



U.S. salvage crew jailed in Honduras for carrying guns

Oct 3, 2014 03:59 PM

B Y R I C H M I L L E R



Capt. Robert Mayne is welcomed home in Florida after spending 53 days in jail.
Tampa Bay Times/Douglas R. Clifford

“Everything seemed normal.”

That’s what Capt. Robert Mayne thought as he retired to his bunk on the night of May 5, awaiting a visit the next morning from the port captain of Puerto Lempira, Honduras. Then a navy launch pulled alongside Mayne’s salvage boat, the 65-foot *Aqua Quest*, leading to a raid and what he called “cold-blooded” extortion on gun-smuggling charges.

Mayne, who said he had firearms on board to defend against pirates, refused to pay the local authorities. As a result, he and his five-man crew spent the next 53 days in jail, their release secured only after pressure from U.S. congressmen and a ruling by a Honduran appeals court.

“We never violated any law and they knew damn well we never violated any law,” said Mayne, president of Florida-based Aqua Quest International. “That’s a port city. There’s a procedure and protocol to handle firearms. We did everything by protocol.”

Mayne and his crew had traveled to Honduras to salvage mahogany logs from the bed of the Patuca River. The project, in partnership with the municipality of Ahuas, designated that 30 percent of the profits go to the region’s impoverished Miskito Indians. Mayne said he had notified town officials a month earlier that the crew would have firearms for personal protection.

As *Aqua Quest* approached Puerto Lempira on May 5, a Honduran navy vessel signaled Mayne by firing a shot in the air. He turned the boat and docked at the nearby naval base at Caratasca, where the crew was asked for vessel documentation and passports. They were also asked if they had any firearms on board.

Mayne said the boat was carrying five guns in a secure locker: two pistols (a .45-caliber Glock and a 9 mm), two 12-gauge pump shotguns and a Century semiautomatic rifle that resembles an AK-47.

“We took them out of the locker and showed them the arms,” he said. “They took a picture of the guns, told us we could put them back in the locker and sent us on our way.”

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Mayne proceeded to Puerto Lempira by skiff and met the port captain, but it was too late in the day for him to come out and officially clear *Aqua Quest* for entry. Under maritime law, Mayne said it was up to the port captain to decide whether the weapons should be handed over to him for safekeeping or remain locked on the boat.

After checking in with immigration and customs officials, Mayne returned to *Aqua Quest* — anchored 100 yards from the naval base — and awaited a visit at 0600 the next morning.



The crew of the salvage vessel *Aqua Quest* was arrested in Honduras for carrying firearms on board.
Courtesy Aqua Quest International

Mayne ate dinner and went to bed early. At about 2130, personnel aboard a Honduran navy launch pulled up to *Aqua Quest* and demanded that the crew raise anchor and come into the dock.

“The Honduran navy commander at the base came on board and said apologetically in English, ‘the (expletive) has hit the fan,’” Mayne said.

“Two detectives from the local

prosecutor’s office arrived 30 minutes later and said they were going to arrest us.”

Mayne said he was then informed by the two men that “maybe we can make your problem go away” if the crew paid the prosecutor’s office \$17,500.

“I was infuriated,” he said. “We were solicited by that municipality (Ahuas) to come down and help and I flat out refused to pay.”

The crew was taken into custody and held in a Puerto Lempira jail for nearly eight weeks. There was no air conditioning or running water. The men were given meager meals of rice and beans and were locked in their cells for 13 hours each night. The mosquitoes and tropical heat were relentless.

Mayne said pressure from the U.S. State Department and several lawmakers — notably U.S. Rep. Mike Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Fla., Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Vice President Joe Biden — led to the crew’s release on June 26. The case had been moved to an appeals court in Le Ceiba, which ruled unanimously that they had violated no law and that their detention was illegal. They had faced up to 10 years in prison.

“It was a 100 percent vindication for us,” Mayne said. “We took a hard hit financially, but we haven’t given up on the project. I’m petitioning the upper levels of (Honduran) government to give us a 15-year concession on doing this work down there. I don’t need a public apology, but I want assurances that we’re not going to have this kind of problem in the future.”

Attempts to contact the prosecutor’s office in Puerto Lempira for comment about the case were unsuccessful.

The crew of *Aqua Quest* received an emotional welcome from family and friends upon returning home to Tarpon Springs, Fla., on July 2. On the voyage back, they disposed of their weapons at sea in case they had been harbingers of bad luck.

Orlando Wilson, chief operations and tactical consultant for Risks Inc., a Florida-based company that provides security services throughout the world, said the crew may have run into trouble because one of the weapons on board resembled an AK-47. “Assault” rifles capable of fully automatic fire are illegal in Honduras, including all versions of the AK-47.

“I tell people to try not to have military-type weapons,” Wilson said. “An AK-47/AR-15 looks aggressive, where a sporting pump-action shotgun has less of an aggressive

visual impact and can be just as if not more effective at close quarters.”

Wilson said corruption is rife in Third World countries and mariners need to prepare and guard against it.

“Basic rule: Expect cops to be corrupt and be prepared to pay bribes,” he said. “I know of one vessel that went into the Dominican Republic. They declared their weapons and had to check them in, then buy them back when they were leaving the port. If a vessel is being searched by police, coast guard or customs, etc., always make sure they are accompanied and not left alone so they cannot plant anything.”

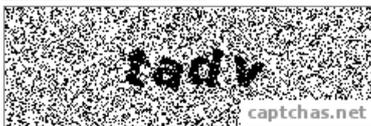
Mayne said he has traveled to ports throughout the Caribbean with weapons on board and never had a problem until *Aqua Quest*’s trip to Puerto Lempira.

“What we’re told from people down there is this only could have happened in Puerto Lempira,” he said. “It is the backwater of Honduras. You can’t get there by road — it’s either by boat or by airplane. Very remote and a very wild, wild West type of place. They just thought that we were some gringos who they were going to squeeze money out of.”

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