

WORLD

Terror at the Texas border

MCALLEN, TEX.

Attack on 3 immigrants sheds light on the hiring of troubled patrol agents

BY MANNY FERNANDEZ AND CAITLIN O'HARA

The Border Patrol agent, she remembers, was calm when he tied her to the tree and put silver duct tape over her mouth. He said very little.

She was a 14-year-old undocumented immigrant who had just crossed the Rio Grande, traveling with a teenage friend and the friend's mother from Honduras. They had hoped to surrender to the Border Patrol and stay in the United States.

But instead of taking them in for processing, the agent, Esteban Manzanares, had driven them to an isolated, wooded area 16 miles outside the border city of McAllen, Tex. There he sexually assaulted the friend and viciously attacked her and her mother, twisting their necks, slashing their wrists and leaving them, finally, to bleed in the brush. Then he led the 14-year-old girl to the tree.

"I only asked him why he was doing this," she recalled. "Why me? He would only say that he had been thinking about it for days. He had been thinking about this for days."

The Border Patrol's parent agency, Customs and Border Protection, is the largest law enforcement agency in the United States, with nearly twice the staff of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Through the years, a small number of officers have succumbed to temptation and reached for a share of the millions of dollars generated in the smuggling of drugs, weapons and people across the southwest border. But a civil suit stemming from the March 2014 attack near McAllen, now making its way through the courts, is shedding light on a more sinister kind of corruption.

Over the past four years, at least 10 people in South Texas have been victims of murder, attempted murder, kidnapping or rape — all, according to prosecutors and officials, at the hands of Border Patrol agents who suddenly and violently snapped.

In April, Ronald Anthony Burgos Aviles, 29, an agent in the 116-county Laredo sector, was charged with stabbing and killing his girlfriend and their 1-year-old son. Then, in September, another Laredo sector agent, Juan David Ortiz, 35, admitted to investigators that he had gone on a 12-day killing spree, fatally shooting four people working as prostitutes and trying to abduct a fifth.

As a result of a civil suit filed by the three women attacked by Mr. Manzanares, the Border Patrol has been forced to answer questions about its hiring practices, its ability to weed out disturbed agents and whether there is adequate supervision of officers.

Sworn testimony and other documents filed in that case, as well as lengthy interviews the three women gave to The New York Times, provide an unusual window into a case that otherwise might have had little scrutiny. Mr. Manzanares never went to trial, because he fatally shot himself as soon as federal investigators discovered his crime and closed in to stop him.

The case goes beyond any one Border Patrol administration: President Trump has given the agency substantial reinforcements and a wider mission, but the attack on the Honduran women occurred during President Barack Obama's presidency. Critics say the very nature of Border Patrol agents' work — dealing with vulnerable, powerless people, often alone on the nation's little-traveled frontiers — makes it easy for troubled agents to go unnoticed.

In September, Judge Randy Crane of the Federal District Court in McAllen,

Tex., dismissed claims of negligent hiring and supervision of Mr. Manzanares filed by the two women who were the victims of his initial attack. The judge concluded that supervisors had not been alerted to any problem in the agent's background and had no reason to know that anything was amiss. But he allowed claims filed by the 14-year-old girl, now 18, whose ordeal had gone on well into the night — and might have been prevented if the agent's actions had been detected earlier — to proceed.

Mr. Manzanares, a father of two, had no major disciplinary infractions during his six years with the agency, which he joined in 2008 after serving with the United States Army in Afghanistan and working as a jailer for the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Department. But according to court documents, he appeared to have become a pedophile, and one of the issues in the lawsuit has been whether the Border Patrol should have conducted the kind of employee reviews that would have brought that to light.

In late 2013 and early 2014, he was in the midst of a divorce, living in an apartment in the border city of Mission with his two dogs. Even among his neighbors — more than two dozen of his Border Patrol colleagues lived in the same gated complex — Mr. Manzanares largely kept to himself.

His rampage that day might never have been discovered had the older woman left for dead after the initial attack not come across a Customs and Border Protection officer as she emerged from the brush. She was still bleeding, and clearly terrified.

The man who did this to her and her daughter, she told the officer, was "dressed just like you."

"I TRIED TO BE STRONG"

The woman, M.G., still has trouble sleeping. (All three women, interviewed in January, asked to be identified only by their initials.) When she dreams, the border agent returns to her in her nightmares. When she wakes, she stares and rubs at the scars on both of her wrists, not so much neat slices as pale, jagged, random dashes. "Last night, I dreamed all of it, from the moment that we crossed the river," she said. "Every time I dream it, I live through it again. Sometimes I'd like to block my mind and think this didn't happen, but this did happen."

