

WORKING THE LINE

The hidden life of the U.S. Border Patrol

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DAVID TAYLOR

TEXT BY
LUIS ALBERTO URREA

THE BORDER PATROL AGENT was driving us to supper in a desert border city. Since the publication of my book *The Devil's Highway*, I have found myself in this situation with regularity. When I started writing that book, there was no indication that the *migra* agents would come to consider me their confidant. Even, for some agents, a friend. If you had told me this in my more radical days, or in my Tijuana boyhood, I would have laughed.





It wasn't late, but the night was already heavy on the land, dropping hard like it does in desert winter. We rode in a late-model pickup—club cab. And the agent was looking up at a railroad bridge as we passed under. "Saw this guy once," he said, almost to himself. "Three guys, actually. Two on either side, holding up the third. They were staggering down the tracks, you know. So I lit 'em up with my spotlight and got out of the truck." In my memory, this moment lasts forever. Saguaros splash in our headlights, looking like landscape in black-and-white noir films. He said: "The guy in the middle . . . the train had cut off his feet. But the weight of the train . . . it had pinched his ankles closed. He didn't seem to know it. He was trying to walk on his stumps."

But that story wasn't what really got to me.

When we pulled up to the restaurant, on what had started out as a completely happy dinner date, looking for some steaks and salads, he parked and sat there for a moment.

"Do you know what it sounds like when a locomotive hits a human body?" he asked.

The memories were coming on, unbidden.

"No," I answered.

He said, "It sounds like an aluminum bat hitting a line drive."

Later, he told me: "We couldn't find that guy. We looked for two miles."

Then: "I saw him fly up over the train."

Finally: "He was in a tree. Somebody shone a light up there. He was on top of a tree."

We went in and ate supper like nothing had happened.

"ALL THESE AGENTS EVER WANTED," says David Taylor, "was a fair shake." I think this secret society of Border Patrol warriors sees us both as slightly brain-damaged liberal dupes. But they forgive us. They don't quite go as far as to pat us on the head—sometimes,



in my case, anyway, they delight in terrorizing me for their own entertainment. But they seem amused by our rosy view of humanity. Yet . . . they trust us to give them a fair shake. It is touching in ways that are hard to describe. I don't know if I can.

They give you things. If you tell the truth, whether you like them or not, whether you agree with them or not, they pay attention and they respond. They have given me gifts like beautiful wood carvings. They give us t-shirts, hats. They cut the patches off their uniforms and send them. Because the truth is, the Border Patrol is assaulted and insulted by both the right and the left, and they sometimes have no one they can trust.

"I don't care if you hate us," an agent told me. "What I want from you is to tell the truth you see here. That's it."

ITEM: SHERIFF RALPH OGDEN of Yuma, Arizona, looks about ten feet tall when you meet him. He's a big 'un already, but he wears a tall Stetson hat and cowboy boots. It makes him about six foot

ten. He has Wyatt Earp's mustache, too. He's so recognizable that there are Ralph Ogden bumper stickers that show a hat, a 'stache, and a badge. Everybody knows who that is.

Ralph (his initials are REO, and you just can't help calling him REO Speedwagon sometimes, which ends up being funny because he's an off-road racer, too) is the ultimate desert lawman. He knows the border inside and out, and he reads many books, and he appreciates art and hummingbirds and elk. He takes great pains to point out to strangers that he is not Joe Arpaio, the tough-guy anti-immigrant sheriff always in the news for his shenanigans. REO is the lawman you want to show up when the outlaws have laid siege to your homestead. Border Patrol agents love him, though they wouldn't say a word like that. They'll tell you, "He's all right."

At a recent public speaking appearance, he and I talked backstage. He reached out a hand and said, "Come here." I stepped over to him. "Here." I stared at his clenched fist. "Take it." I put



out my hand and he dropped a gorgeous silver medal into my palm. "That's for going above and beyond the call of duty," he said. "That's for telling the truth."

ITEM: AT A READING IN CHICAGO, a former Border Patrol agent, now reassigned to Homeland Security, stepped out of the audience and reached into his jacket. He pulled out a USBP service ribbon/medallion.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm going to pin you."

"I can't accept that," I cried.

"You have to accept it."

He pinned the medal to my lapel in front of a crowd of sniffling libs—we know a good weepy scene when we see one.

"If you cut this boy," he announced, "he bleeds forest green."

I was whispering: *Not really! Not so much!*

We all laughed.

DAVID TAYLOR, it must be admitted here, went way deeper into the U.S. Border Patrol world than I ever dreamed of going. It was either an act of daring or of sheer madness. But I suspect there is no great art without some bad craziness mixed in there somewhere. He has spent over seven hundred hours on patrol. He has gone all along the Mexican borderline, taking photos in remote and dangerous places, sometimes with Border Patrol agents watching over him from a distance. He has been rousted by *federales* . . . well, come to think of it, so have I. But if anyone deserves a medal for duty, it is David. What he has accomplished is unprecedented. He has enjoyed total access, and he has brought us visions of a world we have never been allowed to see. Troubling? Yes. Beautiful? Yes. Ugly? Absolutely. Haunting? Oh, yes.

Honest.

YOU FIND YOURSELF in a swirl of history. Your first agents put up the timeworn cop's barrier: flat stare, slightly aggressive suspicion,



hazing. Then they let you in, but they speak in PC phrases, lest you turn their words on them and burn them in print. Then you know one guy, and he likes you, and when he likes you, the other guys relax. I imagine it must be the same with war correspondents. Mysterious chemistry.

Agents from all over the country wrote; their wives and daughters wrote more than they did. Many families of *la pinche migra* don't know what their dads and moms go through in the uniform, and they were reading me to find out! Talk about responsibility.

A daughter wrote to tell me how her dad would come off duty, put on his shorts and t-shirt, and fill water jugs for undocumented walkers passing through their backyard. A wife wrote to tell me she had to go to the station and intercept her husband's Friday paycheck because if she didn't he'd cash it and buy food for the detainees and go back to work. An agent wrote to scold me for aiding and abetting illegal activity, but then he read the book and wrote back and apologized.

The question I am asked the most is some version of, "What are the Border Patrol guys really like?"

Here's what I can tell you, and I think David would agree: in life, some people are devils, some few are angels, and the vast majority of us fall in between. Whether you are wicked or righteous depends upon the prejudice or expectations of the judge who watches you. Could we walk a mile in their shoes before we make our judgment? No. No, we couldn't. These images might be as close as we get. 🐾

Have you checked out Orion's Editors Out Loud podcast? Find it at iTunes or orionmagazine.org.

