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## Confidential DEA Informant From St. John Found Guilty of Double Crossing Federal Agents

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The Office of the U.S. Attorney for the Virgin Islands announced Thursday that after a brief deliberation, federal jury returned guilty verdicts against Samuel Pena Columna of St. John on conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine, possession of a firearm in furtherance of the drug trafficking conspiracy, two counts of assault, and one count of using and brandishing a firearm in furtherance of a crime of violence.

Sentencing for Pena Columna is scheduled for January 19, 2023.

According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, the charges stem from a September 25, 2019, shootout with several U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Air and Marine Agents after Pena Columna drove four men and over \$1.1 million dollars to Haulover Bay, a

known human and drug smuggling trail in St. John. Pena Columna and his co-defendant had planned to exchange the \$1.1 million in cash and an AR-15 pistol-type gun for 100 kilos of cocaine.

Two of Pena Columna's co-defendants, Joan Morales Nolasco and Rammer Guerrero-Morales, both armed with an AR-15 pistol and a handgun, headed down the trail where they were confronted by two CBP agents along the trail. The agents immediately announced their presence which led to a shootout between the agents and Morales Nolasco and Guerrero-Morales. One of the agents was shot in the shoulder and leg, and Guerrero-Morales was severely wounded and ultimately lost his leg. Pena Columna fled the scene in his car with the other two smugglers and the \$1.1 million. Morales Nolasco fled the scene on foot and later to his native Dominican Republic. Morales Nolasco was extradited back to the Virgin Islands for prosecution. Both Morales Nolasco and Guerrero Morales pleaded guilty before trial.

At trial, Pena Columna argued that, on the night of the drug trafficking operation, he was acting as a confidential source for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), a role he had performed since 2017. As a confidential source, Pena Columna provided federal law enforcement agents with information regarding drug trafficking activities in the territory. Agents, however, testified that while Pena Columna had served as a confidential source, his role had been limited to providing information. Agents further testified that though Pena Columna had provided information to DEA that led to the convictions of several drug traffickers, he also maintained a robust drug trafficking organization of his own. Finally, agents testified that Pena Columna was never authorized to conduct illegal drug transactions and failed to advise DEA before or after the shooting incident as required in his agreement with DEA.

Co-defendant Morales Nolasco testified that the September 25th drug transaction was just one of many large-quantity cocaine deals he had conducted with Pena Columna throughout the period that he had worked as a confidential source for DEA, and Guerrero Morales testified that Pena Columna was involved in the drug transaction on the night of September 25, 2019.

"Cocaine smuggling is an enormous threat to our Virgin Islands community and the United States mainland", stated U.S. Attorney for the Virgin Islands, Delia Smith. "The shooting of a federal agent demonstrates how dangerous and violent those involved in drug trafficker can be. This conviction demonstrates that those involved in drug smuggling and assaulting law enforcement officers will be held accountable."

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration, Homeland Security Investigations, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Operations, Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, and the Virgin Islands Police Department investigated conducted the investigation and Assistant United States Attorneys Meredith Edwards and Kyle Payne prosecuted this case.

This effort is part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) operation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level criminal organizations that threaten the United States using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach. Additional information about the OCDETF Program can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/OCDETF>.