#5- Shadow Wolves

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by MARY SANCHEZ The Kansas City Star

SELLS, Ariz. - Racing across the desert at 90 mph in darkness cut only by his pickup's headlights, Curtis Heim spots a wisp of dust settling on the blacktop.
“Did you see that?” he says. “Something was just through here.”
Heim, 31, slows, ready to track his prey - drug runners smuggling marijuana and methamphetamine from Mexico.
Heim is a Shadow Wolf, one of 18 members of an elite unit of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The Shadow Wolves are American Indians who use their tracking skills to intercept large amounts of drugs - 145,000 pounds of marijuana this year - before they can reach U.S. streets.

But after a standoff near the border two years ago, the Shadow Wolves themselves are being hunted.

Heim, who was raised in Kansas, turns the Chevy down a dirt road in the Tohono O'odham Nation, a reservation the size of Connecticut that shares 75 miles of border with Mexico. Creeping now at 5 mph, he hangs out the cab, steering with one hand as he shines a flashlight into the mesquite scrub. He's looking for anything amiss - spots where the dusty ground is a little too smooth, an oddly broken branch, a depression from a gingerly placed heel.

Heim stops the pickup but leaves it running as he steps into the Sonoran Desert. The truck is loaded with a cache of guns, night-vision equipment, sirens, scanners and enough bulbs to light up like a Christmas tree.

“Everything out here stings, pokes, bites or has fangs,” he says. Or fires bullets.
“When I first started, it was great,” says Heim, of the Kickapoo and Sac Fox nations and a six-year veteran of the Shadow Wolves. “I loved the art of tracking.”

In those days, the Shadow Wolves still rode horses part of the time. They tracked the footprints of drug runners carrying 50-pound bales of marijuana, sometimes sneaking up on them as they slept. It was kind of a game for the Wolves, seeing how many they could handcuff before the whole group woke up.

“You'd cuff them up, and off to jail they'd go,” Heim says.

But ever since a standoff at a place called Menager's Dam, each Shadow Wolf has a half-million-dollar bounty on his or her head, Heim says. Drug cartels are offering $50,000 for the death of an immediate family member.

“When you are making a difference, the criminals are going to look at you and realize you are a threat,” says Christiana Halsey, a deputy assistant commissioner with U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Washington. “The Shadow Wolves are on duty literally 24 hours a day. Even at home, they are a target for criminals.”

The 16 men and two women in the Shadow Wolf unit range in age from late 20s to mid-50s. They represent 10 tribal nations. All bring a deep commitment to their role as protectors of America.

Lately, that mission has expanded to a new assignment: terrorism.

The Wolves have started teaching tracking methods to authorities in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Croatia, Latvia, Poland, Estonia and Lithuania. Heim is scheduled to train people in Slovakia this month.

And soon they will begin working with the Blackfeet tribe to help increase security at the U.S.-Canadian border, says Heim, who serves as the unit's spokesman.

The Wolves play an important role in government efforts to keep terrorists out of the country, Halsey says. One Wolf found a satchel of Middle Eastern passports hidden in the desert - possibly left for someone to pick up later.

“It is a big, big job, but the Shadow Wolves know every little inch of desert,” she says. “They will find you if you are out there.”

The role of protecting the land, the Wolves say, is nothing new for native people.

A favorite poster in their office in Sells shows Geronimo and three other Apaches, all carrying rifles. The caption: “Homeland Security - Fighting Terrorism Since 1492.”

“We didn't immigrate,” says Sloan Satepauhoodle, a Shadow Wolf who is a former intelligence officer with the Secret Service. “We don't have any other place but here. We are still defending what our ancestors defended.”

‘It was chaos'

The dangers of the desert multiplied two years ago at Menager's Dam, about a half-mile north of the Mexican border. A phone call to the Shadow Wolves' office in Sells gave them a tip about a large stash of drugs on a two-acre compound of wooden garages and a motor home.
Within seconds after four Wolves pulled up, they sensed something wasn't right.

“The only reason we all survived was that we pulled up in four different trucks,” Heim says. “There were 15 against the four of us.”

A brawl broke out, and then the Wolves and the drug runners began diving for cover.

“The guns that they had were gigantic,” Heim says. “Stuff you never see. …It was chaos.”

