

The Never-Ending Work Of U.S. Border Patrol In Pajaro Valley

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WATSONVILLE — His face shows no fear; just a sign of resignation. His most dreaded fear has come true. He has been captured by "La migra" — the Border Patrol.

The man's demise came late in the morning in an apple orchard not far from downtown. A momentary letdown — fatal for illegal aliens who must always be ready to run.

He was walking down a path in the orchard, oblivious to the green and white Border Patrol car slowly approaching from behind. His enjoyment of the soft sun is shattered when the car pulled alongside.

The man's startled sideways glance knocks off his hat as he runs into a branch of a tree. Not bothering to pick it up, he's off, sprinting through the trees.

The gas pedal is pushed to the floor and the tires churn in the loose, fertile Pajaro Valley soil — the same soil that draws the illegal alien to the area in the first place.

Other Border Patrol cars enter the field.

Wheeling and skidding their cars through the orchard with the ease of a Thomas Magnum, the agents suddenly

stop, jump out and continue the chase on foot.

A flying tackle brings the man down. That quick, the chase is over. The new prisoner walks calmly, but ever so dejected, back to a waiting van, his head hung low.

Twelve others have already been captured this morning. Not bad for two hours of work, but just a normal day in the hectic routine of the Border Patrol.

The problem with illegal aliens, of course, is not new. The reality, however, never was more apparent than in this Watsonville orchard — so close to home in terms of miles, but so very far away compared to the "9 to 5" lifestyle so many Americans are used to. In truth, it's a different world.

"It's like you and me against the Steelers — run and tackle," surmises Agent Tom Elliott, an eight-year veteran of the patrol.

A former police officer in Chula Vista, the 35-year-old Elliott joined the U.S. Department of Justice team after he became tired of the grind of police work. He readily admits the constant "good guy-bad guy" syndrome of the patrol is sometimes just as disheartening.

"Especially when you consider that it

seems to take only around four days for the same illegals to be back working in the same field," he says.

"I've caught one guy numerous times. We're on a first name basis. I know all about his family and he knows mine."

Elliott is quick to avoid answering the most commonly asked of all questions — how many illegals are there in the area?

"That's like asking how many jelly beans there are in the big jar," he jokes.

"I would say, however, that one-third to one-half of the workers we come across in the strawberry fields are illegal. During the peak season, one-fourth of the population in Watsonville may be illegal."

Despite the "never-ending cycle," Elliott prides himself on being a professional.

First step for him was a 4½-month training at the Border Patrol Academy near Brownsville, Texas. That training included the equivalent of 3½ years of college Spanish.

He also learned what they call special techniques, such as driving at high speeds for the frequent chases. He didn't need that training; he used to race stock cars for fun.

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BORDER PATROL

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The Border Patrol job is like a game, but not a fun game. It's deadly serious business for both sides.

This particular day began with a visit to a bakery for a bite to eat. That never came to pass, though, as several illegals who had stopped for a snack themselves, suddenly exit through a back door to a waiting Camaro when they spot the agents. The chase is on.

Despite three agents driving two cars and a van, the suspects get the jump this time. By the time their car is found at the end of a dead-end street a few minutes later it is abandoned — the engine still running and doors ajar.

Unknowingly, the illegals have led the agents to a nearby strawberry field. As the agents make their way down separate dirt paths toward a large group of field workers, action suddenly springs again.

Two-thirds of the group of about 25 drop their flats of ripe, red berries and scatter in all directions. Men, women and children alike. Dirt flies as the patrol cars growl under acceleration.

Some of the workers head toward an adjacent orchard while others cut across the open field. Those selecting the field choose wrong this time.

In anticipation of the move, one of the agents has cut off the field, sealing the workers' fate. A small group is apprehended together.

While Elliott and another agent run through the field, the handful of workers who had stayed in the field to watch, get up and start running, too.

An old ploy, Elliott later explains. Sometimes the agents chase those who run, other times they go directly to those remaining in the field. "We have to vary our pattern," he says.

The result of this ploy by the workers allows most to escape through the wooded orchard.

pered to safety seeing the patrol nearby.

Elliott tugs uncomfortably at his new bullet-proof vest underneath his shirt. He explains he is trying out the vest because there are "more and more physical confrontations" occurring on the job.

