

Injured border agents likely were ambushed

By Jerry Seper

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Two U.S. Border Patrol agents wounded last week near Nogales, Ariz., were shot by assailants dressed in black commando-type clothing in what law-enforcement authorities say was a planned ambush by drug smugglers a mile north of the U.S.-Mexico border.

More than 50 rounds were fired at the agents after they spotted suspected drug smugglers in a canyon east of Nogales, authorities said. Although most of the suspected smugglers fled, one of the men opened fire and the other used a hand-held radio to point out the agents' location to at least two other shooters hidden nearby, they said.

The agents, who were backtracking a previous marijuana load on foot, were shot in the leg with high-powered weapons. Both agents were in uniform at the time of the shooting. Authorities said the gunmen withdrew from the canyon using military-style cover and concealment tactics to escape back into Mexico. No one was arrested.

Santa Cruz County Sheriff Tony Estrada, whose jurisdiction includes the Nogales area, said at least four shooters were involved. He said investigators found commando clothing, food, water and other "sophisticated equipment" at the site.

"The fact they would shoot at law-enforcement officers deeply concerns us. They have always protected their drug loads, usually against other drug gangs, but they have bumped it up one more level," Sheriff Estrada said. "It's clear they intended to intimidate the agents in an ambush, but whether they wanted to kill them is not known.

"They showed, however, that given the opportunity, they have the capability of doing so," he said.

Sheriff Estrada questioned whether the shooters were Mexican army deserters known to protect drug loads, who have offered \$50,000 bounties on Border Patrol agents and state and local police officers. The so-called "Zetas" are suspected in nearly 90 deaths of rival gang members in the past two years as part of a violent drug war to control smuggling routes into the United States.

Members have used their military training and stolen equipment, including high-powered weapons, to fight competing organizations.

The shooting was the latest in a rising number of assaults on Border Patrol agents in the Tucson sector, which includes the Nogales area. Since Oct. 1, the start of the fiscal year, 196 assaults on the agents, including 24 shootings, have been recorded. During the same period last year, 92 assaults were reported, with five shootings.

The sector is the busiest alien- and drug-trafficking corridor in the country.

"An assault of this nature is always of grave concern to the Border Patrol since the safety of our field agents is paramount," said Border Patrol spokesman Mario Villarreal. "This attack is now being thoroughly investigated, not only by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, but by other law-enforcement agencies, including the FBI."

Doctors said both agents will require extensive recovery periods, with one agent needing additional surgery.

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A Border Patrol report on the incident said the agents observed a dozen men dressed in dark clothing sitting under a tree and that as they approached from different directions, they identified themselves in Spanish and ordered the men to stay seated.

The report said all but two of the men fled, but one man "put something up to his mouth, as if talking on a radio," pointing at the two agents as the second man began firing. It said the agents returned fire, moved to cover and then began "receiving gunfire from another direction." After the first agent was hit, the second was wounded as he tried to reach his partner, the report said.

Two Black Hawk helicopters responded, but the gunmen had fled. Authorities later found 500 pounds of marijuana.