

## **Volunteers get taste of fright duty**

**Their 1st night scouring the Arizona-Mexico border for illegal migrants was unnerving. One asked, 'Are we looking like idiots?'**

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The fledgling civilian patrols of the Minuteman Project had just began their first overnight surveillance of the border when a rumor ricocheted among the 11 volunteers posted along the cattle fence that marks the international line.

As many as two dozen members of the nation's latest Public Enemy No. 1, the Central American-based gang called Mara Salvatrucha 13, or MS-13, reportedly were aiming to attack the Minutemen with assault rifles on a moonless night.

Chaos and a brief comedy of errors ensued. Suddenly, volunteers hopped into their cars and led one another on an aimless flight, seeking refuge at one of their posts that wasn't even manned. Then they realized they had no command station or even a commander. The radio operator at the Minuteman headquarters wasn't responding.

### **Panic subsides**

The panic subsided after volunteer Darrel Wood, 44, a former Army Special Forces soldier, urged calm in the early minutes of Tuesday.

"What do you guys make of all this? Are we making a statement or are we looking like idiots?" asked Wood, a Minuteman leader and phone company field technician from Price, Utah, addressing some of the dozen journalists trailing the team. "I just hope no one gets hurt. It would be a sad thing."

The dangerous graveyard duty was a pioneering moment for the grass-roots Minuteman Project, which is so angry about illegal immigration that it has just launched a program to patrol the border this month. This past weekend the group placed about 200 volunteers on a 2.5-mile stretch of the border just outside the town of Naco, Ariz.

Arizona is the nation's busiest migrant smuggling corridor.

In the high desert mountain landscape tinged minty green this spring, the volunteers use binoculars and night scopes to spy migrants sneaking into the U.S. and then call the Border Patrol. Minuteman organizers said their tips led federal agents to apprehend more than 100 illegal migrants so far this week, a number U.S. officials couldn't confirm.

By dawn Tuesday, the first official day of surveillance ended in the San Pedro River Valley, and volunteers acknowledged that inadequate preparation left them disorganized in the night shift's initial stages.

Still, their ragtag efforts stood as a symbol of protest against President Bush's failure to stem widespread illegal immigration, they said. Bush has called the volunteers "vigilantes." Many of them carry sidearms and wear body armor. Their civilian patrols have been criticized by some as racist.

Without more volunteers for the midnight duty, Minutemen acknowledged partial defeat in trying to cover a small stretch of the border. Most illegal crossings of migrants and drug carriers occur at night, U.S. authorities said. Many migrants and smugglers already have found routes around the Minutemen posts, according to Mexican border agents, who have stepped up their own frontier patrols.

It wasn't a complete failure, the volunteers said, because starting with weekend activities, their controversial initiative attracted international attention.

Though many of the 11 observers were disappointed at the low turnout for the 10 p.m.-to-6 a.m. assignment, none indicated surrender.

"I feel great, I feel energized," said Tim Donnelly, 38, of Twin Peaks, Calif., a drill-bit manufacturer who wore a cowboy hat and an oilskin duster and carried a long-barreled, pearl-handled Colt 45 tied to his leg. "Now we're back on the issues. We're not just on the hype."

"No brag, but I wasn't scared," said Buddy Watson, 60, a retired South Carolina prison guard who now lives in Springdale, Ark., following the MS-13 incident. "I believe this is the start of something."

But the momentary rumor, passed up and down the gravel Border Road outside Naco, clearly unnerved the Minutemen, who set up observation posts beside their pickups and cars in the chilly spring night.

The rumor gained credibility when Watson confirmed to all that he was warned of the threat during an organizational briefing earlier in the day. Then one volunteer from Houston drove his pickup to each watchman to spread the word.

"Let's go now, guys!" shouted the volunteer, who identified himself only as Bill, 48, a technical field worker whose girth resembled that of a football nose tackle. He asked that his last name not be used.

"If my leader is being attacked, I'm ready to defend him. Let's go!" Donnelly added, jumping into his pickup.

After several minutes of confused driving, the men exited their cars and circled on high ground off the road. The 11-man crew was visibly smaller than the prior shift's 31 observers.

Watson reminded his colleagues of instructions from Minuteman founder Jim Gilchrist, a Vietnam veteran and retired accountant from Orange County, Calif.: "Upon confrontation, Mr. Gilchrist said, 'Back away and stand aside.'"

One man, about 6-foot-2 and appearing in his 50s, entered the circle and interjected: "It's kind of hard to back away from an automatic weapon."

"It's not our job to confront the worst gang in the world! I'm not going to get involved in a military operation!" the man said. "We can't see more than 50 feet, and we got people crawling up in black camouflage!"

Another suggested return fire. "If anybody fires, it's a threat upon us," he said. Donnelly added: "Should we have a word that means 'Get out!' Like 'Alamo?'"

Bill interrupted: "This isn't a test of testosterone. Ain't nobody going to be called a [sissy] if they don't want to stay."

Bill then ran to two passing Border Patrol vehicles. He returned and told the unit that the Border Patrol didn't know anything about a possible MS-13 attack in the area.

Eventually, Wood, the former Special Forces soldier, became a voice of reason, assigning men to two posts a half-mile apart. Bill then left the contingent, leaving 10 volunteers to monitor the border.

**~ What can you expect?'**

"We can't stop everybody. We're just here to make a statement," Wood said. "What can you expect when you've never done this before?"

Wood described the moment as Minuteman lore in the making.

"I think it's a wake-up call for the patriots," he said. "They'll have stories to tell their grandchildren."