"I was in two shooting incidents while working down on the border. It's not very comfortable walking into cauliflower fields up here either, with 30 or 40 workers all with machetes."

The vast majority of the time, though, his job is one of run and chase. Ninety percent of the illegals they confront, run, he notes.

"It's funny. They run like hell and might kick or hit you while you're chasing them. Once they're caught, they're the nicest guys in the world."

Elliott is sad at what he terms the "biggest misconception" of the patrol — namely, the stories that go around among illegals about beatings received at the hands of agents.

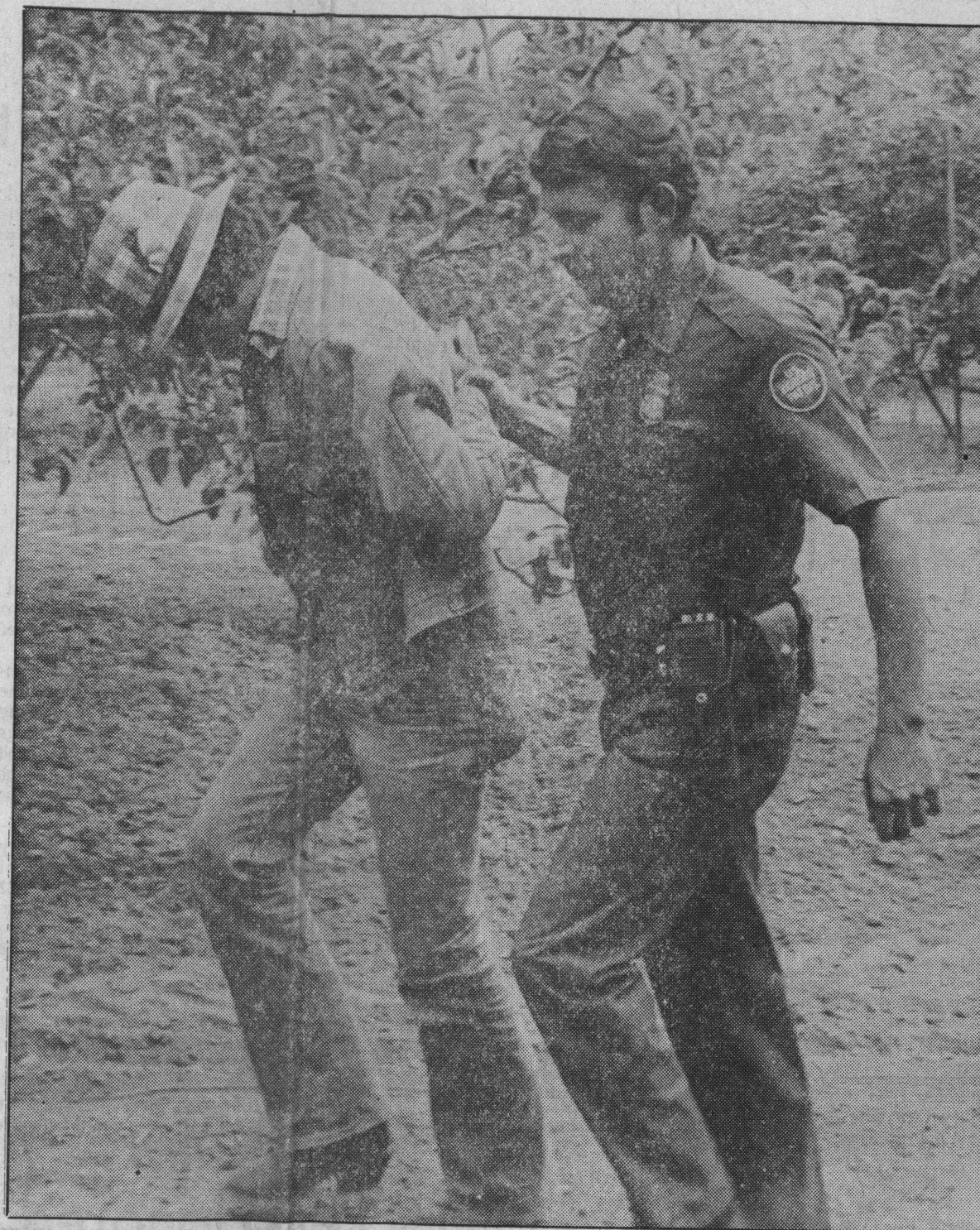
"When we do catch them, one of the first things they do is cover up their heads with their arms because of the stories they've heard," he says. "As far as being gestapo-like, it's not like that at all."

