

## **Time and freedom run out on drug ring**

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### ***Nashville airport turns out to be sore spot for pair***

By the time John Anderson and his stepson John Robert-Leon Washington arrived in U.S. District Court this month, they were capping off three close brushes with the law over the past year.

Each of them had had a chance to walk away once. The last time stopped the both of them cold.

By then, agents had uncovered what they said was a long-distance cocaine distribution conspiracy that could put each of them in federal prison. The two have pleaded guilty to charges of running a drug ring that stretched from the Northwest to Nashville, and their recent brushes with the law indicate that travel to the state of Washington was a crucial part of their business.

For both men, Nashville International Airport has been a sore spot, especially for Anderson.

In May 2003, Anderson walked up to the security screeners, put his bag on the X-ray machine conveyor belt and was quickly surrounded by airport police.

The X-ray machine illuminated a .357 Magnum handgun in the man's luggage. The airport authorities called in the FBI and the ATF, and Anderson was immediately placed under arrest.

He was charged with being a felon in possession of a handgun and with attempting to carry a firearm onto an aircraft.

Agents told *The Tennessean* after his arrest that they did not know what Anderson was trying to do.

"In these days of heightened national security measures in place at airports, it is highly unusual that a convicted murderer possessing more than \$800 cash would attempt to carry a loaded firearm onto an airplane without other criminal objective," ATF agent Eric Kehn stated in an affidavit.

Anderson kept silent and asked for an attorney. Within weeks, his legal strategy was set. With his defense attorney, David Raybin, he elected to go to trial.

His defense? It wasn't his gun, and he didn't know it was in the bag he'd borrowed from his stepson. After all, Anderson's fingerprints weren't even on the weapon. It was all a mistake. He'd never intended to carry a gun onto an airplane.

In Senior U.S. District Judge John T. Nixon's courtroom, jurors heard the government's case and listened to the defense's straightforward explanation. The jury found him not guilty, and Nixon sent Anderson on his way.

Then in the spring of this year, Washington had his own close call at the airport.

As did Anderson's, his troubles started with the security screeners. They found currency stuffed inside some boots. There was more than \$36,000 inside a left boot and a right one. The screeners called the airport police, and the police summoned the DEA.

Washington told the agents that it wasn't illegal to carry cash, and the agents agreed. But they pointed out that they considered it extremely suspicious, affidavits show.

So Washington told them he was a gambler.

With whom had he been gambling in Nashville?

He wouldn't say.

Then the DEA told him they wanted a drug dog to sniff his luggage. They carried the luggage to a special screening area, where the dog alerted immediately to the cash, according to agents.

They told Washington that they were keeping the money because of strong indications that the funds were implicated in a drug transaction. But Washington, they said, was free to go.

So by now, did the government have any strong suspicions about the activities of the two men?

"I can say this," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Paul O'Brien in Nashville. "You wouldn't find any indication of that in the public record."

Nevertheless, the public record would light up again with both men's names.

In June, authorities in Montana pulled over a woman who was traveling east. A subsequent search of the rental car turned up more than 5 kilograms of cocaine. The woman who was driving agreed to cooperate with federal agents and to carry through as if the drive had gone without a hitch.

She was on her way to Nashville.

The agents set up what they call a "controlled buy," and with the woman playing along, she carried out the delivery. The drugs were going to Anderson, the man who'd had the airport gun, authorities charged. Anderson and Washington were both nabbed after the delivery in north Nashville.

The agents found a 9 mm pistol, some ammunition, marijuana and the type of scales that drug dealers generally use to package their product. They also found more than three-quarters of a million dollars in cash.

The men pleaded guilty this month: Anderson, 55, admitted to charges of conspiracy to distribute cocaine, and Washington, 25, admitted to using a telephone in the cause of a drug-distribution crime, according to Assistant U.S. Attorneys David Rivera and Gabriel Banks.

They are scheduled to be sentenced early next year by U.S. District Judge Todd J. Campbell. According to the deals they've struck, Anderson expects to get about 15 years in prison; Washington anticipates about two.

And the \$36,000 from Washington's trip to the airport? The government has begun the court proceedings to confiscate it all.