

# Pilot of pot plane pleads guilty to drug charge; may get 3 years

By HEATHER CHAPIN-FOWLER

**NORWALK** — The pilot who jettisoned about 20 pounds of marijuana from his plane near the Willard area earlier this year pleaded guilty yesterday to drug charges.

Ryan Carter Thomas, 48, of Albuquerque, N. M., owner of the 1963 Mooney fixed wing single-engine plane and his passenger, Greg Baca, also of New Mexico, were arrested on June 17 after the plane landed at the Huron County Airport, in Norwalk Township off US 20.

Thomas pleaded guilty to possession of marijuana and will likely receive a three-year prison sentence, Huron County Prosecutor Russ Leffler said.

Both the state and the defense attorney agreed on the length of the prison term, Leffler said.

"We're glad to have one of them down," Leffler said of yesterday's plea hearing.

Baca is set to go on trial Thursday, Leffler said.

"(Baca) denies he knew anything, so we're going to trial. It will be fun," Leffler said.

The plane is valued at approximately \$35,000 and was confiscated. The proceeds from the sale will be used for law enforcement by the Huron County Sheriff's Office unless the federal officials who helped in the case obtain it, Leffler and Sheriff Dane Howard said.

Investigators from the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Border Patrol and Homeland Security offices assisted in the investigation, according to officials.

Border Patrol agents were on another aircraft that following the plane on June 17 and saw a black duffel bag being tossed off the plane, according to the sheriff's office. Deputies and Willard police officers found the bag that was filled with approximately 20 pounds of marijuana "tightly compressed" in five bricks, officials have said.

Baca admitted to pitching the bag out of the plane, according to a search warrant drafted by Capt. Robert McLaughlin that was filed in Norwalk Municipal Court during the investigation.

Baca also reportedly told investigators Thomas told him to get rid of the bag, the search warrant stated.

During a search of the plane on June 18, a Toshiba laptop computer, Olympus camera and a Garmin GPS electronic mapping system were confiscated as well as the plane and pot, the search warrant stated.

Investigators know the plane was heading to the Cleveland area but don't know exactly where, officials have said.

Originally published in the Morning Journal on September 5, 2009.