



Immigration Monthly

September 2005

- **Second Issue**
- **Patrolling Chaos: The U.S. Border Patrol In Deep South Texas – A Book Excerpt: by Robert Lee Maril**

Second Issue

ILW.COM is pleased to feature a book excerpt describing the life and work of those who guard our border in our second Immigration Monthly issue. *Patrolling Chaos* is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork of three hundred agents over a two-year period based in the McAllen, TX station. The following excerpt follows several Border Patrol agents, including one nicknamed the Mole, as they go about their regular ten-hour patrols along the border. The Southwestern border accounts for over 97% of all undocumented alien apprehensions and thereby commands the lion's share of CBP resources and manpower (Border Security: The Role of the US Border Patrol, CRS, May 10, 2005). Robert Maril Lee takes readers into the world of US Border Patrol agents and the challenges they face enforcing immigration laws along the border. We hope this excerpt provides a deeper understanding of border enforcement and homeland security in today's post 9/11 world.

Patrolling Chaos: The U.S. Border Patrol In Deep South Texas - A Book Excerpt

by *Robert Lee Maril*

The troopers had established that the Mexicans had entered the United States illegally and were anxious to hand them over to the Border Patrol. But first they wanted the men to identify the body. The Mole asked the troopers what they knew. "We're not sure yet," said one of the officers from beneath the wide brim of his cowboy hat. "We spot the aliens and we tail them. There were three cars. We decide to take the lead car on the theory that that's where the *coyote* is. They see us. Then the driver of the lead vehicle, the Trans-Am, decides to bail out. So he bails and the other passengers are left hanging. We're not sure how many of them there were in the car. They all jump and one of them - doesn't make it. See that gray car over there on the far side of the highway? That woman was driving behind us, and when the passengers bailed, one of them crossed the lane directly in front of her. She never saw him and couldn't have stopped if she had."

The Mole also wanted to see the body. The trooper pointed to the San Manuel fire engine parked on the grassy shoulder with its diesel still rumbling. The agent recrossed the highway carefully, silently circumventing the gray car. In the back seat an elderly woman with gray hair tied in a tight bun sat alone, arms folded tightly across her chest. The windshield of her car bore deep cracks from the impact, but the safety glass had not shattered.

"It's got to be tough on her," said the Mole as he headed toward the fire engine. "She's driving along and before she knows it a body hits her windshield out of nowhere. It's not her fault." Before he reached the fire engine, the EMT from San Manuel cheerfully pointed the Mole to the objects on the highway pavement. Seemingly untouched, a lone tennis shoe lay on the asphalt shoulder of Highway 281 North just outside the painted white line marking the far right lane.

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When the elderly lady in the gray car hit the undocumented worker, he was literally knocked out of one of his shoes. The force of the impact, of the car's metal against human flesh, blew the dental plate out of the victim's mouth before flinging him fifty feet into the tall grass. The dental plate was not more than three feet from the tennis shoe. An upper dental plate, intact and flawless under the moonlight.

While the Mole examined the shoe and the dental plate, the troopers escorted the handcuffed former trunk passengers to the tall grass at the side of the highway, pulled back the space-age silver blanket that covered the body, and insisted that each immigrant identify the corpse. The victim, between forty and fifty years of age, lay on his back, arms and legs askew. Although the body was badly mangled, his dark, wavy hair remained combed and in place. Congealed blood covered the man's chin and neck. His moustache was long and thick, the lower lip thin. Each of the handcuffed men denied knowing the victim as he made the sign of the cross. Charlie, taking custody of the illegal immigrants, marched them back to his transport van, searched them for weapons, then removed their cuffs as he shepherded them into the vehicle. After their confinement in the trunk, even the steel cage was a welcome improvement. The men jumped into the back seat of the Border Patrol van as if they were boarding a train bound for New York City. The first man into the van sat down quickly on the bench seat, tightened and fastened his seat belt, then grinned broadly.

He had good reason to grin. After the driverless car came to a stop a few feet onto the grassy highway median, a quick-thinking trooper had pushed it a few extra, crucial feet from the busy highway. Otherwise the Trans-Am could have been rear-ended by an eighteen-wheeler and the three men still hidden in the trunk killed instantly. Crossing themselves again, the workers from Mexico knew that they were very lucky.

A woman had been riding in the front seat of the red Trans-Am. She wore a fancy, dark-colored dress and four-inch heels. When the driver bailed out and the others followed, she headed for the fence line that bordered the highway. But just one look at the dense brush and cactus convinced her that she was going nowhere in her short dress and shoes. The troopers found her there, staring at the four strands of barbed wire that separated the state highway from an immense cultivated field bordered with thick vegetation, which soon gave way to isolated ranches stretching for nearly seventy miles. The woman refused to talk, refused to tell the troopers how many workers were in the car, which way they were headed, or their names. Not a word. The troopers were beginning to think that they would never know the full story. The victim could not talk, the woman would not talk, and the three men in the trunk had not seen a thing. All the others had disappeared.

