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An award for sacrifice

With 5,297 inhabitants, Falfurrias, Texas is home to the Border Patrol checkpoint with the highest seizure rate in the country. You would think that this small town would be in “the middle of nowhere” but, in fact, it is in the middle of everything—the hub of a wheel of activity. In 2006, the Falfurrias station apprehended almost four times as many illegal aliens (20,000) as residents in the town and seized conveyances valued at approximately \$7.5 million. Located on Highway 281, the three-lane checkpoint is one of three permanent checkpoints in Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Border Patrol’s Rio Grande Sector.

The chokepoint: A tactical approach

Traffic checkpoints—temporary and permanent—serve as the strategic enforcement layer of CBP Border Patrol’s tiered approach to border security. Border Patrol agents monitor and stop vehicles at checkpoints, usually located 25 to 75 miles inland from the border. “Checkpoints, or ‘chokepoints’ as they are sometimes called, are usually on main arteries from the border into the interior of the country,” says Border Patrol Rio Grande Valley Sector Chief Lynne Underdown. (See the article “First female sector chief retires” in this issue.)

At checkpoints, agents can check the immigration status of the occupant of every car and if they spot something “in plain view” or if a canine alerts they can send the vehicle to secondary for a more complete inspection. “Checkpoint work hones the skills of agents. An agent in Falfurrias can learn to assess a vehicle and its driver in seven seconds or under,” says Chief Underdown. Traffic has to continue to flow so there isn’t time to ponder—agents must be decisive and quick.

‘A little bit of everything’

It takes Border Patrol Agent Jorge Ramirez almost an hour to get to Falfurrias but he says the commute is well worth it. “Working here is great experience. You can do so many different things—work the brush, roving patrol, highway, the checkpoint.” He has seen a person secreted next to a radiator, 80 people being hauled in a container, hidden currency and document fraud.



Melissa Castillo, an agent since November 2005, echoes these sentiments. “My classmates at the academy who are

CBP loses Border Patrol agents in the line of duty

Border Patrol agent dies saving canine partner

CBP loses Air Interdiction Agent

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Photo Credit: Oscar Saldaña

A CBP Border Patrol agent screens one of a stream of tractor trailers passing through the Falfurrias, Texas checkpoint.

assigned to a line station haven't seen half of what I have seen. I get to do a little bit of everything: work the brush, cut sign, track, patrol the highway, and ride in a helicopter. It is an

exciting place to work.”

Working the brush

Agents assigned to Falfurrias also “work the brush,” looking for sign, the term used for tracking. They scan the desert floor and landscape for any sign that someone has passed in this part of the desert. The signs can be obvious, like empty cans of “energy drinks” now commonly supplied to crossers to give them stamina for hours of walking, or subtle, like broken twigs, a strand of hair or a fiber snagged on a branch. When agents find this “sign” they also look for the footprints left behind. Experienced agents can tell the number and kind of people who are crossing. A smaller or faint footprint could signal women and children, deeper prints can indicate that the crosser is carrying a heavy load.

And it is likely that the “load” an illegal crosser is carrying is narcotics and not water or personal belongings. In calendar year 2006, Falfurrias station seized more than 129,000 pounds of marijuana valued at more than a \$103 million. If you add in cocaine, heroine, and other narcotics seized, the total value of narcotics seized for the year is more than \$171 million. Some narcotics are sent in on human carriers or “mules” but most of it is secreted in conveyances.



Photo Credit: Oscar Saldaña

Travel paths etched by illegal immigrants in the desert landscape are so well-worn they look like hiking trails.

Additional eyes and ears

In this area made up of some of the largest ranches in the country, being a good neighbor is critical. It is not uncommon for a Border Patrol agent to stop for a chat, a chew of tobacco or to help mend a fence with a ranch security patrol. The ranch communities are additional eyes and ears for the

Border Patrol and in turn, the Border Patrol keeps an eye on the numerous hunting lodges that dot the ranches. Hunting is a huge industry here with white tail deer and quail being the most common. However, some ranches raise or import exotic animals and charge thousands of dollars for a half-day or day of hunting bison, antelope, zebras, oryx and kudus. Through monthly meetings with the ranch community the Border Patrol coordinates enforcement efforts so that hunting and enforcement can co-exist.

Paradise undiscovered

Some people in the area would just as soon keep the exciting

working conditions and the excellent quality of life a “secret” in what some view as their “little corner of paradise.” Looking at the town of Falfurrias and the surrounding communities, and seeing the excitement and satisfaction that agents who work here have, make this a highly desirable location. Another reason that living and working in Falfurrias is satisfying for Border Patrol agents is the institutional recognition that the Border Patrol has and the role that agents play as integral parts of the community. “Border Patrol agents are the crème de la crème,” in these communities says Jacobs. “They are the top tier of community leadership, protecting the community, and with the low cost of living, major contributors to the area’s economy.”

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