

A Border Patrol Agent's Open Letter

by John Malone

Yesterday [August 9, 2002], a federal officer lost his life on the border in AZ. I was working. I heard the radio caller announcing a "lookout" for a vehicle loaded with weapons that was going to be driven across the border. A little while later, while I was processing some aliens for "voluntary removal," I heard the Ajo Border Patrol agent talk to the National Park Service ranger about working some pedestrian activated sensor traffic several miles north of the international border. The Ajo agent is fairly new. He has been here less than two years. The park ranger became permanent at Organ Pipe National Monument about two years ago. Before that, he was "seasonal."

Sometime after that, I heard that one of the helicopter pilots from our neighboring sector in Yuma (who provide Ajo agents with more air assistance than our own sector), involved in some activity near Lukeville. I began to realize that the Border Patrol agent, the park ranger, and the pilot were all working the vehicle traffic near Lukeville and not the pedestrian

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traffic from the sensor activation's. It was a little hard to follow, but I didn't have a good feeling about how it was going to develop.

As I have told many of you before, the Ajo station is actually in Why, some 30 miles north of the border. Lukeville is the port of entry (POE) at the terminus of (AZ) State Route 85 on the border with Mexico. In this area, there is a road that parallels the border "fence" both east and west of the POE. It is one of the very few dirt "roads" in the area. The objective of the alien and dope smugglers is to get to the highway. Once there, the next step is to blend in with traffic and avoid the "temporary" checkpoint set up five or so miles south of the station in Why. As some of you have seen, the area is sparsely vegetated and consists of rocky hills and small mountains. These small mountains and the valleys and washes cause radio signal strength to be weak or non-existent in some areas.

Sorry for the digression. As best I could tell, the situation was getting distorted. The pilot was trying to direct the agents to the vehicle and occupants (at some point it must have stopped). He identified at least two bad guys and that at least one of them had a "long arm" (rifle). There were Mexican officials south of the illegal vehicle. I know this because the pilot used them as a reference point to guide the agents. The pilot's radio transmissions were

very distorted with static and helicopter whine so it was difficult to understand what he was saying some times. I don't remember if I heard any of the agents on the ground use the radio. I do remember that our sector dispatch was calling out sensor activations (usually normal radio traffic) and there was some other non-related radio traffic on the same frequency. At one point, an agent not involved in the incident asked for all radio traffic to cease except for those involved in the incident. This started a dialogue between that agent and the dispatch that lasted a minute or two.

At some point (around 12:30 p.m.), I loaded my illegal aliens for their return trip south and was starting to leave the station when I heard the pilot say, "officer down." I made a conscious decision to continue in the vehicle I was in. I figured it would take too long to unload my aliens, lock them in a cell, try and find another "law enforcement" vehicle, and start south. I drove way faster than I should have in the vehicle (an unmarked '97 Ford Van with almost 200,000 miles on it) and with my passengers. I arrived at the POE about 20 minutes later and discharged my passengers and tried to assist. On the way down, I was passed by at least five other BP units running code (lights and siren). About five or six miles north of the

POE, I passed the Border Patrol agent driving the shot park ranger north to rendezvous with an ambulance. By then, five or six law enforcement vehicles were coming off the border road.

I turned around to look for some way to help. When I arrived at the back of the POE, I saw the shot park ranger's fellow ranger (and several other officers I didn't know) performing lifesaving measures on the wounded bad guy. I saw that I was not needed there and drove north to assist with traffic control near the air evacuation site. The first person I saw when I arrived where the ambulance was stopped (12 miles north) was the Ajo Border Patrol agent who was with the park ranger the whole time. He was positioned with a Customs special agent where he could direct traffic on the two-lane road. The look on his face was pure emotional anguish. I parked my van and set out to do what I could.

I could see in the ambulance that at least two paramedics (EMTs?) were working on the ranger. There was also someone else inside. There were at least two more BP Agents a few yards north of the ambulance. I talked to the BP agent who had been with the park ranger. He was distraught. He wanted reassurance that he had done all that he could. I listened to him and reassured him that he did. After spending some time with him, I walked toward the ambulance. I shouted through the open ambulance doors at the park ranger and told him to "hang on." I didn't want to be a strap hanger; I just wanted to offer some

U.S. park ranger shot to death along border

A park ranger was shot and killed Friday at the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument as he pursued a Mexican national on the run from Mexico.

The Mexican national also was shot and killed, but it was unclear who shot him. The identity of the park ranger was withheld, pending notification of relatives.

Officials said the pursuit began east of Lukeville, a port of entry about 40 miles south of Ajo.

Mexican officials contacted U.S. Customs on Friday to report that two men had fled over the border into the park, said David Hutson, chief of interpretation and visitor services at Organ Pipe. Officials did not know why the men fled Mexico.