The Mole reached for his NVGs in his bag of gear in the back seat of his unit, then admitted, "It's a long shot. But we're going to give it a try." Charlie concurred. "We should do it," he said, psyching himself up for a pointless search. "We should give it an honest shot. We don't know crap about how long a lead they have on us, but we should give it our best."

The new recruit was assigned to keep a watchful eye on the three Mexicans in the transport. The Mole, carefully straddling the top strand of the barbed-wire fence, jumped blindly into the thick shadows and landed with a loud thump. The first thing he bumped into was a head-high prickly pear. "Oh, shit," swore the Mole. "Now I'm really screwed." He flexed his leg in the dark, felt the pain, then gingerly, step by step, made his way through the cactus and mesquite. Although barely a hundred feet from the busy highway, this was a desolate place. The highway noises were blocked and filtered by a corridor of vegetation, a jungle of spikes and thorns that raked human skin raw. The darkened parabolas manufactured by the Mole's flashlight hid rattlesnakes, poisonous spiders, fire ants, and other creatures best left undisturbed.

Slowly, carefully, the Mole and Charlie searched the area. Once through the vegetation line that bordered the fence, they crossed a wide expanse of field freshly plowed and waiting for seed. The field stretched for a mile or more until it reached another tree line in the distance. The Mole and Charlie scanned the field carefully with their NVGs, listened intently for signs of life, then began a systematic sweep for fresh sign. At one point, after twenty-five minutes passed in complete silence, the Mole yelled out to Charlie, "What did you find?" Charlie shouted back from the shadows, "Absolutely nothing."

For a half hour more the two agents searched for the *coyote* and the other passengers of the Trans-Am. Charlie finally found fresh sign, but, after they tracked it for a quarter of a mile northward, it disappeared. It could have been tracks of the driver of the car or sign from other immigrants making their way toward the checkpoint at Falfurrias. Charlie also found a major trail heading due north toward the Falfurrias checkpoint along with several resting spots filled with empty plastic water bottles, sandwich wrappers, and other evidence. The trail, two to three feet wide through the brush and low grasses bordering the fields, had been beaten down by the feet of thousands of illegal aliens. In some ways this trail resembled a smaller version of Cavazos Beach, with washouts protected by stunted trees overrun with faded green garbage bags, jeans, T-shirts, socks, and underwear rotting in air laden with the humidity of the Gulf of Mexico. However, this trail lined with throwaway junk was not on the banks of the Rio Grande but twenty miles north of McAllen.

The Mole, ignoring the pain in his leg, waxed theoretical. "The way I see it," he said, now a

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disembodied voice in this confusing night terrain, "the driver and the woman were going to pose as a married couple at the checkpoint. They'd keep the guys in the trunk but drop the others off south of the checkpoint, then arrange to meet them on the other side. Only they never got that far." The Mole and Charlie kept searching for no other reason than their pride. The *coyote*, undoubtedly a seasoned professional, had most likely used his cell phone to call for a ride as soon as he had abandoned the new illegal immigrants. Even now he could be tossing down a cold beer in a McAllen bar while celebrating his escape from the hands of the DPS and the Border Patrol. He could have been long gone, in fact, even before the ambulance and the fire engine left the station house at San Manuel.

The immigrants who fled—if they were experienced—should have headed north toward Falfurrias. But they may have panicked under the circumstances, might already be lost in the brushlands. They would be fortunate to find water at a stock tank and might eventually make it to Corpus Christi.

By the time the Mole and Charlie returned to their vehicles, the DPS troopers had departed along with the fire truck, the ambulance, the medical examiner in his white pickup truck, and the other law enforcement personnel. The flares had been heaved into the buffalo grass. The troopers took with them the traffic cones, tennis shoe, and dental plate. Neither the next day nor in the following days did local television, radio news, or Valley newspapers mention the bailout or the fatality. From the vantage point of the media, nothing had happened on Highway 281 near the town of San Manuel.

While Charlie and his partner transported the three illegal immigrants to the McAllen Station for processing, the Mole pulled out his faithful Leatherman tool and, after rolling up his pants cuff, inventoried the damage. He used the tool to remove the prickly pear thorns one by one. It took him twenty minutes. "Handy little thing," he said, as he went about his task with workmanlike precision. He knew his knee was going to swell up within a few hours. It always did. The Mole had no hard scientific proof, but he firmly believed that there was a toxin in the thorns of the prickly pear. "Hey, bro," he said, "Remember, I know what I'm talking about. I was a biology major in college."

