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HEADLINE: COUPLE WHO DID 'FAVOR' FREED FROM LEGAL TANGLE

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BODY:

Eight months ago, Mario Vega, captain, U.S. Army (Ret.), saw his career and his life heading for the abyss. The slide started in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Northwest Dade, where he delivered \$300,000 in cash to an undercover Customs Service agent.

By June, Vega, 40, had lost his job as a teacher in a Reserve Officer Training Corps program at Jackson High School, his car, his house and his credit.

But now, the government has reassessed Vega's role as an alleged conspirator in a 250-kilogram cocaine case. At the request of prosecutors, U.S. District Judge Shelby Highsmith dismissed the indictment against Vega and his wife, Hilda. "My wife and I have gone through a nightmare," Vega said Tuesday, one day after he was scheduled to stand trial. "You cannot believe the agony we have lived through for eight months." For nearly 20 years, Vega said, he served his country in Korea, Central America and at various bases around the United States. In the 1980s, Vega was posted to the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, where he says he held a "top secret" security clearance.

"As a military officer, I always thought I had the trust of my government," he said. "Then I find myself being accused by my own government."

Whatever trust the government may have had in him evaporated at the sight of Vega delivering a large sum of cash to the undercover agent.

"He delivered \$300,000 to a guy who contacted him by a beeper," said Wilfredo Fernandez, spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami.

Fernandez would not discuss why the charges were dropped. Five others in the case have either pleaded guilty or had the charges against them dismissed.

Miami attorney Walter Reynoso, who defended the Vegas, believes that the more prosecutors looked at the case, "the more they realized the Vegas were not part of any drug conspiracy whatsoever."

Why were the Vegas in a parking lot delivering drug money on a weekend?

In court documents, the government indicated the money exchange in Miami coincided with the delivery of 250 kilos of cocaine in New York. The dope deal, according to court papers, was arranged by agents who were dealing with a ringleader in the Dominican Republic.

Mario Vega says he handled the cash as a favor for a relative who operated a money changing service in New York. The relative was not indicted.

"I was told the money was for people negotiating the purchase of vehicles here in Miami for export to Santo Domingo," he said. "It was an urgent transaction. That's the reason they were doing it on Saturday." But the money, according to Customs agent John Reddin, was a down payment to transport the cocaine. According to Reddin's affidavit, Hilda Vega, identifying herself as "Yolanda," made the initial phone call to undercover agents about the money. She said "Mario" was on his way.

At 2:40 p.m. April 1, Mario took the cash in his burgundy Acura to the Wal-Mart on Northwest 57th Avenue, north of the Palmetto Expressway. He demanded identification before turning over the money.

"I pulled out a receipt for them to sign," Mario Vega said. "There was nothing I was hiding."

After the exchange, agents contacted Vega and told him the count was about \$1,000 short. Vega moved to remedy the shortfall three days later.

"I went ahead and took it out of my credit card," he said. "I took a cash advance and gave them the balance."

"Something that dopers don't do," said Reynoso.

The Vegas were arrested. Both faced a potential 20 years in prison. The Dade School Board fired Mario Vega from his teaching position in June.

Vega hired Reynoso to defend him and his wife, drawing down his Individual Retirement Account to pay legal fees. Reynoso says he hired two mock juries, which concluded that the Vegas were innocent. The defense was also poised to summon high-ranking military men as character witnesses at the trial. They weren't needed.

Now, Vega is moving to reclaim his teaching job. The course of study: leadership education training.

According to Vega, the students learn military history, civics, respect for the flag and "a sense of discipline and organization."

Reynoso likes his client's chances. "We feel confident we'll get it back," he said.

CORRECTION

A story Wednesday on Page 1B about the dismissal of drug conspiracy charges against a Dade couple incorrectly said Miami attorney Walter Reynoso represented both Mario and Hilda Vega. Miami attorney Richard Patino represented Mario Vega, while Reynoso represented Hilda Vega.