

Desperados meet high tech along US border with Mexico

By Dean Nelson
Special to The Globe

SAN DIEGO - It is a throwback to the days when sheriffs' posses would chase and shoot it out with outlaws while helpless victims were robbed, raped and possibly murdered.

And it is like the guerrilla warfare of Vietnam, complete with the high-technology equipment and brutality that accompanied patrols into the jungle.

It is a 2-mile stretch of land next to the San Ysidro border crossing between Mexico and the United States, just south of San Diego. It is the most dangerous border area in the country.

Since February of last year, when a special Border Crimes Prevention Unit was formed to patrol the area, there have been 597 victims of violence, including 14 rapes and six homicides.

"Keep in mind that our figures are only reported crimes," said Gene Smithburg, assistant chief border patrol agent. "I would guess that we only hear about 10 to 20 percent of the real violence down there."

Most of the acts go unreported because the victims are in the country illegally in the first place, he said.

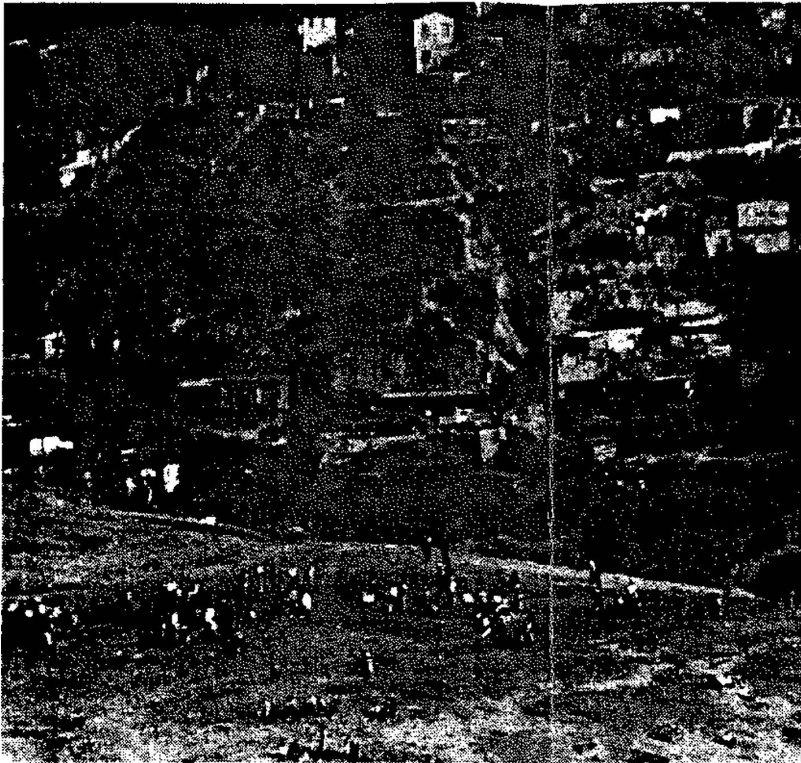
Bandits prey on groups

Most of the violence is from Mexican bandits preying on groups trying to sneak into the United States. The area is full of rugged canyons, brush and rocky trails on the US side of the border, so the bandits lie in wait for travelers passing through.

"It's a war zone," said border patrol supervisor John Chacon. "Many of the aliens are carrying lots of money to pay guides to get them into the country, and they're defenseless. It's not uncommon that we'll come across a body on our day patrol that wasn't there the day before."

The special Border Crimes Unit is an 11-member force made up of border patrol agents and San Diego Police Department officers. They work the area at night, when most of the violence occurs. Since the unit was started, three officers have been wounded and three suspected bandits have been killed.

Earlier this month a patrol en-



Mexicans gather in field outside Tijuana at dusk, waiting to illegally cross border into the United States. GLOBE PHOTO BY EUGENE HARRIS

countered a group of bandits, and while Agent Fred Stevens was attempting to handcuff a suspect, another man ambushed him from a bush six feet away.

Stevens was hit five times by .357 magnum slugs but was able to return fire. A fellow officer killed the bandit with a bullet between the eyes. Stevens' armored vest deflected two shots to the chest but three others hit him in the leg, groin and arm.

The shootout is the unit's eighth this year.

"It's always been this bad," said Chacon. "The difference is that now we're trying to do something about it."

Teenager held in robbery of illegal aliens

Associated Press

SAN YSIDRO, Calif. - A teenager was in custody yesterday after three separate incidents in which gun-wielding bandits robbed 25 Mexican nationals who had just crossed the border illegally, officials said.

No one was seriously injured in the robberies Friday in Dennery Canyon, two miles north of the

border, said San Diego police spokesman Bill Robinson. Two men held up eight more people at about 9:30 p.m. Friday, taking nine wristwatches and \$2200. About 30 minutes later, three more victims were relieved of watches and \$300.

Authorities were searching for a partner and suspected the two were responsible for all three robberies.

per day, or nearly 43,000 for the month.

Last year on the entire US-Mexico border, 1.1 million arrests were made by the patrol. The 66-mile San Diego district netted 408,000, or 40 percent of the total. And since an arrest usually only means a bus ride back to Tijuana, an alien might be arrested two or three times in a night.

Smithburg said the agents arrest about half of the people crossing the border. He knows this, he said, because of the high-tech surveillance equipment.

"A lot of what we use was used in Vietnam," he said. "We use underground sensors that tell our dispatcher when people are coming over and we have night-vision scopes that can see in the dark up to 3 miles."

Body heat detected

Other equipment that detects body heat shows agents on top of hills where the aliens in the canyons are hiding.

Most of the violence in the area is between bandits and aliens, but one recent exception created a public outcry and a substantial lawsuit against the government.

In April, while border patrol agents were attempting to subdue an alien who had bolted across the border, a crowd of people a few feet away in Mexico allegedly began pelting the agents with rocks. Border patrol agent Edward Cole fired across the border into the crowd, seriously wounding a 12-year-old boy.

The boy spent several days in a

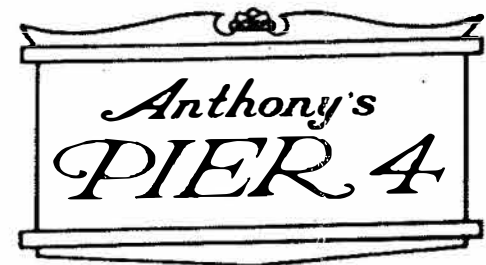
San Diego hospital, and his family has filed a \$3 million lawsuit against the US government.

The situation with the aliens, border patrol and bandits has gotten so bad that the Guardian An-

gels, famous for their red berets, and unarmed New York subway patrols, have become involved. Groups of four to 15 members now occasionally patrol the 2-mile stretch.

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