The Mole limped back to his truck and on a hunch drove to check out the convenience store two miles south of the bailout. A pimply clerk ran out when he noticed the Border Patrol unit by the gas pump.

"I'm real glad you came by," he said holding three crunched Coke cans in his left hand. Two Hispanic males had just come by. One was in a Toyota truck; the other, a blue Tercel. "I didn't like the way they were looking at me. I know what to look for. You work out here long enough, like I have, and you can tell the good

people from the bad.” The store clerk was convinced that the two men meant to rob him as soon as he closed up for the night. “I’m alone out here. My wife is visiting my mother a couple of miles down the road. You mind waiting another thirty minutes until closing time? Just in case they decide to come back?”

The Mole did not mind one bit, but he had to clear it with the supe first. He made the call, received clearance, then sat eating his dinner of a baloney sandwich with mustard. While he chewed, the Mole thought about the cedar fence for his new house. The estimate had come in at just under \$3,000.

The clerk turned off the lights at the convenience store in the middle of nowhere and walked over to thank the Mole. Then he forced a can of Coke on the Mole, who finally took it to avoid hurting his feelings. Half an hour later the Mole was at the scope truck atop the levee east of Peñitas. The diesel hummed loudly as the camera scanned the fields and the brush lines north of the Rio Grande.

Five agents from the midnight shift gathered around the scope truck, each sharing with the others what had transpired since muster at 10 p.m. When it came round to the Mole, he simply said, “I was working a bailout on Highway 281 near San Miguel. One fatality and four apprehensions, including a woman. Charlie and I searched the area for an hour but couldn’t find a thing.” Inspector Gadget then bragged about the nine apps he and his partner, Agent Sandra Aldrete, had tallied near Pepe’s Fiesta Restaurant. Sandra Aldrete accepted the praise from her fellow agents in the form of brief nods of her head. Then it was the next agent’s turn. By chance, three days later, agents nabbed a seventeen-year-old Guate-malan boy as he tried to circumvent the Sarita checkpoint on Highway 177 North—seventy miles as the crow flies from the site of the bailout. The first thing he asked the agents when he was apprehended was, “Was my father hurt when he jumped out of the car?”

And so the whole story finally emerged. When the *coyote* bailed out on State Highway 281 there were, in addition to the three Mexicans in the trunk and the woman sitting in the front passenger seat, four Guatemalans in the back seat. The men included the fifty-year-old father, who was killed; his son, apprehended near Sarita; and two acquaintances from a nearby Guatemalan village. The four Guatemalans had paid another *coyote*, not the driver of the Trans-Am, \$1,500 each for the trip to the United States. But the *coyote* who had profited by a total of \$6,000 had abandoned them on the banks of the Río Bravo. With no money and no food, the Guatemalans spent two hard days in the brush along the river. They did not know how to swim the Río Bravo, which to them seemed as wide as the Mississippi River during flood stage. Finally they met up with a group of fifteen Mexican workers. They followed the more experienced

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immigrants and waded across a narrow bend in the river. While waiting to find a guide who would take them to Houston, the Guatemalans spent another three days on the north side of the river hiding in the brush. They met several *coyotes* but could not afford the \$500 price tag demanded for each of them.

They finally found a *coyote*—the one who drove the red Trans-Am—on their third night in the United States. Without payment up front, he agreed to take them to Houston. He would hide them in a safe house in Houston, he promised them, but then they had to repay him as soon as they found jobs. If they did not repay him his money in a week, \$500 per person, the *coyote* would report them to the INS, which he assured them would deport them back to Guatemala. Half-starved and weary, they accepted the offer.

Two weeks later the Catholic Church in San Manuel published two sentences in their monthly church newsletter about the death of a Guatemalan man in a traffic accident on Highway 281. Prayers were offered in his memory.

The Mole, with still five hours of mids before him, climbed slowly back into his Expedition to consider how he would best spend the remaining time on his shift. Making his decision for him, the dispatcher at the McAllen Station broke the momentary quiet in the Mole's cab. "We have an armed robbery at the convenience store in Peñitas. Hispanic male, dark hair, five six, approximately twenty years old. Suspect entered the store and demanded cash. He is armed with a big rock. Any units in the area?"

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About the Author

Robert Lee Maril is professor and chair of the Department of Sociology, East Carolina University. He is also author of *Waltzing with the Ghost of Tom Joad: Poverty, Myth, and Low-Wage Labor in Oklahoma, Bay Shrimpers of Texas: Rural Fishermen in a Global Economy, The Poorest of Americans: The Mexican Americans of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas*, and other books on poverty and labor. Robert Lee Maril can be reached at marilr@mail.ecu.edu.

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