



2014-09-16 | The Picuda: A Wave-Breaking Go-Fast Wonder that Defies Radar Detection



On Sept. 18, a maritime patrol aircraft detected a 40-foot go-fast vessel in the Caribbean Sea. Drug Enforcement Agency and Royal Bahamas Police Force surface assets responded to the location of the go-fast vessel and detained two suspects after locating 40 bales of marijuana. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)

Brenda Fiegel, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth

The ocean remains a popular transit route for traffickers because it lacks the sensors, manpower, and cameras that authorities are able to concentrate on land. Furthermore, maritime drug shipments can be thrown overboard and/or dropped or buried on a beach or island for later pick-up in case a vessel is about to be boarded.

These are just some of the reasons drug-trafficking organizations, especially those based out of Colombia, have continued their modernization of maritime transport vessels and are now building a new go-fast boat, the "Picuda." The use of go-fast boats to

transport drugs is not a new modus operandi for drug-trafficking organizations, but the creation of this new and enhanced prototype to transport drugs is.

The Picuda vs. the Traditional Go Fast-Boat

Colombian traffickers are known to refurbish Eduardoño type offshore fishing boats into go-fast boats, but when these traditionally refurbished vessels are compared to the Picuda, the latter comes out on top for many reasons. First, the Picuda is constructed completely out of fiberglass, whereas only the hulls of traditional go-fast boats are made of this material.

The use of fiberglass is important for several reasons, but mainly because it is difficult for radars to detect. Second, the Picuda is lighter, faster, and more spacious than the typical refurbished go-fast boat. For example, when comparing the time it takes for a refurbished go-fast and a Picuda to make the same trip, the Picuda is two times faster, meaning it can complete a one-hour go-fast boat trip in 30 minutes.

In terms of longer trips, the Picuda is able to travel to Jamaica from Costa Rica in two days; this same trip would take a comparable refurbished go-fast boat three days. Third, the Picuda consumes less gas. This is of obvious importance because less gas

consumption means that fewer gas cans are necessary. The end result: more drugs can be loaded onto a boat. Fourth, the Picuda's back end is square shaped. This is significant because it provides additional stability in choppy waters.

Finally, the proa of the Picuda is thinner than that of commonly used go-fast boats used to transport drugs. This modification allows the Picuda to travel at faster speeds and to cut through water with added precision. For this reason, the Picuda has been nicknamed the "Wave Breaker."

As for size, Picudas measure 32-38 feet and are generally equipped with (3) 200 horsepower motors. A comparable fishing boat generally measures 22-32 feet and, depending on the model, may be equipped with single 50 horsepower motors or multiple motors of varying horsepower.

Load Capacity: The Picudas vs. Refurbished Go-Fast Transport Drugs

Picudas are capable of carrying up to one metric ton of drugs. Some are also equipped with double-bottomed storage areas which are used to transport additional cocaine or marijuana in gunny sacks. Select offshore refurbished fishing boats also have high load capacities and are able to carry shipments ranging between 3,000 and 5,000 pounds.

The Arrival of the Picuda in Costa Rica

Within Costa Rican waters Picuda boats have been detected in Cahuita, Jalova, Parismina, Westfalia and Puerto Viejo. During 2013 alone, Costa Rican authorities seized seven Picudas. As for trajectory, Picudas generally depart from Turbo, Colombia, in the evening or early morning hours and travel to Jamaica, Honduras, and Costa Rica.

They are painted blue, gray or green and are manned by three-person teams. Additional crew members represent smaller earnings, and for that reason it is rare for there to be more than three crew members. Crew members on shipments arriving in Costa Rica are generally from South America, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Central American crew members are generally responsible for logistics and distribution of the shipment.

Detecting fast-boats remains a challenging task for authorities, and modifications such as the ones made to the Picuda will continue to present interdiction challenges. As long as drug cartels continue to make astronomical earnings, it is likely their nautical technology will aid them in successfully trafficking drugs through the Caribbean. The monetary gain associated with successfully delivering a drug shipment to its assigned destination also serves as a driving force for boat navigators to take life-threatening risks.

