NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A Coast Guard cutter chased a boat loaded with an estimated 75 tons of marijuana in the Gulf of Mexico, finally using machine gun blasts to force it to stop, the Coast Guard said.

Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Tom Pearson said 16 persons aboard the boat were arrested and will be charged with smuggling.

Pearson said the cutter Point Spencer spotted the 150-foot Polaris — similar to an offshore oil industry supply boat — 13 miles south of Grand Isle about 8 p.m. yesterday.

He said the Polaris started to flee, and the cutter gave chase, then fired a 50-caliber machine gun across the bow and finally into the vessel itself before forcing it to halt about 4 a.m. today 40 miles south of Grand Isle.

The crew on the Point Spencer made repeated tries by firing across the Polaris’ bow to force the boat to stop, Pearson said.

“When all of these efforts failed,” he said, “the cutter then fired directly into the vessel with a 50-caliber machinegun.

“THIS CAUSED a small fire to erupt on the stern of the vessel when one of the tracer shells from the machinegun ignited a container of lube oil.

“This, plus the knowledge that the Coast Guard really meant business, brought the Polaris to an abrupt halt,” he said.

Pearson said a boarding party that included U.S. Customs officers board the Polaris and found the marijuana below decks, with several valves opened in an attempt to scuttle the vessel.

The boarding party closed the valves and pumped the water out.

Pearson said there were no reports of injuries.

The crew’s quarters are in the bow of the vessel, while the gunfire was aimed at its stern.

Pearson said the street value of 75 tons of marijuana would be about $60 million dollars.

The exact amount on board the Polaris would not be known, he said, until it was unloaded and weighed.