



Rancho Palos Verdes Neighborhood Watch

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PANGA ACTIVITY ON SOUTH BAY COASTLINES

For many years, Palos Verdes Peninsula and South Bay Neighborhood Watch groups and residents have been on the front lines as the eyes and ears for law enforcement in our fight against crime in our cities. We then became instrumental in watching for criminal activity in our wildfire-vulnerable canyons. Now we are part of a serious transnational security problem – that of maritime smuggling of drugs, weapons, people, money to terrorists, and anything else that illegally comes through our local coast.

Border Patrol Agent, Ernesto Arellano, (Ernie), a 14-year employee of the U.S. Border Patrol, now under Homeland Security, recently spoke at a CERT meeting with a real nuts-and-bolts presentation of what our country is up against. As he says, 9-11 was the wake-up call that brought to light not only the shortcomings of first responders, but also the challenge to citizens that we are part of the solution to a safe America. As a result, agencies and citizens alike got busy preparing for disasters.

MANAGEMENT The Central California Maritime Agency Coordination Group (CenCal MAC) or as it's nationally known, the Los Angeles/Long Beach Regional Coordinating Mechanism (LA/LB ReCoM), is composed of an alphabet soup of acronyms (US Customs, Dept. of Fish and Game, FBI, ICE Homeland Security Investigations, National Guard, US Coast Guard, National Parks, CHP, DEA, LA County Fire, Santa Barbara County Sheriff's, Ventura County Sheriff, Orange County Sheriff, L. A. Port Police and L.A. County Sheriff's Dept.) The Joint Harbor Operation Center (JHOC) in San Diego, CA is a US Coast Guard command center and the coordinating agency that observes and watches beaches and coastline criminal activity and follows up on tips and leads. The umbrella of maritime activity is the Dept. of Homeland Security. Ernie and his fellow agents are responsible

for coastline criminal activity between San Diego and Santa Barbara.

CRIMINAL OPERATIONS Major maritime crimes include smuggling threats, narcotics, weapons, gang violence, kidnapping, pick-up crews, homicides, prostitution, and money laundering. JHOC's first priority is the safety and well being of communities such as ours, their own personnel, and the victims of human trafficking. Illegal activity has primarily been overland across southwest states' land borders, through dozens of underground tunnels, and through state parks thence to points inland all over the country. These routes are being challenged by stricter border control, resulting in increasing maritime criminal activity. The common thread of these crimes is that they are cartel controlled. What our communities experience is trespassing, break-ins, vehicle thefts, and petty thefts of such things as food, water, and jackets.

OPERATIONAL PATTERN

Smugglers travel in pangas 20' to 40' long, capable of going 40 knots and traveling as far as 200 miles out to sea before they turn towards coastlines. The trip may be 2-days or more and the pangas are operated by the driver, a fuel guy, and a GPS person. They can carry up to 500 gallons of fuel on the larger Super Pangas, much of it normally in 5-10 gallon cans. They are capable of carrying 1,500 to 6,000 pounds of marijuana or 18-20 passengers per trip. Passengers each pay \$10,000 to \$12,000. Smuggling is also done by pleasure craft entering local harbors.

Smugglers often hide on the far side of our outlying islands, where they can sleep and keep out of sight. They are not usually armed because criminal weapons charges are high. Smugglers are now landing any time between sundown and dawn. They don't normally land during daylight hours and

WHAT IS OUR JOB?

The ocean and coastal communities encompass a vast area, and Maritime Law Enforcement desperately needs our help in reporting what we see. Here are things we should look for:

- Heavily laden, ill-equipped vessels without running lights.
- Heavily laden pleasure craft at marina gas stations getting an inordinate amount of fuel.
- Multiple cell phones.
- Trash – products from Mexico (Tampico orange juice, Raleigh cigarettes). Spam, Electrolyte containers, energy drinks, cheap brandy bottles, distressed sun-bleached burlap sacks, life jackets and the boat itself.
- Boats operating at odd hours or in odd locations.
- Suspicious coastal activity such as people signaling to boats, or people watching maritime activity when no special events are present.
- Suspicious vehicles in coastal neighborhoods at odd hours.
- Suspicious things when out on pleasure craft or on the Catalina Ferry.

When a resident calls law enforcement or 911 after seeing a panga or debris on the beach, the first law enforcement agency that gets there (probably our local Sheriff's or Police Station) is in charge until Federal authorities arrive to take over the investigation. The Dept. of Homeland Security cleans up the mess and is in charge of indictments.

If you are the first to come across a scene, until someone arrives, consider the area a crime scene and immediately call 911 or the JHOC. Try and stay clear and keep people out. Watch the surf line and if you are compelled to move something within the crime scene, annotate what you had to move, where you moved it to and take photographs of what you did if possible. Bear in mind that your photographs and possibly the photographer could be subpoenaed to court to testify about what you did.

aren't deterred by moonlight nights, or threatened by high tides or fog. Nothing matters but getting in and out fast. They don't buzz the coastline like fishermen. April and May - marijuana harvest season – is a peak time.

Well-organized teams meet the smugglers, warning them of dangers from law enforcement. One team patrols the landing site and communicates with the Panga and directs separate pick-up crews, who are ready and waiting in different vehicles to transport drugs and weapons to large secret warehouses and immigrants to safe houses. But, as Ernie exclaimed, their own border patrol scouts are also out on our coastlines at the same time.

The panga that landed on Abalone Cove on Dec. 20, 2010 carried 4 principals and 14 passengers. Two passengers who were previously deported went straight to jail. In the Malaga Cove incident on Oct. 30, 2012, they found 2 principals and 263 bundles with 3,200 pounds of marijuana. Smugglers are pre-programmed on what to do after landing - toss everything on the beach including cell phones and GPS's and get outta there. Once on land, the pick-up crews blend in driving SUVs, resulting in residents paying little attention to them.

In 2011, 170 smuggling events and 606 apprehensions occurred. In 2012, 101 events occurred with 299 apprehensions. Ernie estimated that smugglers are interdicted successfully 40% of the time, while 60% are not. There can be 3 to 8 pangas waiting at a given time to enter our coastline.

Smugglers endanger the lives of everyone involved in their illegal activities. Our biggest threat is terrorism. Once smugglers establish routes that work, accepting money from terrorists is the next step. It is incumbent upon every citizen to do his or her part to eliminate this threat. **IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING. GO WITH YOUR INSTINCTS! IMMEDIATELY CALL ONE OF THE FOLLOWING NUMBERS: (1) 911, (2) Your local law enforcement office, (3) JHOC (800-854-9834), or (4) the U.S. Coast Guard.**