



Photo by STEVE DAREING

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Cocaine smuggler falls to his death

Parachutist crashes on driveway

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — A heavily armed parachutist, wearing a bullet-proof vest and carrying \$14 million worth of cocaine, fell to his death in a residential driveway Wednesday when his chute failed, police said.

"I got up to shave and looked out my window and saw him," said Fred Myers, 85, who discovered the body Wednesday morning. "It looks like he jumped out with too heavy a load."

The victim was identified as Andrew Carter Thornton II, of Paris, Ky. Police had no further information about the man, who carried 35 kilograms of cocaine in an Army duffel bag, as well as two automatic weapons, several knives and rope, and was wearing night-vision goggles.

Knox County Medical Examiner Randall Pedigo said the parachutist appeared to have been dead for eight hours when the body was found at 8:45 a.m.

"He had bags attached everywhere," said Ralph Johnson, 63, a neighbor of Myers who notified authorities.

"There was a trickle of blood from his nose that had dried on each cheek," Johnson said. "Other than that he looked OK. He was lying on his back with his knapsack half under him."

Metro Narcotics Squad Lt. Jerry Day said the man was "aiming for this area and there was probably someone supposed to meet him."

Detective Charles Coleman said the death appeared to be an accident.

"He had several IDs on him, all

different," Coleman said. "We're checking to see which one is his."

The victim's main parachute apparently failed to open and the reserve chute had been deployed, Coleman said.

Tony Acri, assistant special agent in the Atlanta office of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, said the mountain passes and clandestine airstrips in Appalachia provide good cover for smugglers hoping to beat a DEA crackdown on drug peddlers in Miami and other ports.

Acri's office, which oversees activity in Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, said cocaine is "smuggled into the (Appalachian) area and picked up by Colombians and other groups, and distributed from there. It's a big problem."

He said the area's access to interstate highways appeals to smugglers looking for quick getaway and distribution routes.

He said each kilogram of cocaine is worth about \$40,000 wholesale, and 10 times that much on the street.

"It was just a matter of time until we had something like this," Day said.

The nearest airport is Downtown Island Airport, about three-quarters of a mile away, but a spokesman there said he already told police no planes landed overnight.

Parachuting expert Rick Snow of Knoxville, asked by police to help in the investigation, said the dead man appeared to be an expert jumper because the chute was of an expensive make.

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