"You have to have a certain amount of compassion in this job, but then you can't let that get in your way either," he adds. "I sometimes have to psyche myself out of feeling sorry for them."

The illegal alien, according to Elliott, "is one of the most extorted people there are."

Not only do they have to pay to get smuggled in, but then they might have to pay hundreds of dollars a month to share a dirty, crowded room with five others. They are taken advantage of time and again, being overcharged for many things they buy.

Even as Elliott speaks a call comes in from one of his partners of a "suspicious vehicle" at a convenience store close by. Stepping on the gas, Elliott screeches into



Only Four Agents Patrol Wide Area

Four.

That's the number of Border Patrol agents assigned to cover the hundreds of square miles encompassing Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Benito and part of Santa Clara counties.

From the lettuce fields of the Salinas Valley to garlic fields in Gilroy and strawberry fields in Watsonville, the four agents go about working as a team, catching illegal aliens the best they can.

It's an ever-ending cycle.

"It does seem kind of meaningless sometimes," admits agent Tom Elliott. "It doesn't seem anybody really wants to address the problem. The way it is now, there is no real control."

"I'm doing the job I'm supposed to do," he adds. "It's the government that isn't doing its job."

Elliott's fellow agents — Barry Williams and Tom McKenney — agree their job could be made less frustrating with the cooperation of the government.

"We could cut out 90 percent of our work if they would just pass a law getting employers in trouble for hiring illegals," says Williams.

As it is now, growers are not punished at all for hiring illegals. They would certainly think twice, the agents say, if a jail sentence was awaiting them for hiring illegals.

Such a law, however, has been discussed for years, but nothing has happened.

According to McKenney, their job will get worse before it gets better, citing Mexico's continuing economic problems.

"The worse they're economic conditions get, the worse it will get here," he says. "They're (illegals) just flocking over."

Based in Salinas, the Border Patrol can only vary their routine as much as possible. Sometimes working nights and weekends, they set up roadblocks in search of vans with smuggled illegals, do bar checks and run through the fields.

Without giving away any secrets, they say they normally go out with four agents, driving two vans and two cars. The vans hold about 30 prisoners. The agents work until those vans are full. That usually takes only a few hours.

The rest of the agents' shift is spent processing their prisoners, getting the necessary paperwork

chase ends in Agent Tom Elliott's favor

run, other times they go directly to those remaining in the field. "We have to vary our pattern," he says.

The result of this ploy by the workers allows most to escape through the wooded orchard.

Another field raid last week in Gilroy, however, yielded some 100 illegals in one fell swoop of a garlic field, he adds. A lot has to do with luck.

As the strawberry field now stands empty, the owner approaches, complaining that he now has no pickers for his harvest.

"If you didn't hire illegals, you wouldn't have the problem," replies Elliott.

On the way out, the owner passes a cauliflower field where two men have managed to already fill three huge bins with the leafy vegetable.

"You picked that all by yourselves?" he shouts to them. "Man, you guys sure are great workers. I want to hire you."

Obviously, the illegals who had been in that field only minutes earlier had scam-

ped away. They are taken advantage of time and again, being overcharged for many things they buy.

Even as Elliott speaks a call comes in from one of his partners of a "suspicious vehicle" at a convenience store close by. Stepping on the gas, Elliott screeches into the parking lot just as three Mexican youths are getting back into a car. With the agents' cars blocking any possible escape, the number in the van grows again.

Meanwhile, watching all this has been two other Mexican men who were working on a truck. When Elliott starts walking toward them to check for their "green cards," they start to run. One is caught, the other gets away, getting lost in a maze of an adjacent residential neighborhood.

Another car is spotted whose driver suddenly starts to take off. The non-stop action continues.

On this particular day, Elliott says later, "We kept trying to get to the outskirts of town to the fields. It's just so busy, though, we never made it."

Another chase ends in Agent Tom Elliott's favor

Sentinel Photos By Pete Amos



Agent Barry Williams gets his man



Farm worker dashes through sprinklers to evade agents

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All they can do is continue to do their job.