

## Frontline Story

### Mexico: Crimes at the Border: The Business of Human Smuggling

Watch the video at this link: <http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/mexico704/>

#### Synopsis

In a cemetery in the border town of Tijuana, there is a shrine to a young soldier, Juan Soldado, who is the patron saint for migrants trying to cross illegally into the United States. It's the place where FRONTLINE/World reporter Lowell Bergman arranges to meet a smuggler, or *pollero*, who has agreed to talk about the business of human smuggling on condition that we not reveal his identity. We call him "Rafael." He's been a smuggler for ten years and he tells Bergman how he got started in the business.

"I had this friend who had a lot of money and he was like 16 and I was like 18 at the time and I was like, dude, how did you make all that money?" recalls Rafael. "He didn't want to tell me at first, and then when he told me, I didn't believe him. So he took me to the people and they offered me a job too."

To show how the smuggling business works, Rafael drives Bergman around Tijuana, which, though peaceful during the day, has turned into one of the most dangerous cities in Mexico due to the drug trade and human trafficking. Rafael says danger is part of the allure of the business – "an adrenaline rush" when he sneaks people across the border.

Since 9/11, Rafael says that the U.S. has tightened security along the border, but he says the smugglers have learned to adjust, finding more sophisticated hiding places in their vehicles for the migrants they are transporting, creating false documents to show border guards, and charging their clients more for their services.

"Now more than ever," says Bergman, "most migrants need the help of a smuggler to get across the border – making them indispensable. As a result the smugglers say they're making more money than ever."

In the past, illegal migrants crossed the border at spots where they were less likely to be spotted – sometimes risking long treks through the desert. But the U.S. government is spending billions to build up a border fence, fortified by surveillance cameras, bright lights and many more border guards. So an increasing number of people who enter the U.S. illegally do so through the regular Ports of Entry with the help of professional smugglers.

At the San Ysidro Port of Entry – between Tijuana and San Diego – over 100,000 people cross every day. It's the busiest land border crossing in the world. The sheer volume of traffic makes it impossible for U.S. border guards to check every vehicle and every document. If they did, the border would shut down.

And if the inspectors do spot a fake ID or uncover migrants hidden in car trunks, the repercussions are minimal, even for the smugglers, because the courts cannot possibly handle the number of cases. Buses carry the illegal migrants who are caught back across the border, where they usually turn around and try again. That goes for the smugglers, too. Rafael says he was caught smuggling once, but was quickly released.

There is one guaranteed way for migrants to get across on their first try, says Rafael – if a smuggling operation is able to bribe a U.S. border official.

“I have known inspectors that are crooked,” asserts Rafael. “But you would never talk about them and you will never say you have one, because it’s your golden meal ticket because those are like very, very hard to catch. They would make a lot of money because it’s failsafe, it’s secure.”

Terry Reed, an FBI agent in San Diego, is part of a Border Corruption Task Force and he acknowledges that the problem of corrupt border guards is growing. He recounts one of the most important cases, which started with a tip from an informant who alleged that a guard at the Otay Mesa Port of Entry known as *El Guero* – “the white guy” or “the blond” – was working with a smuggling operation. It wasn’t much to go on. Then, a year later, another tip led to a woman named Aurora Torres, who was a suspected smuggler. Reed set-up a sting operation. At a meeting in a McDonald’s in San Diego, which was secretly videotaped, Torres agreed to transport a client across the border, saying it was a sure thing because she was working with an officer at the Otay Mesa port. What she didn’t know was that the client was an undercover FBI operative. When he was driven to the border, the operative says a blond Customs Inspector quickly waved their car through.

Reed’s undercover operation tracked Torres as she took her group of illegal immigrants, and the FBI plant, to a San Diego suburb, to what is known in the trade as a “load house,” a place where smugglers hold the migrants until a relative or friend arrives to pay the required smuggling fee. A member of Reed’s team, posing as a relative, showed up to pay \$3,500 to pick up their operative. Later, the operative told his FBI handlers that he’d read the name on the badge of the guard who waved them through: It was “Gilliland.”

At the time, Michael Gilliland, a former Marine, was a decorated Customs and Border Protection inspector with 16 years experience. Investigators began to follow him and wiretap his phone calls, including calls from Aurora Torres, the leader of the smuggling group. “From these wiretaps, obtained by FRONTLINE/World, it appears the two [Torres and Gilliland] were having an intimate relationship,” says Bergman. “The FBI told me that it’s a well-known tactic that smugglers use sex to entice border agents into compromising relationships.”

Still, the FBI needed proof that Gilliland was taking bribes. They managed to record surveillance video of Gilliland entering Torres’ residence, then leaving carrying a plastic bag. “He was coming to pick up his money,” says Reed.

A month later the FBI videotaped Gilliland waving cars through his lane at the Port of Entry, not looking at identification, not asking questions, not searching cars. One of the vehicles caught on the tape -- a black GMC Yukon -- was driven by Torres with 11 illegal immigrants inside. The FBI finally had all the evidence they needed. They arrested Gilliland and Torres.

“Rafael,” the smuggler, tells Bergman that a lot of different families are involved in the smuggling trade these days, like Torres. He says the small operations pay off organized crime in Tijuana to allow them to operate.

“These smuggling groups can afford it,” reports Bergman. “When Torres was arrested, the FBI found nearly half a million dollars in a safe in her bedroom. She pled guilty to smuggling and was sentenced to three and a half years in federal prison.”

Gilliland also pled guilty to accepting approximately \$100,000 in bribe money. He was sentenced to five years in prison and ordered to pay a \$200,000 fine. But no one knows how many illegal migrants he let into the country or how much money he made.

And Gilliland is only one of many such cases. Federal officials say there have been over a hundred similar busts in the last five years. Just this month a guard was arrested at the same Otay Mesa Port of Entry where Gilliland worked. There are now nearly 200 open investigations of corruption along the U.S. border with Mexico.

“There’s more pressure on the other side of the border from the smuggling organizations to elicit the help of a corrupt border official,” says FBI agent Andy Black. “The pool of individuals who are susceptible to corruption has grown.”

FRONTLINE/World made numerous requests to interview the man in charge of all border issues, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, but he declined. At a press conference, where Bergman finally catches up with him, Chertoff says the bigger the police force on the border, the more corruption cases there will be.

San Diego Congressman Duncan Hunter, an advocate of building an 800-mile fence along the Mexican border, says it’s “tragic” that some border guards succumb to corruption, but that the government should continue to fortify the border. But University of California at San Diego immigration expert Wayne Cornelius suggests this is futile. His study indicates that 97% of the people who try to cross the border eventually succeed, despite all the obstacles. “If they don’t succeed on the first try, they almost certainly will succeed on the second or the third try,” says Cornelius.

Back In Tijuana, “Rafael,” the smuggler, tells Bergman he’s not worried about going out of business any time soon, due to a U.S. clampdown on the border. “The smuggling people business, the *pollero* business, will stop only when there are no borders,” he argues. “Unless you can stop poverty or hunger, it will never stop, because people will always want to help their families. Doesn’t matter how tall the wall is, they will just dig a hole then. So you will never stop people getting across [into] the United States.”