The ranger, a law-enforcement officer at the park, and three U.S. Border Patrol agents responded as a Border Patrol helicopter searched for the men, Hutson said.

The helicopter spotted their vehicle about a half-mile from the border, officials said, and agents arrested one of the men without incident.

Agents in the helicopter spotted the second man a short time later and directed the park ranger to him, Hutson said. The man opened fire on the ranger when he approached, striking him below his body armor at least once. He died en route to a hospital, Hutson said.

The ranger was one of fewer than a dozen workers at Organ Pipe. The tight-knit crew mourned the loss of one of their own late Friday.

"With a small overall staff, we're all pretty close here, so you can imagine what it's like," Hutson said.

Organ Pipe was labeled the most dangerous in the national park system in a 2001 survey by the Fraternal Order of Police chapter for park rangers.

encouragement. I went back to the BP agent and tried to help.

I don't remember what time I arrived at the scene of the ambulance. I know that we radioed to have both north and southbound traffic stopped. I know that one agent called our dispatch on several occasions to ask about the ETA of the air evac. More than once, he asked to confirm that there was more than one helicopter en route and that they were going to two different locations. At least one of the calls was inquiring about the new ETA after the previous one

had passed. At some point I noticed that one of the people in the ambulance was another park ranger that I knew; his name is Bo. Near the end, he exited the ambulance and walked away from it and in my general direction. I walked to him, hugged him, and tried to say something encouraging. He commented that he thought it was too late. A little while later, the helicopter finally landed. It flew up from the south, the direction of the POE.

Bo and I walked over to the ambulance so that we would be

ready to help load up the wounded ranger. We were there when it was decided that the helicopter wasn't going to take him. We were there when the doctor on the other end of the ambulance frequency called the time of death (2:40 p.m.). I watched as Lonnie (the EMS director and OIC at the scene) and Bo cried. It seemed like it was just the three of us. They both talked to and stroked the dead ranger. I put my hand on Bo's back and held it there until he was through with his initial moment of grief. I watched them as they unhooked all of the IVs and monitors and removed the pressure trousers. I saw them cover him with a blanket.

Yesterday, I saw my first dead person, and it was someone I knew and someone I worked with. I didn't stay there much longer. I took the BP Agent who was with the shot ranger back down to the POE.

When we arrived, we saw that the bad guy was dead. The dead ranger's buddy, who was trying to save the bad guy's life, was sitting with quite a few law enforcement officers. As I looked around, I saw Customs and Immigration inspectors (who work at the POE), Customs special agents, Border Patrol agents, county deputies, an Air Force K-9 handler temporarily detailed to the POE, and a couple of AZ DOT officers who also work at the POE. It didn't surprise me. While there may be some chest thumping and service rivalry, when one law enforcement officer needs help out here, there is no hesitation. We know that sometimes someone from another agency may be our only backup because our agency

backup may be 30 miles away.

* * *

I wrote this email for several reasons. I know it is long. I could probably spend an hour or so editing it; but I won't. I wrote from my perspective; not to talk about me or my actions but to use what I saw to describe the people and events. I wrote it to tell you what happened as I know it. I wrote it to tell you how one officer's death affected me. I wrote it to help me grieve. And, I wrote it to point out a few things that are wrong with this job and the approach that our management and government officials are taking with the border issues. A National Park Service ranger died assisting a Border Patrol agent with his job. We are undermanned, our technology (communications, vehicles, weapons, uniforms, etc.) is outdated and ineffective, our national border policies are too political, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is out of touch with reality, the court dockets are so full that we can't prosecute those that need to be, and the smugglers are getting more aggressive. I have yet to see the results of the other shooting incident investigations. Our management never officially (through e-mail) notified us of these events. How are we, the agents, supposed to learn from these situations? It's almost as if they didn't occur.

In the five years I have been at this station, I don't recall a single incident where a Border Patrol agent was shot at until a couple of months ago. That incident involved the Mexican military shooting at the vehicle of a Border Patrol agent who was doing his job on our side

of the border. Since then, BP agents were shot at twice in one week in two different incidents. Up until yesterday, those shootings took place on the Tohono O'dham Indian reservation, in some of our most remote areas. Yesterday was the first incident I recall occurring near Lukeville. I may have forgotten one or two incidents because I am getting "sometimer's disease." The point I am making is that the trend of shooting incidents in our area has increased dramatically.

I did not write this letter to be a chain mail. However, I hope that you will pass it on as you see fit. There are roughly 9,000 Border Patrol agents trying to protect our borders from the illegal entry of aliens, terrorists, and drugs. We have a very small voice in Congress and most people have no clue what we do, or under what conditions.

Take a moment to pray or offer your thoughts to the fallen ranger. While you're at it, we would appreciate it if you said one for the rest of us.

Thanks,
JOHN MALONE