above challenges, stand a taut watch, and conduct themselves in a professional manner as we go about our business of stemming the flow of narcotics in the Eastern Pacific,” said Capt. Brian Anderson, commanding officer of the Bertholf. “I could not be more pleased with the overall teamwork between the aircraft, our small boats, and my crew in the interdiction of this drug laden vessel. Together we are making a difference.”

Nine suspected traffickers were taken into custody between the three interdictions.

Munro and Bertholf are two of four 418-foot Legend-class national security cutters homeported in Alameda. National security cutters have a crew of more than 150 and are among the largest and most technologically sophisticated vessels in the Coast Guard’s fleet. The cutters can operate globally in the most demanding open ocean environments, from the North Pacific’s hazardous fishing grounds to the Eastern Pacific’s vast approaches, where its crews battle transnational crime.