

a CRACK in HELL ...POINTBLANK

By Corby Anderson

If you are given a vehicular choice while working on a documentary film production anywhere near La Frontera, the border region that stretches from San Diego to Brownsville, Texas, always rent the largest vehicle possible, preferably a Suburban. Do this especially if a national network is paying the gas bill.

The Suzuki XL7 "all wheel drive" moon-wagon may be tempting to the cost conscious, but the narcos who operate along the Arizona border won't respect it, and when you try to run from them its dirt bike frame won't be able to withstand the jet-like torque that has foolishly been overbuilt into the tiny washing machine motor. You will be left lurching off into the saguaro like a lusty heat seeking missile at a fireworks show, and the smugglers will be on you before you can roll tape.

On the Documentary Road, following a story as it unfolds, often literally shooting from the hip, decisions must be made on the fly, and lessons are hard won, the consequences dire and the margin for error thin as a milk less crepe. This was one of the lessons that I learned as a hired wheelman and sound engineer for a wily veteran of over fifty documentary films, Wayne Ewing as we sprinted around La Frontera, the arid border region that snakes from San Diego to Brownsville, Texas. We spent most of March charging eastward, fueled only by Jack Links jerky, peanut M & M's, shrimp cocktail, and left-over Coke water, documenting the construction of the Border Wall – a massive, endless project of steel and gold, whose origin is cemented in the shallow mud of fear, paranoia, failed policy, and ignorance.

The Border Wall, in theory, is intended to keep Mexican laborers from crossing illegally into America. It is made of various shapes and configurations across its span, but for the most part consists of rusted piping and landing craft materials that were reclaimed after the first Gulf War. It reaches eighteen feet high in most places, although in some long reaches the wall is but tangle of steel beams welded together into a low slung vehicle barrier. The Border Patrol recons the new wall to hold up the average illegal immigrant from crossing by an average of only four minutes. At one section south of Tucson, just a mile or less down the road from where the construction crews were building more wall, we found a simple rope ladder attached to the wall the instant that we started traversing it. When motivation is strong and options few, desperation hastens improvisation.

Still, good people die every day in the American desert, opting to avoid the new attention and to go around the wall, further out into the heart of the furnace. They walk for dozens of miles into the desert in disparate groups led by coyotes, their guides who require thousands of dollars to lead these incursions, a profitable venture than now finds most of them in league with the narcos. They die of exposure, of thirst, of assault. Women are raped and abandoned to wander towards their helpless end. Men are murdered in their sleep. Coyotes turn on one another out in the tragic canyons, the black market loads that burden them and their flocks worth more than a life's worth of guilt or conscious.

These dry, undulating scrub and cactus hills southwest of Tucson is where No More Deaths (No Mas Muertes) make their rounds. Socially conscious former collegians from Notre Dame University make camp there, prepping the grounds for the influx of energetic spring breakers who come to assist the cause. The cause is what it sounds like: No More Deaths. Since 2004, No More Deaths has patrolled the Arizona desert in the searing summer months, assisting immigrants who are injured, sick, lost, or worse.

We joined up with the No More Deaths crew, a mixed platoon of grizzled activists, newly indoctrinated suburbanite undergrads, and a silver headed old timer, in the cold morning at the Arivaca Store, where we stocked up on water, ice, and road nosh. On the way to meet the we encountered two immigrant ladies, who stood near the dirt road looking like frightened Ewoks, clad all in black with hoods over their faces. They were lost and injured and just wanted to go home back to Mexico. We gave them food and water, and at their request called the Border Patrol to have them picked up.

Still processing that incident, I searched the Arivaca Store in earnest, but my search for a Virgin of Guadalupe sticker came up short once more. The narcos believe that the Virgin will protect them from harm, and we had been advised to add one to our Chevy's back window the next day, when we were to go over into Mexico. I had suggested, half jokingly, a can of white shoe polish with which to write PRESS on all over the windows, but our guide, a conniving huckster, local photographer and author of coffee table books

full of mummified corpses suggested otherwise, and at that time I trusted him. Later, across the border, when we were at the mercy of his interpreting skills and the time for direct action (not contract renegotiation) was at hand, my mind would change, but on this day his instincts proved correct.

After the requisite orienting of maps, our convoy pushed out into the sea of shattered rock and twisted canyons. We moved fast and with purpose, and when we stopped the activists unloaded their gear swiftly, faster than I could rig up my sound package. A location sound package is fairly simple – in this case consisting of a telescoping boom pole, which holds a high-powered shotgun mic in its fur-covered zeppelin at the end. Around my neck I had a small, battery-powered mixer that is protected by a tough, denim like fabric. Early on I had figured that the best way to manage several lengths of fragile audio cabling that connected the boom to the mixer, and me to the director was to rig them looping off to either side of my torso, hung by cheap gas station carabineers.

In practice, this was the best method for moving fast and light through snaky brush, often in a dead sprint, but there was no way to avoid getting snagged, short of levitation. My job was to constantly, without fail, be on my toes, to be the eyes of the cameraman, as his eyes are locked into the rubber viewfinder, his feet dancing along sharp rock and vanishing desert trail. Wayne does an amazing job of feeling the terrain as he glides along at breakneck speed, often backwards or sideways, capturing a moving subject. I was to shadow him closely, as we were tethered by an XLR cable that serves as a conduit to professional production sound as well as a potential noose, snagging easily if allowed to drape low in the rocks and brush, and that is how expensive cameras get destroyed and hard planned shots lost. The devil is in the details in this line of work, and the details are unending. Running through the desert in advance of a quick moving band of college kids, I was to stop my cameraman from sure disaster, but to let him move if

the obstacle that he was about to encounter was deemed to be passable in the least. My gear was innately catchy, and I felt like a giant piece of double-sided female Velcro running sideways through a narrow hall of hooks. When the flat land running up into the hills gave way to the veins, and then arteries of the canyon system, we followed leader of No More Deaths, an athletic, tall and bearded man in his mid-twenties to lead us to the proper canyon, where he had warned us a squalid scene awaited. Carrying water jugs and empty backpacks, the activists trailed along behind their leader, who had recently been given a ticket for littering when caught leaving full water bottles out in the desert in a high traffic area, the Border Patrol ticket coming just days after he had discovered a dead teenaged immigrant girl's body in similar terrain.

