

Smuggling suspect denies wrongdoing in refugee deaths

Man accused in deaths of refugees near Jupiter Island

By Sally Apgar | South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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It was dark when a Bahamian sea captain's speedboat hit the ocean bottom about 15 feet from a desolate, rocky stretch of [Jupiter Island](#) on Dec. 28, 2006. He told his 11 passengers, mostly Jamaican and Bahamian immigrants who were clutching their passports and clothes in plastic grocery bags, that it was time to jump off.

As Rickey "Tricks" Thompson fought to steady his boat against the waves that were running him into the rocks, he heard one passenger, a 64-year-old Jamaican man, struggle in the surf.

In federal court Thursday, Thompson testified the older man could not stand up in the water because he was wearing four layers of clothing under his life jacket.

"The current was sucking him down with that weight," said Thompson, telling the jury that Nigel "Pops" Warren drowned because "he panicked."

In the third week of his murder and drug smuggling trial, Thompson testified for a second day in his own defense. Along with the murder of Warren on the December trip and two other passengers on an Aug. 16, 2006, trip to the same Jupiter Island beach, Thompson is charged with smuggling 14 immigrants and importing cocaine, heroin and marijuana.

If convicted on all counts, he faces life imprisonment and \$37 million in fines.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Adrienne Rabinowitz opened the trial accusing Thompson of preying on immigrants desperate to escape the poverty of Haiti and Jamaica. The prosecution has painted Thompson as a cocaine-snorting smuggler of drugs and immigrants, who forced his passengers off his idling speedboat at gunpoint. The prosecution alleges that Thompson charged \$3,000 a head for passage on the stolen speedboat. Jurors were told it was illegal for Thompson to come to Florida because he was deported after pleading guilty in 2000 to importing 827 pounds of marijuana to Florida.

But the defense portrayed him as a victim who has been "tricked" by bad acquaintances and U.S. drug enforcement agents.

From the stand, Thompson has criticized the U.S. government for inflicting its laws on the citizens of other countries.

Defense attorney David Rowe has presented Thompson as a peaceful, church-going fisherman and family man who does not own any guns. With only an elementary school education, he has built a small commercial fishing business and a four-bedroom house. The defense claims Thompson was out "crawfishing" in August 2006 and not making smuggling runs to Florida.

When the prosecution confronted him with testimony from passengers on the August boat, Thompson repeatedly said, "That's a straight-up lie."

He has also repeatedly looked at government evidence, ranging from a silver gun and kilos of cocaine to police photos of dead bodies, and claimed no knowledge.

On Thursday, he testified extensively about the trip he "captained" on Dec. 28, 2006. He said a local fisherman first approached him about two Jamaican men, but by the time he loaded his speedboat the night of the trip there were 11 people.

"I didn't force nobody onto the boat. They jumped in," Thompson said.

Thompson told the jury he decided to make the nighttime run because "he felt sorry" for the immigrants.

Describing the mood on board that night, Thompson said, "They were happy. This was what they were striving for. Even though, deep down inside, I know, I bending over backward and putting myself out on a limb, I was happy for them. This is what they wanted."

The trial is expected to continue next week.