Drops of Water in the Desert Help Immigrants on Their Way; Tales of Dehydration and Death Motivate Volunteer Fliers

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Body

Flying 500 feet above the simple barbed-wire fence that marks the U.S.-Mexico border, Armando Alarcon scans the ***desert*** below not just for a sign of life. He's also looking for a signal of distress.

On this day, he sees only creosote bushes and ATV tracks in the dirt. He sees a big buck loping through the brush and a Border Patrol truck parked north of the border. He sees a cluster of cattle, a large field of black volcanic ash and the huge crater formed when the volcano collapsed. Finally, Alarcon's single-engine Cessna buzzes past the open arms of the Cristo Rey (Christ the King) statue built on a mountainside that straddles the end of the United States and the beginning of Mexico.

It is down below where illegal ***immigrants*** take their first steps onto U.S. soil and where many collapse to their ***deaths*** in the brutal ***desert*** heat.

Alarcon's goal is to try to prevent that, a quixotic project he calls Paisanos al Rescate, or Countrymen to the Rescue. On summer weekends, this small group of ***volunteer*** pilots and spotters take turns flying a 30-year-old refurbished aircraft in search of migrants who need to be rescued or who just need a few bottles of ***water*** parachuted their ***way***.

"It's, basically, like looking for a needle in a haystack," said Alarcon, a 38-year-old customer service representative of an El Paso trucking company. "We've got 2,000 miles of border, and what we're covering is like a speck of sand on a beach. But we're just trying to ***help*** out our little corner of world."

This is Paisanos' third summer up in the air, and this year has seen the tenor of the illegal immigration debate escalate. Polls say the issue will decide some contested midterm races. Congress has taken the divisive debate on the road this month with public hearings from California to New Hampshire. The original Minutemen Project has morphed into several factions, some of them patrolling the Mexican border for illegal ***immigrants***, others monitoring day-laborer sites up north. Still, Alarcon and his little group plug along.

It's not that the rhetoric or proposed changes to federal immigration law or the daily news coverage of "broken borders" is lost on them. They're neither for illegal immigration nor against it, and they don't consider themselves political activists. They're simply humanitarians, they say.

"My biggest concern is that people were dying in the ***desert***," said Mario Luna, the co-founder of Paisanos. "We're not telling them where to cross or how to cross or to come over here or that we have a job for you.

"If you're encountering ***death***, it's time to activate," Luna said. A corporate pilot for an El Paso beer distributing company during the week, Luna pilots Alarcon's Cessna 172 Skyhawk as a Paisanos ***volunteer*** on weekends.

A 2004 news report on the ***death*** of an 8-year-old girl trying to cross the ***desert*** near El Paso spurred Alarcon to action. He was much luckier than that child, having entered the United States as an infant in his mother's arms when she waded across Rio Grande into El Paso. Twenty years later, he became a U.S. citizen while serving in the Army during the Persian Gulf War.

"We give needles to our drug addicts," Alarcon said. "Why can't we give a bottle of ***water*** to a fellow human being?"

With almost $70,000 of his own money, Alarcon bought the small plane and began flying lessons. He subsequently met Luna and proposed his idea of ***dropping water*** bottles to migrants on the ***desert*** floor.

"Armando was all excited, saying, 'Let's get it going; let's get it done,' " Luna recalled. "I said, 'Hey, wait a minute. Let me see if it's legal.' " His task was to check the Federal Aviation Administration regulations; Alarcon's, to consult with the Border Patrol. Luna found that ***dropping*** objects out of an aircraft is allowed at certain altitudes. Alarcon ran his plan by the local office of the Border Patrol.

"We have no reason to think that his efforts are nothing other than humanitarian," said Doug Mosier, spokesman for the El Paso sector of the Border Patrol.

An agreement was made that Paisanos would call BORSTAR, the specialized search, trauma and rescue teams operated by the Border Patrol, if anyone appeared to signal for a ***desert*** rescue. The third summer into the project, no such call has been made, although almost 300 bottles have been ***dropped*** to migrants. But lots of other things have happened since June 2004.

The first few bubble-wrapped bottles of ***water*** burst upon impact, and the intended targets in the ***desert*** responded by hurling back rocks. "They thought we were trying to hit them -- intentionally," Alarcon said.

An engineer in San Francisco, who read about the project, came up with a novel idea: Attach small parachutes to the bottles. The engineer bought and donated several hundred 36-inch-diameter surplus Army flare chutes. He also had them silk-screened with information in Spanish on the symptoms of ***dehydration*** and heat stroke; the distance from the border to Phoenix and other cities in the West; the local telephone numbers of the Mexican and Salvadoran consulates and instructions on how to signal the plane if a rescue was needed.

Midsummer last year, Paisanos ran out of money, grounding the airplane that burns 10 gallons of fuel an hour at $5 a gallon. Then came a couple of lucky breaks. Mexican businessman Pedro Zaragoza, who owns dairy and beverage firms in Juarez, donated ***water*** bottles and fuel. Bruce Springsteen also read about the project and mentioned it at a concert in Connecticut, inspiring one devotee to post information on the rock star's official fan Web site.

That prompted donations ranging from $10 to $500. "Thank you for your good work. Bruce sent me," read a note from a New Jersey Springsteen fan who enclosed a $25 donation. Wrote another who sent $50 from Woodstock, N.Y.: "As a member of a group (Irish) with a history of unofficial entry to this country, I know something of those who have lived with the fear of discovery and repatriation, but at least not with the horror of dying of thirst."

Since Oct. 1, 34 migrants have died in the El Paso sector, which includes two West Texas counties and New Mexico, according to the Border Patrol. During the same period, 484 "migrants in distress" have been rescued by the Border Patrol. One hundred forty-two migrants have died in the ***desert*** of the Tucson sector; 615 have been rescued.

"I go to work, and I'm always prepared mentally and with my equipment for this to turn into something else," said Steve Aguilar, a senior agent in the Deming, N.M., Border Patrol office. "I always ask a large group that I find, 'Did you leave anybody behind?' I don't just want to catch somebody else. But I don't want anybody to stay behind and die."

Aguilar said he doesn't object to the Paisanos project, but he sees it as impractical. "People usually die from overheating, not from lack of ***water***," he said. "I understand what he's doing, and I have no problem with [it]. . . . But it's not the most effective ***way*** to stop people from dying in the ***desert***."

This year, Paisanos al Rescate received its nonprofit tax status, which Alarcon hopes will ***help*** the group raise money. Paisanos wants to purchase and station at least one plane and one helicopter in El Paso, Tucson and Calexico, Calif., and keep them fueled and stocked with ***water*** bottles and parachutes.

Among the messages on the Paisanos parachute is one that asks migrants to write the group to let it know about their journeys. To date no one has. But this spring, Alarcon got a pleasant surprise. He was invited to the popular Univision variety show "Sábado Gigante," filmed in Miami, where he thought he was going to be interviewed about the project. Instead, the show's host introduced a Mexican woman, then living in Chicago, who presented Alarcon with a plaque of appreciation. She said she and her companions were able to finish their ***desert*** trek in Arizona with ***water*** bottles ***dropped*** by the Paisanos plane. She brought the parachute with her as proof.

"We're flying up there, and we have zero contact with anyone. So it was like, wow! I didn't know what to do," Alarcon said. "It felt good."

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