It had been a coincidence that the three women had crossed the river together. They were from the same town in northern Honduras and were neighbors and friends. J.E., the girl who had been tied to the tree, had been trying to join her parents, who were already in the United States. M.G. and her daughter were on their own journey to America. The three of them stayed at the same hotel in Guatemala and decided to travel the rest of the way together.

They crossed the Rio Grande on a raft early that morning as their smuggler directed it to the other side. They had been on a dirt road for only a matter of minutes when Mr. Manzanares pulled up in his Border Patrol vehicle.

"When I saw him, I said, 'Thank God,'" M.G. said.

But they slowly began to worry as they sat on metal benches in the back of the truck. M.G. thought there was something strange about the way the man was breathing. At first, she tried not to show her fear to the girls. "I pretended," she said. "I tried to be strong."

Mr. Manzanares made a series of stops with them. J.E. recalled that he told them to get on their knees so he could put plastic restraints on their wrists. On one of the last stops, M.G.'s daughter, N.C., watched Mr. Manzanares force her mother out of the back of the truck and lead her into the woods.

"I was crying, telling him to leave my mom alone," said N.C., who is now 18.

M.G., now 40, recalled hearing her daughter's screams as he led her away. "I was begging him to kill me but not kill my daughter, and my daughter was



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAITLIN O'HARA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



M.G., top, showing the wrist scars from a vicious attack by a Border Patrol agent in which her teenage daughter N.C., above, and a teenage friend, J.E., center, were also assaulted in 2014. A civil suit stemming from the attack is making its way through the courts.

screaming there where she was, 'Come kill me, don't harm my mother!'"

He threw M.G. down, twisted her neck and cut her wrists. "I felt I was losing consciousness, but every time my daughter screamed, I didn't want to go," she said.

He returned to the truck for N.C. She said she had only one thing on her mind: "I was only thinking about finding my mother." Mr. Manzanares took N.C. out into the woods, twisted her neck, molested her, took pictures of her, cut her wrist and then covered her with dirt and brush, as she pretended to be dead.

He went back to the vehicle again and drove J.E. to a stand of trees at the edge of a field. She said she steeled herself, in part, by keeping her mind blank, "as if nothing were happening."

It is unclear how many hours she was handcuffed to the tree. According to interviews with the victims and court documents, Mr. Manzanares left his Border Patrol station at the end of his shift at a few minutes before 6 p.m. He changed out of his uniform into a shirt and sweatpants and then returned to the field in his own pickup. He took J.E. from the tree and drove her to his apartment. J.E. recalled that she still had duct tape over her mouth when he carried her over his shoulder to the apartment and that she made eye contact with a woman standing in the complex.

"I am sorry for what I have done. I am a monster."

"She didn't do anything," J.E. said. "Why didn't she do anything?"

F.B.I. agents and Mission police officers, meanwhile, having identified the agent based in part on M.G.'s report, were closing in.

It was shortly before 1 a.m. and J.E. was trying to fall asleep when she heard loud knocking on the apartment door. Then she heard a single gunshot. Officers eventually forced open the door, untied her and kept her wrapped in a blanket as they put her in an ambulance.

Mr. Manzanares had shot and killed himself with a .40-caliber pistol while seated at his dining room table. On the table, officers found a two-page suicide note. "I am sorry for what I have done," he wrote, explaining that he had been troubled since coming back from Afghanistan. "I am a monster."

NO QUESTIONS ASKED

The three women now live far from the South Texas border, in southwestern Virginia. All three were granted permission to remain in the United States on so-called U visas, issued to victims of sexual assault and other violent crimes.

Officials with Customs and Border Protection said in a statement that they cannot comment on the pending lawsuit, but that they take allegations of misconduct seriously. "C.B.P. has a work force of dedicated men and women who are among the finest civil servants in the world, who carry out their duties with the utmost professionalism, efficiency, honor and distinction," the statement read. "C.B.P. acts decisively and appropriately to address any misconduct."

But agency officials revealed in their response to the women's lawsuit that they had no procedure in place for supervising agents in the field. No policy, they noted, required supervisors to make verbal or physical contact with agents during a shift.

Mr. Manzanares had so much autonomy that day that he even briefly drove his victims into and out of his Border Patrol station in McAllen, but no one questioned his actions.

Sensors set up in the borderlands alert Border Patrol to suspicious activity and movements in the brush, and though Mr. Manzanares failed to respond to the majority of sensor activity in his zone that day, none of his superiors took any steps to find out why.

California town tries to come to terms with last year's fire losses

OJAI, CALIF.

