

Border Crimes Prevention Unit



by S.E.D. Staff

On any given night, hundreds and sometimes thousands of Mexican citizens and various other nationalities migrate illegally into San Diego County in search of financial survival.

As they attempt to migrate, some are brutally robbed, beaten, and raped by persons who attack them minutes after crossing into our country.

Some of the suspects are also Mexicans and other nationalities seeking financial survival, and some are Americanized hoodlums and hypes who have found their "cherry patch."

In 1976, S.D.P.D. fielded a small squad of officers into the incorporated acres adjacent to the international border in an effort to apprehend these felons.

Their efforts were colorfully documented in author Joseph Wambaugh's second work of non-fiction, *Lines and Shadows*. The book vividly depicts the shootings, vermin-like suspects and bigger-than-life officers of the PD's early B.A.R.F. team. This team was discontinued after 18 months' operation because of a complexity of problems.

In 1984, the PD deployed another team into the border canyons. This team was inte-



Migrants stage on the "soccer field" near Colonia Libertad, waiting for darkness.

grated with U.S. Border Patrol agents and reported successful impact statistics.

The international border, however, does not lie entirely within San Diego's city limits. In fact, there are 45 miles of border that separate Mexico from the sheriff's jurisdiction.

Additionally, between San Ysidro and Chula Vista lies the six-mile, east-west length of the Otay River bottom which zigzags in and out of PD and S.O. jurisdictions. The

river bottom is a main thoroughfare and a funnel for nocturnal migrants. It is also a convenient place to victimize them.

The activity and publicity of the B.A.R.F. squad kept the public aware in the city limits, but few people realized the assaults, robberies, rapes and murders had been happening for just as long in county areas.

These crimes are seldom formally reported and probably occur far more often than any of us realize. The illegal victims, naturally, do not want the attention of local law enforcement. Even those apprehended by the Border Patrol will discuss their attacks with B.P. agents, but most of them know that a report made to the Sheriff's Department will prolong their detention.

The relatively few formal reports made over the years in county areas have been quietly and dutifully processed by the deputies of the Lemon Grove, South Bay, an Imperial Beach stations.

In Sept., 1984, the Border Patrol monitored an increase in border-bandit activity in the Otay River bottom and the county areas just east of San Ysidro. They requested assistance and S.E.D. joined with several B.P. agents to form the county element of the Border Crimes Prevention Unit.

The unit works sporadically when S.E.D. and B.P. schedules can be synchronized. The work involves nighttime foot patrols, not unlike those of any infantry fire team. The pa-



The 1986 border-bandit season is just getting started. The scheduled patrols have so far neatly coincided with this winter's record rainfall, resulting in a low volume of arrests and a high frequency of head colds. As the weather dries out, however, we expect business to pick up.

The S.E.D. deputies salute the agents of the Border Patrol assigned to the B.C.P.U.

Supervising Agent Fred Stevens is a veteran bandit chaser from the era of the original B.A.R.F. squad. He was also a participant in the 1985 bandit shoot-out while on a patrol with the B.P. The bandit hit Fred with three rounds and put him into the hospital for a few weeks. Fred returned only one well-placed round to render the suspect E.O.S.

Fred's agents are hand-picked and their tactical mindset, dedication and cooperation are exceptional.

Most of the guys in S.E.D. have read *Lines and Shadows* and agree that it is not the lure of drawing against the drop that motivates them on the border.

Rather, it is working in a tactical mode with the high quality personnel of the U.S. Border Patrol that allows them to look forward to walking those seamy canyons.



Typical terrain in the border canyons.

troops usually cover five to six miles per shift.

The patrols require every bit as much tactical intensity as a SWAT activation, however, they fall remarkably short of the excitement, bloodshed, and glamour that one reads about in *Lines and Shadows*.

So far, the deputies' personal lives have not been impacted like those of Wambaugh's B.A.R.F. squad. We must admit, however, that because we have to drive county equipment home after each shift, and half of us live in North County, an hour away, the boozy, bawdy and lusty after-work partying has been held to a conservative minimum.

In Jan., 1985, the sheriff's element of the Border Crimes Prevention Unit walked into a six-man robbery/ambush attempt in the Johnson Flats barley fields.

Before the elements of robbery had been completed, the suspects became nervous and exploded into six different directions. We ran down five of them, losing one across the border. When the dust settled, we recovered a revolver, ammunition, knives and a bludgeon.

We realized then that perhaps Wambaugh was not exaggerating so much after all.