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DEA agent rode coke to ground

By Bob Robinson
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MIAMI — His cocaine-laden aircraft was shot out of the sky by Sandinista anti-aircraft fire when he tried to run cocaine to the United States, a government informant said yesterday.

"We were going to lose the plane and a crash was imminent," said Barry Seal, a former TWA pilot turned drug smuggler turned government snitch, as he described an emergency landing he made in May. His airplane was fired on because of a lack of communication, he said.

In testimony in U.S. District Court, Seal said he had earlier been warned to be careful while flying from a military airport just outside Managua, Nicaragua. Anti-aircraft batteries had orders to shoot any plane that came near the country's only oil refinery or a volcanic lake that supplied the capital city with its water.

Seal had been recruited as a pilot

for what federal prosecutors have called one of the world's biggest cocaine cartels. Pressure from a crackdown on drug traffickers by Colombia forced the cartel into setting up shop in Nicaragua.

Nine men were charged with conspiring to import and distribute cocaine. Three of the main leaders of the cartel — Jorge Ochoa, Carlos Ledber, and Pablo Escobar — are fugitives, as are Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha and Frederico Vaughan, who was an aide to the Nicaraguan interior minister.

On trial are Carlos Bustamante, who is alleged to have supervised the distribution of cocaine in the U.S.; Paul Etzel, an alleged courier and interpreter; Felix Dixon Bates, a pilot; and Lizardo Marquez-Perez, alleged to have been revising the cartel's security operations.

Seal described a May 20 trip to Managua to scout out the operation set up by the Ochoa cartel. He was met there by Mr. Vaughan, an aide to Interior Minister Tomas Borge, he

said. He was worried about operating out of a Communist country because the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration had told him it could not protect him there, Seal said.

Mr. Vaughan, he said, assured him that there would be no problem. He and Felix Dixon Bates, another pilot, were allowed, through Mr. Vaughan's influence, to enter and leave the country without having their passports stamped, he said.

The two men, accompanied by a Sandinista army sergeant, passed through a series of military checkpoints before reaching the airfield just outside the city, he said.

One side of the airport's runway, he was told, had been land-mined and he was warned not to step on the grassy part.

Mr. Vaughan gave him high-frequency radio codes as well as telephone numbers he could use to contact, he said. None of them did him any good when he tried to fly out a first shipment of cocaine May 28.

After refueling the cocaine-laden airplane, Seal said, he and his copilot took off in darkness. The control tower was shut down, the runway lights were out, and Mr. Vaughan was gone.

"I was told later that Mr. Vaughan had not coordinated any of this with anyone," he said.

As the aircraft went north of the city, anti-aircraft batteries opened up, hitting the left engine, he said.

"I tried desperately to reach Mr. Vaughan, and I realized this was hastily done and it would be suicide to go back onto that runway we had just taken off from," he said.

Instead, he radioed a commercial airport and landed there. When Sandinista soldiers arrived, Seal told them not to touch the airplane and then called Mr. Vaughan's office again.

The same army sergeant who had been with Mr. Vaughan previously then arrived with a tractor and unloaded the cocaine.

"Another master sergeant who spoke perfect English then arrived and told us to keep our mouths shut, everything would be fine," Seal said.

The two were jailed for a few hours before being taken to Mr. Vaughan's residence.

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