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MULTI-STATE LUXURY AUTO THEFT RING SMASHED

*Eight Individuals Charged In Connection With Theft of \$500,000 Worth of Vehicles;
Alleged Ringleader Is U.S. Army Special Forces Sergeant Stationed In Fort Bragg;
Car Titles Allegedly Washed Clean in the Carolinas and Georgia*

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown, joined by New York State Police Superintendent Wayne E. Bennett, announced today that an auto theft ring that operated up and down the eastern seaboard and specialized in stealing high-end luxury automobiles – including Mercedes, BMWs and Jaguars – has been shut down.

In a series of early morning raids today that capped a yearlong investigation, six individuals – including two Queens car dealership employees – have been arrested. A seventh defendant is presently being sought and an eighth defendant and the group's alleged ringleader – a U.S. Army Special Forces Sergeant presently stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina – is expected to return shortly to New York to answer charges in state court.

District Attorney Brown said, "A sweeping one-year investigation dubbed 'Operation Car Wash,' that utilized both court-authorized wiretaps and surveillance, has slammed the brakes on a sophisticated auto theft ring centered in Queens County that allegedly stole nearly a dozen cars, valued at more than \$500,000, from public streets or directly from car dealership lots through the use of insiders – dealership employees. Once an automobile was stolen, the defendants allegedly would 'wash' the car titles clean by using the CARFAX website to check the history of a vehicle identification number (VIN) of a similar make and model that had been salvaged. They would then allegedly use this information to put a new VIN plate on the stolen car's dashboard and get a title made up to match the fake VIN before the car was re-registered in the Carolinas and Georgia – states that could not "read" the information bar code on the New York titles. If they could, they would have easily discovered the altered information. The vehicles were then sold to unwitting buyers in New York City and North Carolina – including military personnel."

Police Superintendent Bennett said, "Once again, law enforcement's collaborative interstate efforts have matched these thieves' sophisticated efforts and have brought them to justice."

District Attorney Brown said that the investigation leading to today's arrests began in July 2005 when investigators assigned to the New York State Police's Auto Theft Unit developed information about an alleged vehicle theft ring operating in Queens County and the Carolinas and began a joint investigation with the District Attorney's Organized Crime and Rackets Bureau.

The defendants, who will be arraigned later today in Queens County Supreme Court in Kew Gardens, are variously charged in ten separate indictments with Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the Third and Fourth Degrees, Illegal Possession of a Vehicle Identification Number Plate and Conspiracy in the Fifth Degree. If convicted, the defendants each face up to seven years in prison.

According to the District Attorney, the defendants are identified as:

- Alleged ringleaders U.S. Army Special Forces Sergeant ROBINSON PANIAGUA, 25, of 57-20 Pratt Street in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and his brother, LEWIS PANIAGUA, 23, of 35-34 101st Street in Corona – the alleged owner of Rapan Auto, an auto body shop located at 33-33 103rd Street, also in Corona, which is one of numerous garages where stolen vehicles were allegedly stored;

- MARCOS SONG (a/k/a. Chino), 27, of 85-03 Jamaica Avenue in Woodhaven, is a salesman at Major Auto World, a car dealership located at 43rd Street and Northern Boulevard in Long Island City, where four vehicles were reported stolen;

- CARLOS PAYAMPS, 26, of 37-28 101st Street in Corona, is a salesman at BMW of Bayside, a car dealership, located at 21707 Northern Boulevard in Bayside, where two vehicles were reported stolen;

- ELVIS ESPINAL, 34, of 778 Dumont Avenue in Brooklyn, the owner of Platino Auto, an auto body shop located at 87-11 and 87-13 Atlantic Avenue in Woodhaven, where stolen vehicles were allegedly observed driving in and out of the location (Espinal is presently being sought);

- FELIX RODRIGUEZ (a/k/a Gato), 28, of 31-28 104th Street in East Elmhurst, and JUAN GARCIA (a/k/a Lazlo, Pete and Epedido), 37, of 835 Blake Avenue in Brooklyn, who were known as the “paper guys” who allegedly altered VINS and forged fake titles and VINS; and

- KEVIN URENA, 34, of 103-11 Altsyne Avenue in Corona, who was allegedly the “broker” in the sale of a stolen vehicle.

According to the indictments filed in Queens Supreme Court, vehicles which had been reported stolen from two Queens car dealerships – Major Auto World and Luxury Cars of Bayside (also known as BMW of Bayside) – and residents of Manhattan, Queens and Long Island were observed in possession of one or more of the defendants between June 1, 2005 and April 2, 2006.

The indictments further charge that the Paniagua brothers would register on the CARFAX website to check the history of vehicle identification numbers of makes and models similar to the stolen vehicles. By entering a vehicle’s VIN number, consumers can search CARFAX’s nationwide database to obtain a detailed vehicle history, including accidents, title and registration. One or more of the defendants would then allegedly use the information obtain on CARFAX to create forged titles – sometimes replacing the VIN with new plates and VIN stickers – and thereby disguising the true titled owner of the stolen vehicles. The vehicles were then driven to the Carolinas and Georgia, where they were registered using the forged VINS and given clean titles. The vehicles were then sold either there or back in New York.

Among the vehicles allegedly stolen were a 2002 Jaguar, two 2002 Ford Explorers and a 2003 Ford Explorer Eddie Bauer edition from Major Auto World and a 2001 and 2003 BMW X5 from Luxury Cars of Bayside. Other vehicles allegedly stolen included a 2001 S500 Mercedes from within the 111th Precinct in Bayside; a 2003 BMW X5 from within the 109th Precinct in Flushing; a 2003 BMW X5 from within the 10th Precinct in Manhattan; and a 2002 S500 Mercedes from a resident of Nassau County.

The investigation was conducted by Investigators Elias Chacon, Robert Holman and Rodney Polite of the New York State Police Auto Theft Unit under the supervision of Senior Investigators Mark Yanitelli and Peter Kontos, Lieutenant George Nohai and Major Frank Koehler, as well as members of the UNYRIC Unit of the New York State Police, and the overall supervision of Superintendent Wayne E. Bennett.

Also assisting in the investigation were William Brown of the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles and Tim Hickman of the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles.

The cases are being prosecuted by Assistant District Attorneys Peri Alyse Kadanoff, Deputy Bureau Chief, and Dana L. Brubaker of the District Attorney’s Organized Crime and Rackets Bureau under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Gerard A. Brave, Bureau Chief, and Marc P. Resnick, Deputy Bureau Chief, and the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Peter A. Crusco and Deputy Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Linda M. Cantoni.

It should be noted that an indictment is merely an accusation and that defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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