We alternately followed behind at a brisk pace, or ran ahead to get shots of them marching past, our network interpreter and guide grumbling at every step about being asked to carry the tripod. As a self-promotional desert rat, I expected him to arrive in something more suited for the terrain at hand than shorts and running shoes. His fat legs were soon a trail map of bloody scratches and gouges, and a small formation of black flies and mosquitoes lined up to lap on his freshly spilled blood.

Down at the trailhead, if that is what you would call it, we had looked up into the hills and oriented to our target canyon, and as we followed along, I found it fascinating that this activist leader, a young, strapping lad who oozed self-confidence (not to mention disdain for the media) was so focused on the fancy GPS unit that dangled like digital dog tags from his neck. It fit his wardrobe

though, I thought. He was dressed for the part, a striding stereotype and a walking advertisement for any of the chain distributors of adventure wear.

After an hour of winding up through dry spillways, scrambling up loose shale, and zagging through cactus gardens of innumerable variety, I started to wonder if his nose to the screen approach at hiking wasn't getting us miserably lost. So did the rest of the film crew. His fellow humanitarians just followed along, intermittently yelling in Spanish at the top of their lungs. This was to warn the immigrants who may be hiding ahead of us that we were of the church, and friendly to their circumstance. At each instance of their yelling, my headphone-covered ears were blasted by their closely miked blurtings. When on a rolling film production, the subjects could be live at any time, and any thing said must be heard. This made my life as a soundman difficult and jumpy. As we motored ahead in rattlesnake country, I used the mic to listen closely for any sign of reptilian



warning. I hate snakes, and I figured that I might as well use the resources that I have at my disposal.

At the top of a rise, I could make out the distinctive bulge of the mountain that capped the canyon that we had originally been attempting to hike in to. The human train ground to a halt.

"I think that we are lost." Said our leader.

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"I told you!" said our interpreter, mockingly. "I don't need no fancy computer to tell me that I am way over here when we are supposed to be way over there!" he added. "These people! I told you miles ago!" he said, stalking off, using a favorite expression of his. As he moved off to scan the hill to our east, I pointed the shotgun mic at him, where I caught him muttering to himself. "This deal is about to change." he said in a low, threatening growl. "They hire me to guide and I gotta follow Eddie freaking Bauer and his magic orb. The NERVE!"

I chuckled, and turned back to the discussion that was at hand. It was hot, even in March, and we had walked many miles in the wrong direction. We had left our trucks in a fairly protected and hidden area, and the chances of us finding them easily were diminishing with every step. My boss was exasperated, and after a lively discussion about the foolhardy grip that GPS technology had on our young subjects, and a sidebar discussion about common sense, he ended up taking charge of the expedition with the sureness of a career film director. He pointed across the vertical maze to where we would go, and we followed, our own guide Juan now huffing along out near the front, his every step a spiteful confirmation of his rightness. When they chisel the words that define his life on his gravestone, the words that Juan Annerino will lie under will be ironic... "I Told You So."

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We fought through a jungle of thick sage and cactus, Ironwood and Brittle Brush, finally arriving at a scene that Wayne would later come to refer to as "A Crack in Hell". A narrow, steep wash filled, in some places several feet deep with a tangle of human detritus. Backpacks upon backpacks. Purses, pants, jackets, shoes. A women's underwear stretched across the tangled branches of an old cedar. "Probably she was raped.", someone said.

Scattered about in that doomed wash was trash piled knee deep, discarded water bottles of every shape and kind, empty Pedialyte bottles, Red Bull cans and ephedrine bottles were everywhere. There is much walking and no sleeping on the Coyote's watch. Tequila bottles lay shattered and empty. Human excrement was everywhere. We filmed as a volunteer held up a Valentines Day card that had played a song. It felt like death, a terrible place of viciousness and misery. The heat that roiled in that shallow ditch was choking, the smell even more so. I wondered if the sweat that poured off of Ewing's face was not mixed with tears. The activists picked through the massive piles of backpacks, taking the

ones that were not too severely soiled away to be reused in Hefty bags and in their own backpacks. Theirs was a grim toil, and certainly not what most college kids expect when they think of spring break.

Having seen and filmed enough for the day, and both of us feeling worn out from our fourth consecutive emotional day of hiking and filming, we started back down that evil wash towards the cars. Wayne led, taking no chances with the GPS reliant youngster. The sun was going down and this was no place to be wandering around after dark.

Corby Anderson is a freelance writer and filmmaker based out of Monterey, California, where he is writing the great American ski bum novel. A massive pile of his short stories, journalism, poems, and novel excerpts can be sifted through at corbyanderson.wordpress.com.

The Border Wall is a feature-length documentary from Colorado based filmmaker Wayne Ewing (Breakfast With Hunter, When I Die, Free Lisl: Fear and Loathing in Denver) about the attempt by the Department of Homeland Security under Secretary Michael Chertoff to erect 670 miles of walls along the 2000 mile southern border of the United States in the waning days of the Bush administration.

The film can be purchased for \$20 at www.theborderwall.com.

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