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Three Men Facing Over 100 Years Each After Police Say They Tried to Run Over an Officer With Chevy Blazer

Crime / **Published On February 13, 2023 03:57 PM /**

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Left, Ja’Haile Clendenin, upper right, Akwany Dore, lower right, Khalid Smith. By. THE VIRGIN ISLANDS POLICE DEPARTMENT.

ST. THOMAS — Three young men were charged with a slew of criminal offenses after allegedly aiming their vehicle straight at a police officer before leading police on a short chase.

On Saturday, February 11, officers of the the Virgin Islands Police Department were conducting a surveillance operation near Dineros Restaurant in Vitraco Mall, because the VIPD Intel Unit had learned that someone in possession of illegal weapons and narcotics would be in the vicinity that day.

The Intel Unit passed detailed information - down to the car the suspect would be driving - on to the Special Operations Bureau, and members of both units were on scene when they saw three men, later identified as Ja'Haile Clendenin, Akwany Dore, and Khalid Smith, sitting outside the restaurant in question, smoking marijuana and drinking. Clendenin was reportedly spotted with a large transparent glass jar filled with plant material that later tested positive for marijuana, taking it out of a dark colored backpack and later putting it back in. After a while, the trio walked to the vehicle the Intel Unit had indicated was theirs - a white 2008 Chevrolet Blazer with no tags. The three drove away from the Mall, and the surveilling officers quickly radio ahead.

Several police units converged in Droingens Gade, near Market Square, in an attempt to make a traffic stop on the Chevrolet. Emergency lights on his police vehicle flashing, one officer was approaching the SUV when he said it suddenly veered onto the sidewalk and drove straight at him. He reportedly pressed his back against his police unit, trying to make himself "as small as possible", and braced for impact. A light pole in front of him, slightly off to his left, saved his life, the officer said. The Blazer's right fender and front bumper hit the pole, sending the glass from the light shattering down around the officer's head, while the SUV dragged the light pole down the street, trailing sparks.

The police officer said he immediately jumped back into his marked unit and followed the white Chevrolet as it traveled westward. It slowed almost to a stop, and Clendenin and Smith reportedly exited and took off running, still heading west, while Dore pointed the SUV towards Veteran's Drive.

The officer said he decided to pursue the two suspects on foot, and so he ran after them until they disappeared down an alley to the west, while terrified bystanders huddled together screaming "they have guns!" The officer said he then returned to his vehicle and went after the Blazer, which turned on to the Veteran's Drive Annex before stopping in front of Moe's Fresh Market.

The driver, Akwany Dore, was surrounded by Special Operations Bureau officers and ordered out of the vehicle and down to the ground. The officer who had been chasing the suspects handcuffed Dore and remained to secure the scene while his colleagues went in search of Clendenin and Smith.

Those officers soon received reports that the pair had been spotted running towards the former Golden Dragon Restaurant, carrying what looked like a machine gun and a handgun. Relying on pointers from bystanders, police tracked Clendenin and Smith to the back of the building complex and up some stairs. They were detained without incident, and after officers swept the area for the weapons members of the public had said they were carrying, the officers found a black firearm, later identified as a Glock 22 40 caliber pistol, fitted with an automatic conversion kit. The gun had a full 15-round magazine attached, and one round in the chamber.

Back at the scene in front of Moe's Fresh Market, police searched the Blazer, and found two 50-round drum magazines, one for 5.56 caliber/.223 rounds, the other for 9mm ammunition. Both had an unspecified amount of ammunition loaded in them. There were also two 31-round extended magazines filled with 9mm rounds.

Also discovered was a "high-powered" Remington BB rifle with a scope, other rifle scopes, and another automatic modification chip. Police also found the glass jar of marijuana that had been spotted earlier, along with transparent plastic baggies.

The vehicle's owner was identified as Akwany Dore.

The three men were arrested and charged jointly with 19 charges, ranging from assault, to firearm possession, to drug trafficking, to attempted murder. Clendenin and Smith were additionally charged with being felons in possession

Unable to post bail of \$150,000 each, they were taken to the Bureau of Corrections and appeared in court on Monday for their Advice of Rights hearing.

In court, defense counsel and the prosecutor tussled over whether all three defendants should share the burden of several charges, including reckless driving and attempted murder. Ultimately, the presiding judge found that there was probable cause for Dore, Clendenin and Smith to be charged jointly for most of the alleged offenses.

All three now face charges of attempted first-degree murder, first and third-degree assault, as well as aggravated assault and battery, unlawful possession of ammunition, constructive possession of a firearm, possession with intent to distribute, possession of both a firearm and narcotics within 1000 feet of a church, illegal modification of a firearm, possession of a machine gun, reckless endangerment, delaying/obstruction, disturbance of the peace and destruction of property. All three have also been hit with charges of aiding and abetting on the attempted murder, assault, drug and gun charges.

Both Clendenin and Smith, having been previously convicted of criminal offenses, each face additional charges of being felons in possession of a firearm and ammunition respectively.

Dore, as the driver of the vehicle, was assessed additional traffic offenses including failure to stop, reckless driving, and leaving the scene. All told, if the state proves its case beyond a reasonable doubt for the lengthy charge sheet, each man upon conviction could be facing cumulative sentences of over a hundred years of jail time, with fines exceeding \$100,000.

Clendenin and Smith are facing as much as a 10-year enhancement of possible sentences and fines on the possession charges due to their previous criminal convictions.

In court on Monday, the public defender currently appointed to represent all three alerted the judge of potential conflict of interest arising from each of the defendants perhaps having different responsibility for the commission of the laundry list of offenses. The judge noted that possibility and agreed, saying that separate attorneys would almost certainly be assigned before trial begins.

Prosecutors argued for bail in the amount of \$500,000 for each defendant, saying that they were all dangers to the community and flight risks. The defense attorney said that amount was excessive, and argued that the courts must take into account each defendant's right to bail, and ability to finance cash bail requirements, cautioning against imposing steep bail requirements as a "back door" to keep defendants detained ahead of trial. She suggested bail of \$20,000 a piece with the provision for payment of 10 percent in cash. However counsel for the state pointed out that at least two of the defendants were convicted just last year of criminal offenses - both of whom were out on probation when they were arrested. Clendenin had begun his probation term just four months ago.

Ultimately, the judge rejected third-party custodian applications for Clendenin and Smith, and set bail at \$175,000 for each, fully secured. Dore will have to pay \$125k before he can be released,

but the court said it would be willing to modify this bail requirement should a suitable third-party custodian be identified. The court said it found Dore an “extreme flight risk”, and all three a “danger to the community”, as it considered bail.

All, if released, will have to submit to 24/hr house arrest with electronic monitoring, with only court appearances, meetings with their attorney, or emergency hospital visits exempted. Smith did not receive an exemption from house arrest to attend work. The three young men are restricted from traveling outside the St. Thomas/St. John district without the court’s written permission, must surrender their travel documents and drivers’ licenses, and are banned from possessing alcohol, controlled substances, firearms and ammunition. They must each report to the probation office twice a week by telephone.

Dore, Smith and Clendenin are all barred from communicating in any fashion with witnesses or the complainant in the matter, and each must remain in regular contact with their attorney. They will all next appear in court on March 3.

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