

The US border agents' challenge: Determining whom to stop and search

By Dean Nelson
Special to The Globe

SAN DIEGO — Among US Customs agents along the US-Mexico border south of San Diego, one of the favorite examples of creative drug smuggling belongs to Charley Mazone, a supervisor at the San Ysidro border inspection station.

A strip search of a suspect revealed a prophylactic filled with several grams of pure heroin, hidden in a body cavity.

"When we removed it, he turned around and said, 'How'd that get in there?'" Mazone said. San Ysidro, the world's largest land port entry, is 17 miles south of San Diego and across the border from Tijuana, a city of 1.7 million. Because of its size and 24-hour-a-day operation, the station is the preferred entry point on land for smuggling, according to Customs agents.

In February, after US drug agent Enrique Camarena was kidnaped at gunpoint in Mexico, border inspectors began intensive searches of every pedestrian and vehicle entering California from Mexico. What is normally a 20- to 30-minute wait for cars dragged on for up to 10 hours at San Ysidro.

The searches lasted for a few days (Camarena's body was found near Guadalajara on March 6), and the experience taught the public what Customs inspectors have known all along: It is impossible to search everyone.

At San Ysidro alone, 20,000 to 30,000 cars with at least two people each, and another 10,000 pedestrians, cross the border every day. Many of the people are commuters, possibly up to 25,000; some are shoppers, others are tourists, some are smugglers.

"If you have a line of 100 cars, I'd say maybe five of them have a problem we'd like to check out," said Bob Shorey, a Customs supervisor. He estimated that officers actually inspect only about 2 percent of those coming through.

Deciding which 2 percent to inspect is a challenge. In about 40 seconds, inspectors use the little psychology training they get and a lot of intuition to determine if a car should get a closer look.

"The key to nabbing the smugglers is to base your decision to search a person or a vehicle on the probability he's got something, not the possibility," said Tom Hardin, a senior inspector at the commercial inspection station in Otay Mesa, about 10 miles east of San Ysidro.

Hardin, who spent four months in Boston last year on an investigation of Chinese food smuggling, said the agents expect some nervousness; but there are other signs that stand out.

"When the carotid artery is bulging and they're swallowing a lot, and when we pat them down and their heart is pounding a thousand times a minute, we figure we're on to something," he said.

The agents' questions are also designed to put the travelers on the defensive to see how they'll react.

"I don't go for the big intimidation scene like some of the agents," said Phyllis Isom, a Customs inspector. "But I do ask questions to see if two plus two really adds up to four." Last summer, she looked in a car and thought to herself, "Why, on a 100-degree day, would someone have a down coat in his lap?"

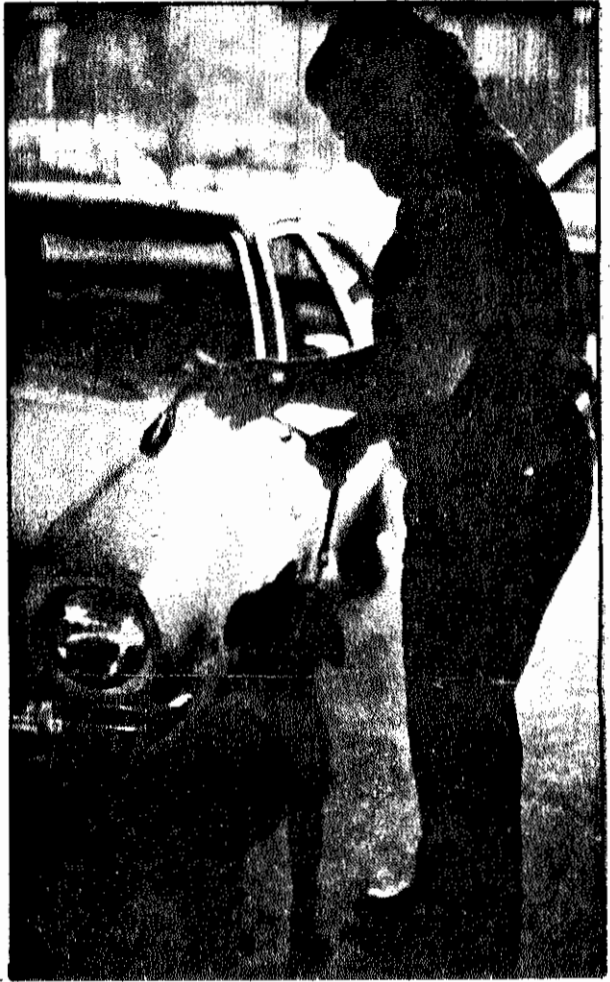
The search answered her question. In each sleeve of the coat, wrapped in newspaper, were parrots headed for the lucrative US black market.

"That guy was pretty dumb," Isom said. "Not only did he draw attention to himself by having a down coat in sweltering heat, by the time we found the birds, they had all suffocated."

Birds, clothing, currency and aliens are common objects of smuggling, with a fair profit for those involved.

But the real money in smuggling is in drugs.

Good marijuana, which has an estimated street value of \$400 to \$600 a pound, is hard to smuggle in bulk because its size makes it difficult to hide. Some smugglers pack bags of onions around it, others have replaced a portion of a gas tank with a marijuana



Larry Sisson, sa contraband enforcement officer at San Ysidro, prepares his dog for a car search.
GLOBE PHOTOS BY EUGENE E. HARRIS

tank. In March, two propane tanker trucks were discovered to have their spare tires filled with marijuana.

Last year, San Diego district Customs agents seized about \$17 million in marijuana at the border. They also confiscated an estimated \$22 million worth of heroin and \$12 million in cocaine. In the first five months of this fiscal year, the agents have seized \$5 million in marijuana, \$31 million in heroin and \$17 million in cocaine.

The big money for smugglers is in heroin. A gram can be worth about \$2000.

Charley Mazone said he's known people to seal balloons containing a gram of heroin each and swallowing them. "You can bring in 20 or 30 balloons like that," he said. "That's a lot of money."

Dogs trained to seek out scents of the three main drugs are the key to catching smugglers. Two or three marijuana seeds are all a dog needs to go on "alert." In the case of the man with the heroin-filled prophylactic, the dog "alerted" on the car seat where the man had been sitting.

In addition to dogs, Customs agents use sophisticated devices that can look into gas tanks or measure the dimensions of a semi-trailer to see if there might be false walls or floors.

But no matter how effective the equipment, considerations of expense and manpower restrict how much can be done to limit the amount of illegal drugs and other material coming into the United States.

"I like to think that we're making a difference," Shorey said. "I like to think that because we're doing better, some people in Mexico are deciding it's not worth the risk to try to come in."

"Are we seizing a significant amount? Probably not. But my responsibility is not cleaning the streets in the US of all drugs. My job is to make a judgment as to whether the next car in line is carrying something it shouldn't."