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ICE ASSISTANT SECRETARY DEDICATES NEW AIR AND MARINE FACILITY AT HAMMOND AIRPORT



HAMMOND, LOUISIANA – Michael J. Garcia, the acting Assistant Secretary of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) today hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Hammond Municipal Airport to dedicate the opening of ICE’s newest Air and Marine Operations facility and to award commendation letters to five local ICE employees.

“I’m proud to announce the formal opening this state-of-the-art facility. This new structure provides the space and facilities that will enable the men and women of this branch to perform their critically

important missions more effectively and efficiently – all to the benefit of the American public,” said ICE acting Assistant Secretary Garcia.

The New Orleans Air and Marine Operations (AMO) branch began as a small unit in 1974, located at the Naval Air Station in Belle Chasse, Louisiana. Created initially to combat drug smugglers at sea and in the air, the New Orleans AMO branch saw its mission expand over the years. Today, the branch plays an important role in a variety of Homeland Security initiatives, including participation in airspace security, counter-drug missions, port patrols, and support to other law enforcement agencies.

Charles Stallworth III, Director of Air and Marine Operations for ICE, said that the branch’s mission has expanded even further since inclusion in the Department of Homeland Security. "During Operation Liberty Shield, this branch deployed a light enforcement helicopter and crew to New York State to aid in the investigation of suspected terrorists," said Stallworth. "In support of Operation Port Security, vessels and crews routinely conduct patrols along the Gulf Coast near tourist and harbor areas to promote homeland security initiatives and augment the U.S. Coast Guard when high value vessels are most at risk."

The New Orleans AMO branch and its subordinate offices currently have a 10-state area of responsibility that extends from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border. The branch boasts a fleet of sophisticated aircraft and vessels. These include Cessna Citation (C-550) aircraft, Beechcraft Kingair (C12C) aircraft, Cessna 210 (C-120) aircraft, Astar (AS350) helicopters, and several vessels.

During today's ceremony, acting Assistant Secretary Garcia awarded commendation letters to five employees of the New Orleans AMO branch, who in August 2003 helped rescue the crew of a sinking vessel as well as a Coast Guard diver in the Gulf of Mexico. The employees, Scott Fenner, David Grantham, Michael Gray, Richard Ryen and Michael Spearman, were praised by acting Assistant Secretary Garcia for going above and beyond the call of duty to rescue these individuals in rough seas and adverse weather conditions.

"The courage, expertise and professionalism displayed by these employees during the rescue operation are a credit to ICE and the Department of Homeland Security," said acting Assistant Secretary Garcia.

Since its inception, the New Orleans AMO branch has continually been involved in important operations. Recent activities include:

- On October 18, 2003, the New Orleans AMO branch responded to a request for assistance from the Livingston Parish Sheriff's Office, which was attempting to locate two escaped prisoners. A helicopter from the AMO branch assisted in the apprehension of both escapees.
- In early October 2003, ICE agents in Texas arrested a violator with 110 pounds of marijuana. A follow-up investigation resulted in the surveillance of another group of suspects in Mississippi. The New Orleans AMO branch, using both helicopters and fixed wing aircraft, provided aerial surveillance of the suspects over a three-day period resulting in the arrest of two violators and the seizure of \$38,580 cash.
- In mid-September, 2003, the New Orleans AMO branch located a vessel in the Gulf of Mexico that was believed to be carrying a cocaine-laden cargo container to New Orleans from Colombia. As the ship approached land, it was watched to ensure an early offload was not attempted prior to docking. Eventually, ICE agents discovered and seized 579 pounds of cocaine located inside the container aboard the vessel.
- On August 23, 2003, a sub-office of the New Orleans AMO branch assisted in an investigation involving the smuggling and transporting of marijuana and cocaine. This case culminated in the seizure of \$2,127,231.
- In August 2003, five employees of the New Orleans AMO branch were involved in rescuing the crew of a sinking vessel and a Coast Guard diver during a storm in the Gulf of Mexico.
- In November 2002, the New Orleans AMO branch assisted in the search for three missing children in Alabama. The missing children were eventually found.

Construction on the new facility began in May 2001. The facility was completed in September 2003.

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