



COVER STORY:

# Fluid Borders

In 2012, a number of narcotic and human smuggling incidents along the Palos Verdes Peninsula drew national attention, perhaps none more tragic than the death near Santa Barbara of **Coast Guard officer Terrell Horne, a native of Redondo Beach**. This recent trend suggests Mexican panga boats are moving farther north at an alarming rate. Is our coastal area from the South Bay to San Luis Obispo the latest hotbed of human and drug smuggling?

D

ecember was a record-breaking month for migration. The American Cetacean Society sighted an unprecedented “19 grays on one day” at Point Vicente on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. U.S. federal agents cited migrations of another sort, heading north, off the same Southern California coast, departing

from beaches near Ensenada, Mexico and landing in the very coves and inlets used by pirates and smugglers since the 16th century.

According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) spokesperson Virginia Kice, maritime smuggling activity along the Southern California coast has been on the rise for the last four years. “In 2008, there were 45 such incidents detected, most of them in the San Diego area. In fiscal year 2012, there were more than 200, and nearly 40% of the incidents occurred *north* of San Diego County.”

On December 10 in Rancho Palos Verdes, 22 Mexican immigrants and one from Guatemala were arrested after their open-hulled fishing vessel, known as a panga, landed in Abalone Cove. Less than two months earlier on October 30, a panga ran ashore in Malaga Cove with 10 bales of marijuana, weighing about 3,500 pounds. Three men were arrested in a joint operation involving Palos Verdes Estates police, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the Coast Guard.

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL NEVEUX

The coastal area from San Diego to San Luis Obispo has seen a five-fold increase in human and narcotic smuggling over the last year, and the trend is continuing—pushing smugglers more than 100 miles out to sea and farther up the coast.

### SECRET PASSAGEWAY

In a 2008 episode of *Weeds*, Nancy Botwin (played by Mary-Louise Parker), the pot-peddling mother from the fictional San Diego town of Agrestic, hears banging in the maternity shop she thinks is a front for money-laundering, only to be dazed by the sight of a Mexican worker pushing his way out of a tunnel under the boxes of clothes in her storage room.

Federal officials link the surge in maritime smuggling to greater success with land operations along the U.S. southern border with Mexico. U.S. drug enforcement officials have uncovered more than 100 tunnels over the past decade, but those discovered in 2010 and 2011 were exceptional for their scale, sophistication and their link to Mexico's Sinaloa cartel.

The first was 2,200 feet long; the second was more than 6 feet high and had a working elevator with a railway and cart system that ran through its air-conditioned passageway under the border fence to an ice manufacturing plant behind a strip club in Mexico. One U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent dubbed the 2011 Sinaloa masterpiece “an extraordinary feat of engineering.”

Since then, drug smugglers have improvised with no less ingenious but significantly lower-tech catapults and pneumatic cannons that shoot pot over the border fence.

### BIG BUSINESS

Former Mexican president Felipe Calderón estimated that Mexico's cartels earn \$20 billion per year from Americans consuming cocaine, marijuana, heroin and crystal meth. ICE special agent Claude Arnold, whose department investigates the highly trafficked maritime corridor from Orange County to San Luis Obispo, says that for the Sinaloa cartel, “Marijuana is still the main cash crop. It's their bread and butter.”

In the last two years, authorities have seized more than 120,000 pounds of marijuana in maritime smuggling incidents. With the DEA estimating the street value of pot at about \$1,000 per pound, bales of marijuana from a single panga can sell for millions. That same panga, loaded with, say, the 23 immigrants in Albalone Cove, would pay smugglers anywhere from \$6,000 to \$10,000 per person—a profit of up to \$230,000 for the smuggling organization.

Where there is money to be made, the risks are often great. On December 2, a suspected drug smuggling interception near Santa Cruz Island ended in tragedy after a panga rammed into a Coast Guard vessel, killing 34-year-old Chief Petty Officer Terrell Horne III. Horne was a Redondo Beach native and a 14-year Coast Guard veteran, beloved by both his *Halibut* crew members and his family. He left behind a pregnant wife and small child.

Officer Horne's death marked the first deadly encounter between smugglers and the government; the incident immediately captured national attention. On December 10, Congresswoman Lois Capps (CA-23), Congressman Henry Waxman (CA-30) and Congresswoman Janice Hahn (CA-36) wrote a joint letter to DHS secretary Janet Napolitano, requesting a review of efforts “to combat the rise in drug and human smuggling from panga boats” on the California coast.

### ALPHABET SOUP

During an interview in a conference room with a panoramic view of the Port of Los Angeles, Claude Arnold obliges a reporter who asks him to locate his department on the organizational chart provided by the U.S.

