



Hundreds of gun sales reported through Operation Wide Receiver

Tucson ATF sting exported weapons

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It was early 2006 when a customer raised the suspicions of a Tucson firearms dealer, Michael Detty, triggering a federal investigation into guns bought here for criminals in Mexico.

Four years and hundreds of sales to gun smugglers later, nine people were charged quietly in Tucson, in May and October 2010. Two have pleaded guilty and two more are scheduled to admit their roles in Tucson's federal court next Wednesday, while the other five cases are pending.

Operation Wide Receiver, which The Associated Press revealed Tuesday, now appears to have been a precursor to the controversial Operation Fast and Furious. In that operation, federal agents in Phoenix allowed thousands of guns to be smuggled into Mexico as they tried to build cases against high-ranking criminals. In the Tucson operation, the guns numbered in the hundreds, but many also slipped into Mexico while agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives watched.

In a twist, the man who was U.S. attorney for Arizona when Operation Wide Receiver started in 2006 is pursuing a lawsuit over Operation Fast and Furious. Paul Charlton represents the parents of U.S. Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry, slain near Rio Rico last year.

In an interview Wednesday, Charlton, who was U.S. attorney from 2001 to January 2007, said he couldn't remember the Tucson operation.

"We had hundreds of operations and hundreds of names," said Charlton, now in private practice and planning to file a claim against the U.S. government for letting the guns loose that may have been used to kill Terry. "I don't think I would ever have approved letting guns walk, and I don't know if that's what's happened."

He added, "If that happened on my watch, then I own it."

Attorney Kurt Altman, who represented defendant Jonathan Horowitz in a Wide Receiver case, is a former federal prosecutor and could see that something "much bigger" was going on than his client's relatively narrow case, he said.

In addition, Altman said, "There was no doubt that guns were going to Mexico."

Horowitz, his client, admitted last year that he bought 100 AR-15 rifle components from Detty's business for a man in Tijuana and that he had smuggled some firearms himself.

A Tucson defense attorney representing another defendant, Ismael Betancourt, who pleaded guilty July 13, said Wednesday that she was puzzled by how the case proceeded.

"I did find it surprising that the investigation began in 2006 and they did nothing about it until four years later," Laura Udall said.

Fellow Tucson defense attorney John D. Kaufmann has argued that the case against his client, Ricardo Mendez Jr., should be dismissed because federal prosecutors waited years after the end of the investigation to pursue an indictment. He also has demanded any material that might show that ATF agents encouraged dealers to make illegal sales.

Udall and Altman noted that suddenly last year, the case was being handled by an attorney at the Justice Department in Washington, D.C., not a federal prosecutor in Arizona, as usual.

The May 2010 indictment says Detty's home-based business, Mad Dawg Global Marketing, sold 126 firearms or gun components to people who exported weapons to Mexico for a man living in Tijuana. It doesn't mention any firearm seizures by U.S. officers. Bear Arms Firearms in Scottsdale also sold 43 firearms to the defendants, the indictment said.

The October 2010 indictment said the defendants bought 269 firearms from Mad Dawg but refers to seizures by law enforcement of 47 of them, leaving 222 that may have crossed the border. The indictment does say firearms bought by defendant Carlos Armando

Celaya "were transported to or near the state of Sonora, Mexico."

In an interview with CBS News broadcast Wednesday, Detty said he signed on as a confidential informant for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in 2006. He said he sold about 450 firearms as part of Operation Wide Receiver but he wouldn't have done that if he'd realized the guns would end up going to criminals in Mexico.

"It really makes me sick," he said.

A man who answered the phone at a number for Mad Dawg Global Marketing declined to comment for the Star on the case.

The House Government Oversight Committee has little information on Operation Wide Receiver, said Becca Watkins, spokeswoman for chairman Darrell Issa, the California congressman who has been pursuing an investigation of Fast and Furious.

"We don't know much about it because the Justice Department has not given us the documents we've asked for," Watkins said. "We'd love to know more about it."

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ATF Supervisors reassigned

Two top supervisors at the headquarters of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives - the deputy director and the assistant director for field operations - were reassigned as the beleaguered agency attempts to remake itself in the fallout from the failed Fast and Furious gun-tracking operation.

William J. Hoover, the No. 2 man at ATF, will become special agent-in-charge of the agency's Washington, D.C., field office. Mark Chait, who ran all of the field investigations around the country, will head the Baltimore field office. As deputy director, Hoover had broad supervision over Fast and Furious and was given routine updates on the "gun walking" operation. As time went on, ATF emails indicate, he grew concerned over the number of firearms reaching Mexico without any U.S. indictments on this side of the border.

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