

## \$255m ice seizure: Three Australians charged planned to fly planeload of drugs across Pacific

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**THREE Australian men face the prospect of life in prison if convicted over an alleged \$255 million drug scheme using a small plane to take a bumper payload of the killer drug ice 13,000km from California to Melbourne.**

Sydney man Jim Soukoulis is allegedly at the centre of the foiled plan to buy a light aircraft in the US and strip the seats out of it before it was to be flown solo by a 72-year-old pilot halfway around the world stuffed with more than 250kg of ice.

A tip-off in January this year led to a six-month joint investigation by the Australian Federal Police and the United States Drug Enforcement Agency, which resulted in the arrests of the Australian trio and the seizure of the plane, 255kg of crystal methamphetamine and more than \$2 million in cash.



Picture: AFP

It is alleged Hugh Gorman, a qualified pilot, was to pose as a holiday-maker and “island hop” 13,000km across the Pacific Ocean.

Mr Soukoulis, 52, from Zetland, appeared in Central Local Court yesterday charged with money laundering and was extradited to Victoria to appear in a Melbourne court today.

Police will allege the “ice” seized in California was destined for Australian addicts, with an estimated street value of about \$255 million.

Mr Soukoulis was arrested last Friday at Sydney International Airport and charged in relation to the seizure of \$2.4 million cash in Mildura hidden in a prime mover driven by a drug addict truck driver in April this year.

He was granted strict bail but was rearrested yesterday.

**It follows the arrest earlier this month of Hugh Gorman, 72, at Melbourne Airport with police alleging he was planning to travel to America.**



The plane's seats would have needed removal to fit the drugs in for the long flight



Mr Soukoulis has also been charged with money laundering in connection to the plane. Picture: AFP

The last of the trio, 58-year-old Melbourne accountant Peter Caluzzi was arrested yesterday at his Sunshine firm PC Accounting Services.

Witnesses reported seeing plain-clothed police leading the man away.

It is alleged Mr Gorman, a qualified pilot, was to pose as a holiday-maker and "island hop" 13,000km across the Pacific Ocean in the six-seater plane from California to a rural Victorian airport.

"Now I'm not a good flyer at the best of times but that's certainly not a plane I would have liked to have been on," AFP Superintendent Krissy Barrett said.

"We'll allege that there was a sophisticated concealment plan for the drugs ... that would have involved the removal of the passenger seats.



The 255kg drug haul on display at the DEA office in Santa Rosa. Picture: AFP

“We think that the drugs were destined to be distributed along the east coast of Australia.”

Who was to collect the drugs when they touched down in Australia is still under investigation.

All three have been charged with conspiracy to import a commercial quantity of border controlled drugs, namely methamphetamine, and money laundering offences, regarding the purchase of the aircraft.

Mr Soukoulis has also been charged with a second count of money laundering in connection to the Mildura cash seizure.

The joint investigation began after the DEA received intelligence in January relating to a conspiracy to export drugs to Australia.

On June 15, agents from the DEA Santa Rosa Resident Office conducted a search warrant on a storage facility in northern California.



AFP officers investigate the case in conjunction with American counterparts.

About 255kg of a white crystalline substance was found and tested positive for methamphetamine. The substance was seized, and investigations continued in Australia to locate the intended destination for the drugs.

Supt Barrett said the close working relationship with the DEA was vital in the disruption of this illicit drug trade.

“Crystal methamphetamine is a serious threat to the Australian community, and the AFP is focused on continuing to work closely with both national and international partners to stop this drug making its way to the community,” she said.

DEA Resident in Charge at the Sydney Office, Eric W. Baldus, also said the US Drug Enforcement Administration’s strong partnerships with the AFP were vital to unified efforts to fight the world’s most dangerous and prolific narcotics traffickers.

“These arrests, in conjunction with the seizure of a significant amount of crystal methamphetamine in Santa Rosa, CA, are representative of the strength and effectiveness of our combined global policing strategies,” he said.

Investigations are continuing

Extracted from:

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