BY TIM ARANGO AND JENNIFER MEDINA

There is the original commencement address that Aldous Huxley gave in 1951, saved from a burning boarding school in Ojai. There is a tattered and singed American flag, too. And on wall after wall of the Ojai museum are photographs of fire and destruction.

It was only a year ago that a wildfire set a ring of flames around this rustic city about 80 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

But the fire is already part of a retrospective exhibition that tries to make sense of the tragedy, even as homes remain unrestored and the trauma remains fresh.

The Thomas Fire, which laid waste to sections of Ojai, briefly stood as the largest in the state's history, only to be eclipsed in August by the Mendocino Complex Fire. Then came the devastation of recent days in Paradise, in Northern California, a blaze of a destructiveness never before seen in modern California history. The Camp Fire has reduced Paradise to ash, and so far the authorities have identified 76 people killed, with more than 1,200 listed as missing. Before that, a fire in 1933 in

Griffith Park, Los Angeles, stood for decades as the state's deadliest, with 29 people killed.

So it is in California that as one community, Paradise, is only starting to comprehend its losses, Ojai, a bohemian idyll in a valley only 15 miles from the Pacific Ocean, is coming together to remember its last big wildfire — and to worry about when the next one might come.

"When we started talking about this exhibit earlier this year, I don't think it occurred to us — we didn't even think about it — that it would be fire season," said Wendy Barker, the director of the Ojai Valley Museum. She added that she felt uneasy about opening the show at a time when the state, yet again, is on fire: in the north, in Paradise, and in the south, with the Woolsey Fire, near Malibu and parts of Ventura County, not too far from Ojai.

But this is California, where these days fires seem to be raging all the time.

Ms. Barker, whose exhibition included the maps of fires that burned near Ojai throughout its history — in 1929, 1932 (for decades the largest in state history), 1948, 1979 and 1985 — said that in the past, after a fire, residents would at least have the respite of believing they would have many years before the next one.

"But do we?" she said. "I don't know.



Bob and Heather Sanders lost their home to fire last year. They are living in a trailer.

It's scary. These aren't isolated incidents anymore."

Stephen J. Pyne, a historian of wildfires at Arizona State University, said it had been a century since a fire in the United States caused deaths on the scale of the Camp Fire. That was the Cloquet Fire, in 1918, in Minnesota, which started with sparks from a railroad and killed nearly 500 people.

"We do seem to be at a tipping point," said Professor Pyne, adding that there needs to be new thinking on zoning and where homes are built, as well as on how to manage forests in the face of growing danger. "If last year didn't do it, if that didn't lead to a massive and immediate response, than what would? Well, this, within a year of the fires of 2017, and this one that has destroyed so much. This is

shaping up to be a major moment on the timeline."

Edward Struzik, a historian and a fellow at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, noted that most of the largest fires in California history had occurred in recent years. In fact, nine of the 10 largest have occurred since 2003.

"It's going to get worse," he said. "I don't think there's any question about it. We're seeing a trend here very clearly. Nobody expected it to happen as quickly as it happened. This is a head-spinning trajectory, these past few years in California."

Heather and Bob Sanders, who have lived in Ojai since 1976, are among those who lost their home in Upper Ojai in the Thomas Fire, where about 100 houses burned to the ground. These days they are living on their property in a trailer, with hopes of rebuilding.

Describing the process of rebuilding, Mr. Sanders said, "It's just a stack of papers." Just the other day, a geological survey of his property was finally finished, which will now allow him to apply for a building permit to rebuild.

The couple's story is included in a new book, "From the Fire: Ojai Reflects on the Thomas Fire," published by two local residents. One of them, Elizabeth Rose, is a lawyer from Massachusetts who a few years ago moved with her husband to Ojai. Her publishing partner,

Deva Temple, who grew up in Ojai but now lives in Oregon, was drawn to the photographs that emerged from the fire.

Ms. Sanders, speaking about losing her home, says in the book: "But life goes on and now we're dealing with it, though there are just too many things to do. We're still figuring out how to rebuild."

Others who lost homes in Ojai decided to pack up and start again somewhere else, where housing is cheaper and where wildfires are not a danger.

"We didn't want to go through that again," said Lauren Crow, 32, who moved to Portland, Ore., with her partner after losing her hand-built tiny house — and her start-up skin care business — in the Thomas Fire.

The destruction in Paradise is likely to reverberate around California, as people in other places wonder if their town could be next.

"It's not like people are buying McMansions in a rural spot," said William Stewart, an expert on forestry at the University of California, Berkeley. "These are places where people have been since the Gold Rush in some places, or at least for many decades. We're now having these historical towns where people are starting to look around, and think: 'We're not that different from Paradise. Could that happen to us?'"