At one point, a drug runner rammed a sport utility vehicle through a garage door and headed for Heim. The Ford Explorer hit him, but as Heim rolled off the hood, he fired five rounds.

“Three connected as head shots,” he says.

Fifty minutes passed before more agents arrived, including some in Black Hawk helicopters sent from the Customs office in Tucson.
Heim says the man he shot survived because he had so much methamphetamine in his body, it constricted his blood vessels, keeping him from bleeding to death.The haul from the compound: about 9,000 pounds of marijuana and methamphetamine crammed into five stolen SUVs. Each vehicle was outfitted with passports, guns, cell phones, cash, food and water.

“These guys were the top of the food chain in getting drugs over the international border,” Heim says.

Soon, other drug runners began jostling to fill the vacuum. Men came up from Mexico and went door to door at Menager's Dam, threatening people with guns, trying to flush out whoever tipped the Shadow Wolves. The Menager water tower was spray-painted with big black letters, “Mind Your Own Business.”

“People starting dying,” Heim says. “There were murders in Phoenix that we tied back to this, murders in Tucson, and some south of the border.”

The Wolves got another tip: The cartels had set bounties for the death of any federal agent involved with tracking drug smugglers.

Death threats also began coming for specific Shadow Wolves. But it was Kristopher Eggle, a 28-year-old park ranger, who died.
He was killed in 2002 in an ambush at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, just west of the Tohono O'odham reservation. He was helping Border Patrol agents catch two men suspected by Mexican officials in a drug-related killing.

Heim was teaching Eggle to track. He keeps a photo of Eggle pinned to his pickup's visor.

“He was an all-American kid, valedictorian, good in church,” Heim says of Eggle. “It was a huge blow to us.”

Always a hunter

As a boy growing up in Atchison, Kan., Heim's hunts were for ducks and deer.

“I never wanted to be inside,” he says.

In grade school, day after day, he went out, gunning for squirrels. After much effort but no success, he complained to his grandfather that they all seemed able to elude his .22-caliber rifle.

“They are laughing at you,” was his grandfather's reply. “You need to sit still longer.”

So Heim did. An hour passed, an eon to a small boy. Soon he could hear the squirrels chattering, no longer mindful of the boy, his rifle.

“You just have to wait them out one at a time,” he says. “I just picked them off.”

Twenty years later, patience and the desire to notice everything about the land are still his guides. Night, when the desert cools and the stars are out, is the best time to track. It also is the time when the drug runners are most active. A hundred feet off the road, Heim bends to note footprints in the dust. “This guy shouldn't be out here alone,” he says.

The footsteps are at least a day old. Wind has rounded off the edges where a sole once left a sharp, clear print. A piece of a leaf has settled into one. And on another print, a bug walked across, leaving a straight line. The tracks are not those of a man weighted with a bale of pot, Heim says. And he's not dragging his feet due to lack of water. Everything that moves through the desert leaves a mark: drug runners, migrants, cars, cattle, horses, the wind.

A thread caught in a bush tells who passed through. If it's burlap, it probably came from one of the sacks used to wrap bales of marijuana. Soft cotton could be from a baby's blanket, indicating a female migrant with a child. A shiny synthetic thread probably came from a male migrant's shirt. A discarded piece of food can tell a time. Heim knows how long it takes an orange peel, a bit of tortilla, a prickly pear to dry out.
Markings under a tree can indicate the time of day a group stopped to rest. The tree's shade moves during the day, and in the desert, people don't sit in the sun.

Sometimes drug runners try to disguise their tracks by tying squares of carpet to their shoes. The carpet actually makes them easier to track, Heim says. It buffs the earth as they move along, and the markings are readily apparent under a flashlight beam at the right angle. Besides, the fibers leave their own telltale marks, Heim says.

Sometimes drug runners will have the last man in a group walk backward, erasing prints with a branch. The best way, Heim says, is to have the last man sprinkle dirt in the prints. But Heim has caught these tracks, too - he noted where the man knelt to gather more dust.

“They always mess up,” Heim says. “They always leave a trail, no matter how hard they try.”

To reach Mary Sanchez,

call (816) 234-4752 or send e-mail to msanchez@kcstar.com.

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