## Los Angeles Port Police (LAPP) noticed THREE SUSPECTS RUNNING FROM PORTUGUESE BEND across the road.

### Thirty minutes later, Border Patrol agents and LAPP officers captured 20 wet, sandy Mexican citizens and one Guatemalan, along with a GPS unit.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS). ICE is the largest investigative arm within the immense DHS, whose mission is “to identify and dismantle criminal organizations responsible for the illegal movement of people and goods into and out of the United States.”

Under the box labeled Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Claude locates the box, “Operations,” and because the beltway-centric chart is missing his box, he draws a line and writes, “26 Special Agents in Charge.” He is one of them.

The youngest of four brothers and the son of French immigrants, Claude's formative experiences with law enforcement have all the makings of a Disney movie in which a young boy (instead of a dog) is always getting lost. As a toddler in New Jersey, he hopped on his tricycle and followed his brothers to school. A police officer found him, respected Claude's choice *not* to get in the squad car, and followed him and his tricycle home. “He must have been driving two miles an hour,” Claude says.

Another time, he was on the escalator at Macy's in Herald Square during the holidays. He had grabbed his mother's hand, only to learn, at the top of the escalator, that he was holding another mother's hand.

The Los Angeles area under Claude's jurisdiction is vaster than those of his childhood role models, spanning seven Los Angeles-area counties: Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo. Just 90 miles from the Mexican border, the region has always been a profitable location for smugglers, long before the Sinaloa cartel.

Under Spanish rule (1769-1821), galleons were intercepted by pirates in Portuguese Bend, Abalone Cove and Malaga Cove. In the early 1800s, Californios traded hides known as “leather dollars” for goods provided by Yankee traders. The otter contraband trade was thriving by the end of the Spanish period.

Steep duties during the Mexican period (1822-1846) made smuggling so commonplace that it gained the sympathy of California's Mexican Governor Argüello, who commented in 1824, “I see not why we should prevent it, since our people are the gainers.” From 1920 to 1933, during Prohibition in America, California's “Rum Row” transferred huge quantities of liquor from mother ships to smaller speedboats that, like today's pangas, often operated at night without lights and

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landed in the many coves off the California coast, including Palos Verdes.

### ANATOMY OF TWO INCIDENTS

Successful interdictions rely on a nimble network of communication and cooperation both within Claude Arnold's department and among HSI partner agencies—the U.S. Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection. Add to that local police forces, the Los Angeles Border Enforcement Security Task Force (LA BEST), the DEA and the Maritime Coordination Center.

#### *Human Smuggling: Abalone Cove, December 10, 2012*

Abalone Cove Beach is a feast for marine biologists, routinely serving up urchins, sea stars, chestnut cowries, sunburst anemones, giant keyhole limpets, feather boa kelp and harbor seals. As Smuggler's Cove (a local name for the area), it leads a double life.

While law enforcement officials maintain that no smuggling event is ever the same, a few patterns have emerged. For departure, taxi drivers in Mexico bring their “loads” (a smuggling term for humans) to the panga. Each passenger pays between \$3,000 and \$10,000 for the journey, which includes a driver (often equipped with a cell phone and GPS), a refueler and a spotter, along with vehicles prepared for their arrival in the U.S.

“No one tells them the risks of going 150 miles out into the Pacific,” Claude says ... risks that include bad weather, dehydration and often half the number of life jackets required. “We have no idea how many souls

have been lost at sea.”

According to court documents, at 5:15 a.m. on December 10, Border Patrol agents were surveilling the coastline near Abalone Cove with infrared photography when they spotted a panga one mile away, heading for Portuguese Bend. By 5:25, the agents called Border Patrol, which notified “all assets in the area” and headed to the shoreline to capture the boat.

By 5:45, the Central California Maritime Coordination Center in Long Beach was responding to “a possible maritime smuggling event.” By 6:00 a.m., officers from the Palos Verdes Estates Police Department noticed a red Dodge Caravan and a light blue GMC Safari on Palos Verdes Drive South, near the suspected landing site. By 6:15, the Lomita sheriff arrived to take custody of the two van drivers (Palos Verdes Peninsula is technically under the jurisdiction of Los Angeles County police; only the tiny city of Palos Verdes Estates has its own police department).

Los Angeles Port Police (LAPP) noticed three suspects running from Portuguese Bend across the road. Thirty minutes later, Border Patrol agents and LAPP officers captured 20 wet, sandy Mexican citizens and one Guatemalan, along with a GPS unit. They were arrested at 8:30 a.m. and taken to the San Clemente Border Patrol Station. The Los Angeles Port Police recovered the 27-foot, single-engine panga, which had been drifting at sea since 6:00 a.m.

