

Coast Guard Launches Massive Search for Missing Crew Members, Murder Charges Follow

Story by PA1 Jennifer Johnson, District Seven Public Affairs

MIAMI – It was supposed to be a quick trip, less than 24 hours for the charter boat crew to drop two men off in Bimini, Bahamas, and return to Miami the following afternoon. A massive five-day search, covering 14,850 square miles would ensue, only to discover an abandoned vessel, two survivors in a life raft, four 9 mm shell casings and eventually two murder suspects.

On Sept. 22, Jake Branam, the captain of the 47-foot fishing vessel, *Joe Cool*, his wife Kelly Branam, his half-brother Scott Gamble, and friend Samuel Kairy set off on a charter trip taking Kirby Archer and Guillermo Zarabozo to the Big Game Resort on Bimini to meet their girlfriends. Little did Branam and his crew know, it would be the last time friends and family would see them alive.

About 4 p.m. on Sept. 23 Jake's uncle, Jeff Branam, contacted search and rescue coordinators at Sector Miami to report his family and the *Joe Cool* had yet to return from their charter. He stated there were four crewmembers and two customers on board who



MIAMI – Guillermo Zarabozo and Kirby Archer were transferred by Coast Guard Cutter Pea Island crewmembers to FBI officials, Monday, Sept. 25, 2007 at Coast Guard Sector Miami. Zarabozo and Archer have been charged with first-degree murder of the four crewmembers of the fishing vessel *Joe Cool*. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Barry Bena.

paid \$4,000 to be taken to Bimini. After dropping the two men off at their desired location the crewmembers were expected to return to Miami no later than noon on Sept. 23.

“Initially we had our stations contact local marinas to determine if anyone had information about the whereabouts of the vessel,” said Petty Officer 2nd Class Danny Knapp, an operations controller at Sector Miami. “I contacted U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials in the Bahamas to see if the vessel had checked in or not, but they didn’t. From there I started plotting drift models and by that time one of our cutters had already located the vessel with no one on board.”

The Cutter *Pea Island*, a 110-foot patrol boat based in St. Petersburg, Fla., was on patrol in the Straits of Florida when they came across the *Joe Cool*, nearly 160-miles south of its intended destination about 6 p.m. Sept. 23. Crews went aboard the vessel to determine if anyone was there but discovered the vessel had been abandoned.

Coast Guard crews continued to search throughout the night for the six missing people. The Cutter *Confidence*, a 210-foot medium endurance cutter from Cape Canaveral, Fla., was also diverted from its patrol to assist with the search.

On Sept. 24, an HH-65 Dolphin helicopter crew, from Air Station Miami and embarked with the Cutter *Confidence*, set out on its first search. About 9:45 a.m. the aircrew discovered a life raft with two people inside in the same vicinity as where the *Joe Cool* was found the evening before. The two people were hoisted from the life raft by the helicopter crew and taken aboard the *Confidence*.

After initial questioning, the *Confidence* crew discovered the two men inside the life raft were Guillermo Zarabozo, a 19-year-old from Hialeah, Fla., and Kirby Archer a 35-year-old from Strawberry, Ark. The helicopter crew had located the *Joe Cool*'s two paying customers but the four crewmembers were still missing.

Once this information was discovered, Richard Blais, a special agent with Coast Guard Investigative Services, and FBI officials, were flown to the *Confidence* to conduct additional questioning. Zarabozo was later charged for making a false statement to a federal agent. Archer was charged with unlawful flight to avoid prosecution for an outstanding, arrest warrant stemming from a \$92,000 theft charge from a Wal-Mart store in Arkansas where he was an assistant manager.

Over the course of the next five days the Cutter *Cormorant*, the 210-foot Cutter *Confidence* and its deployed HH-65 Dolphin helicopter, the Cutter *Pea Island*, the 210-foot Cutter *Reliance*, an HU-25 Falcon jet from Air Station Miami, a C-130 Hercules airplane from Air Station Clearwater deployed in support of Operations Bahamas Turks and Caicos (OPBAT), a Coast Guard Auxiliary aircraft, a Good Samaritan aircraft, a C-130 Hercules aircraft from Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., and a Navy P-3 from Naval Air Station Mayport, Fla., searched for the four *Joe Cool* crewmembers. Together they covered more than 14,500 square miles between Daytona Beach, Fla., and Cay Sal Bank, Bahamas, before officials suspended the search Sept. 27.



MIAMI – The fishing vessel, *Joe Cool*, remains at Coast Guard Sector Miami after its captain and crew went missing Sunday, Sept. 24, 2007. The Coast Guard located the two paying passengers, Guillermo Zarabozo and Kirby Archer, floating in a life raft Monday, Sept. 25, 2007, but the four missing crewmembers have yet to be found. Coast Guard photograph by PA1 Jennifer Johnson.

“The size of the area and the time span made for a very large search area right from the start,” said Nancy Nelsen, a District Seven search and rescue specialist. “This was a large area that also crossed the Gulf Stream and that particular column of water moves at a very fast rate and further expanded the search area up to the north.”

Zarabozo, Archer, the *Joe Cool*, its four missing crewmembers and the mystery at sea remained in the daily news rotation around the country for the next two weeks. Reports about pirates and what really happened aboard the *Joe Cool* were widespread until results of the initial investigation were released by the FBI.

On Oct. 10, prosecutors from the Southern District of Florida ended everyone’s curiosity and charged Zarabozo and Archer with four counts each of first-degree murder in international waters.

“The forensic, historical, and circumstantial evidence of premeditated murder compels us to bring this prosecution,” said United States Attorney Alex Acosta. “Although no legal proceeding can restore the lives that were tragically lost at sea, we hope that this prosecution brings some level of comfort to the families of those innocent victims.”

In the official court document, officials reported the two men made numerous inconsistent statements to federal agents investigating the case. For example, neither of the men could agree on what happened aboard the *Joe Cool*, how or when they met each other, nor provide any information regarding the girlfriends they intended to meet in Bimini.

Lastly, both men claimed all four victims were shot outside the vessel’s cabin but a search of the *Joe Cool*, however, revealed four spent shell casing for 9 mm bullets, three of which were found inside the vessel’s cabin.

Today, Guillermo Zarabozo and Kirby Archer remain in federal custody and are awaiting trial. Jake Branam, Kelly Branam, Scott Gamble and Samuel Kairy have yet to be found.

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