



The dangerous 2,000-mile border between the U.S. and Mexico is known as “The Ribbon,” and is considered to be the deadliest international boundary in the world. The worst of it is an intensely wild stretch called the Naco Corridor, running some 400 miles across Arizona and New Mexico between Nogales, Ariz., and El Paso, Texas. LEFT: Illegals crossing rough terrain and thorny brush in mind-warping temperatures. BELOW: Rob Krentz, uncomfortable in town, getting an award.

A Good Man Gone

Rob Krentz and a dangerous border. By Tim Findley

As this edition of *RANGE* was going to press in late March, we learned that our friend Rob Krentz, an outstanding Arizona rancher and genuinely nice guy was murdered on his ranch by a gunman who fled south into Mexico.

Bluntly, Rob was bushwhacked at close range as he and his dog rode up in an ATV to meet a man spotted on a hillside. Shot through the arm and into his chest, Rob managed to spin the ATV around and drive some 300 yards before passing out. Tracks indicated the shooter followed him and may have been attacked by the dog before shooting the animal and running away, leaving Rob Krentz to die, still in his seat.

On another part of their 35,000-acre ranch, Rob’s brother, Phil, had received a radio-phone message heard by other ranchers on that frequency. It was garbled by the distance, but Phil heard a few words from Rob—“illegal...hurt...need backup.”

Phil tried, again and again, to reach Rob by radio, but there was no response. He began a frantic search for his brother, joined by others in the family as darkness began to settle over the mountains. But it was not until nearly midnight that an Arizona State Trooper helicopter spotted the ATV, its engine still running, and according to a sheriff’s spokesperson, the headlights shining.

Rob was dead, still holding the radio phone. The dog, a beloved pet of Rob’s wife, Sue, was still alive, but could not be saved. In the vehicle, Rob’s rifle and his pistol were found, still in their holsters. A distinctive track of the killer, and possibly a blood trail, led south.

Phil felt the agony swarm over him with undeserved personal guilt. Only the day

before, he had spotted a group of evident drug smugglers carrying packs across another part of the ranch. He tried to avoid being seen as he drove his own ATV into the trees to alert the Border Patrol. But by the time they arrived, the human “mules” had dropped their packs containing 300 pounds of marijuana. Authorities later arrested 13 “undocumented aliens” nearby, but could not attach them to the abandoned drugs. They were held, awaiting transport back to Mexico.

Who, then, was the man who killed Rob, and why? The Cochise County sheriff hedged on information, first alluding to “another incident” the day before, but refusing to confirm that it was the burglary of another rancher’s home where two 9mm pistols were stolen. Three shell casings were found near where Rob was shot, but the sheriff refused to reveal their caliber.

In the darkness of that Saturday night, dogs and trackers were organized, but it was independent hunter-trackers who would pick up the trail. It was already nearing dawn, and the killer had a wide lead on the relatively easy trail leading to the border some 20 miles south. The sheriff’s office would not confirm tracker reports that he left a distinctive print of an unusually large size 13 shoe.

An odd hush spread across the Bootheel border region of Arizona and New Mexico as word spread of the murder of a popular and well-known man who only the year before was inducted into the Arizona Ranchers Hall of Fame. It was partially grief and anger, but it was also quiet fear for what this might bring.



Rob would have counseled patience, as he always did, even with his younger brother. The two of them are heirs to a ranch founded by their family in 1907. They lived with this hard country all their lives, and loved it. Encountering *crosseros* from Mexico was common. Fluent in Spanish and understanding of the arduous trail, they had frequently given them water and food. It was in part to protect themselves. The Krentz ranch house was burglarized years ago, but the rancher’s

reputation was not threatening to illegals, even in recent years as the ugly, violent presence of cartel smugglers became more evident in what is called the Chiricahua Corridor.

Rob, and especially Sue, repeatedly urged and petitioned state and federal officials to recognize the danger posed to them and other ranchers in the area, but there were only endless meetings and vague promises and ultimately useless border fences.

Across the border in Mexico a bloody and gruesome war raged among competing cartels and intimidated or corrupt police and officials. In the last two years alone, 17,000 people have been killed in Mexican border towns, including public officials, police and journalists. Fear rules in a society so encrusted with corruption that it cannot defend itself.

So when American politicians offered another meeting in Douglas, Ariz., to talk about the killing of Rob Krentz, some of his closest friends saw it as useless even to attend. Only three days before, Homeland Security Chief Janet Napolitano told an audience at Arizona State University that “the border is more secure than ever. Getting across the border is very, very difficult.” When she was the politically conscious governor of Arizona less

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than a decade ago, she brought in the National Guard to seal the border. But the guardsmen were ordered not to shoot even if fired upon, and many of them carried no ammunition or even weapons. The cartels merely waited for them to leave. Now, Napolitano has joined the Obama administration in urging a new amnesty program for aliens, presumably including those who are forced by cartels to act as mules in transporting drugs across the border. In the Bootheel, jurisdiction of divisions of the Border Patrol between Arizona and New Mexico remains uncoordinated and distant by some 45 miles from where they know the most heavily used entry corridors to be. Often, those lead, as they do just behind the Krentz ranch, into wilderness and wild regions relentlessly snatched up by crusading environmentalists. They become like free zones for the cartel caravans, protected by such signs as that near the Krentz ranch warning hikers that they may be "entering an area used by drug smugglers." Mexico may confront the traffic with corruption, but the United States does it with fools.

President Felipe Calderon demonstrated his U.S.-touted "war" on the cartels a few days after the killing of Krentz by saying authorities were nearing arrest of a suspect in the 2008 murder of a Juarez journalist, one of dozens of reporters killed or taken hostage by the gangs. On Sunday, March 28, the day after Rob Krentz was killed, 25 armed gunmen burst into the headquarters of the Mexico State Investigative Bureau in Magdalena, beat up everybody they could find, and left, warning the police to "let us do our work." In another part of Mexico near the border, 10 students on their way to picking up scholarships were ambushed, robbed and murdered.

There is a \$15,000 reward for the capture of the gunman who killed Rob Krentz, but his problems may be greater in Mexico than in the U.S. The cartels there have begun a policy of cutting off the fingers or the hands of drug runners who lose their loads. The killer, whatever his motive, has brought them even bigger trouble.

In the Bootheel, and all over the Southwest, there will be an echo for a long time from the last message heard from a good man. "Illegals...hurt...need backup." ■

Check Tim Findley's border story, "The Ribbon," at www.rangemagazine.com. Click on Back Issues, Summer 2006.



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