The affidavit offers a glimpse into the desperate nature of the December 10 journey. One woman was terrified because she could not swim. Another passenger thought he would be traveling in a yacht. When the engine stalled, one man was threatened by the driver because he was “too fat” and told he would be thrown overboard.

The driver admitted that he had been convicted of transferring illegal aliens into the United States and had served 17 months in a federal prison before being deported to Mexico. Two other passengers spoke of multiple deportations.

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#### *Drug Smuggling: Malaga Cove, October 30, 2012*

The day before Halloween was a busy day for The Costume Closet in Malaga Cove, situated in the historic Malaga Cove School that now serves as the district office for the Palos Verdes Unified School District. Soccer teams were practicing on the lush green fields when a Coast Guard chopper drew the attention of locals who gathered in the gazebo above RAT (Right After Torrance) Beach. A panga loaded with bales of marijuana had landed in broad daylight.

“I have a hard time believing that Palos Verdes Estates was the intended destination,” Palos Verdes Estates police chief John Eberhard says. “I'm guessing that the destination was farther north.”

Until a couple of years ago, Chief Eberhard had



**DETOURED AND  
DETAINED** A panga ashore,  
similar to those found  
on and off the South Bay  
waters.

never had to deal with pangas. When three of the smugglers walked up the beach trail and entered his jurisdiction, three of Eberhard's officers detained them. The smugglers sat on the curb until a Spanish-speaking officer arrived.

Hours before the panga arrived in Palos Verdes Estates, a Navy helicopter spotted the boat near San Clemente Island and reported it to the Maritime Coordination Center. By 3:00 p.m., a Customs and Border Protection air unit updated the location and relayed it to the Coast Guard helicopter. Nearly one dozen federal and local law enforcement agencies participated in the recovery of the panga, the marijuana and the drug smugglers.

Over the last two years, authorities have seized more than 60 tons of marijuana in maritime smuggling incidents. "Marijuana is a cash crop requiring no processing, unlike cocaine, heroin or crystal meth," Special Agent Arnold explains, which is why pot smuggling is both profitable and relentless.

### IT'S COMPLICATED

With maritime smuggling interdictions, indictments and convictions in Southern California at an all-time high, law enforcement agencies appear to be doing their jobs—even risking their lives in the case of Officer Terrell Horne III. Other times, law enforcement is disarmed by ironies that are quintessentially American. Last year, a U.S. citizen and former beauty queen gave birth to twin girls in the Los Angeles area and whisked them across the border to meet their father and her

husband, Joaquín (El Chapo) Guzmán, head of the Sinaloa cartel.

One law office's website offers another American right, via the Fifth Amendment: "Los Angeles drug smuggling defense attorneys at Cron, Israels & Stark have been successfully defending clients who are being prosecuted for marijuana smuggling and other related drug crimes for decades ... *Hablamos Español.*" Alan Riding, author of *Distant Neighbors: Portrait of the Mexicans*, recently wrote in *The New York Times* that "the biggest headache" inherited by Mexico's new president, Peña Nieto, is "the war on drugs," in which tens of thousands of Mexicans have died in territorial wars from competing cartels. "Mexicans feel they are fighting an American battle on Mexican soil."

The border is literally fluid. Closer to home, adolescent pot use is up, Washington "has bigger fish to fry" and, in California, Heal the Bay likely prays that the whales don't inhale, given the quantities of drugs dumped at sea.

Now that Colorado and Washington have legalized the recreational use of marijuana, Riding adds, "It is hard to explain why Mexicans should die to prevent marijuana being smuggled north."

Human and narcotic smuggling in a national and international context is a multi-billion dollar business. Drug trafficking is chronic issue, due to what Hillary Clinton once called America's "insatiable demand for illegal drugs." Until this market landscape changes, expect the issue to make local and national headlines for many years to come. ●



### BY THE NUMBERS

How the issue adds up.

# \$9,000

Amount Antonio Bonifacio Benitez, 41, spent on a boat trip back into the states after returning to Mexico to bury his mother. He was found dead, face down, in a panga near San Diego in 2011.

# 25

Illegal immigrants detained on Peppertree Drive in Rancho Palos Verdes this December after their panga washed ashore.

# 755

Miles of continuous tunnel discovered in Yuma near the U.S./Mexican border last year.

# 200+

Human or drug smuggling operations intercepted between San Diego and San Luis Obispo between October 2011 and September 2012.

# 4,000

Pounds of marijuana found on a panga in Abalone Cove in Rancho Palos Verdes in November 2011.

# 2

Children Redondo Beach Coast Guard officer Terrell Horne, 34, left behind after his death.

PANGA BOAT BY SHUTTERSTOCK.COM