

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Rented Ferrari helps crack smuggling ring

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2012-04-03 12:08:58



A stolen black Ferrari shipped to Asia as "used fitness equipment" led federal agents to crack a suspected smuggling operation thought to be responsible for at least 19 other high-end car thefts.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection tracked down the 20 vehicles, worth an estimated \$1.5 million, in recent weeks as they departed the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. In some cases, container ships that had already left port with stolen vehicles on board were ordered back.

It's not yet clear whether any of the recovered cars came from Orange County. "It could be," Customs spokesman Jaime Ruiz said. "A lot of big dealerships are in Orange County."

The California Highway Patrol is investigating but has not yet made any arrests; Sgt. Michael Stefanoff of the Foreign Export and Recovery Team said there are multiple suspects. Investigators believe a single smuggling ring was behind the car thefts but don't yet know how sophisticated or wide-reaching it was.

Investigators believe the cars were purchased or leased under fake or stolen identities, or purchased on credit by people who planned to quickly spirit them out of the country. They were all bound for Hong Kong or Vietnam, in containers labeled as carrying used fitness equipment, used weighing equipment or used printer cartridges.

A 2010 Ferrari 458 Italia, a sleek black bullet with black leather inside, worth at least \$240,000, provided Customs agents their first clues in mid-February. A high-roller Hollywood rental agency reported that the car's GPS system had shown it parked in the same place for two days.

Eric Blumberg, the owner of the agency, Rent In Style, said a woman had rented the Ferrari for about \$2,000 a day. "To have it not be moving for any period of time does not make sense," he said.

Blumberg said he hired a private investigator, who tracked the car's last location to a shipping yard in Carson. He got the container number and called Customs; the Ferrari, meanwhile, was loaded onto a container ship and sent to Hong Kong.

Customs agents were able to track down the container, which had been labeled as used fitness equipment. They ran information about that shipment through a database and found 10 other containers that had similar phone numbers, addresses or other information listed, Supervising Customs Officer Marlene Figueroa said. Some of the shipments also had similar misspellings on their manifests, she said.

Those containers held the rest of the 20 cars: mostly SUVs with the insignias of BMW, Mercedes Benz and Lexus on their hoods. Many had dealer placards that indicated they came from Los Angeles County, but Ruiz said investigators are still trying to track down some owners.

Agents intercepted some of the shipments before they left port, but had to call back a few other ships that had unwittingly set out with stolen vehicles on board, said Carlos Martel, the area port director for Customs. Four of the stolen cars had already reached Vietnam; investigators put a hold on them and are working with Vietnamese authorities to recover them.

At \$1.5 million, the value of the cars is not far off from the total value of all vehicles that Customs seized at the LA-Long Beach ports last year, \$1.8 million. The cars will be returned to the victims of the thefts – in most cases, financial companies taken for bogus car loans.

Blumberg – whose rental agency loans top-end cars to movie studios and wealthy clients – said he has not yet gotten his Ferrari back. But he said getting it back on U.S. soil "is a start."

"Let me tell you something. It was touch and go," he said. "The situation got a lot more positive for me when they said it's on the ground (in Hong Kong) and we're going to seize it."

Agents did not recover the keys to any of the vehicles, however. The vehicles were moved into a Carson warehouse with the help of a forklift – even that \$240,000 Ferrari.

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