

NEWS RELEASE



OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

San Diego, California

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For Immediate Release

Two Former Border Patrol Agents Sentenced for Alien Smuggling, Bribery and Money Laundering

NEWS RELEASE SUMMARY – June 21, 2013

Former U.S. Border Patrol Agents Raul and Fidel Villarreal, brothers who smuggled at least 1,000 illegal immigrants into the United States in exchange for more than \$1 million in bribes, were sentenced today to 35 and 30 years in prison, respectively.

The brothers were convicted by a federal jury on August 10, 2012, of conspiracy to bring in illegal aliens for financial gain, multiple counts of bringing in illegal aliens for financial gain, conspiracy to launder money and receiving bribes. The brothers smuggled their customers while on duty, in uniform and in their Border Patrol vehicles and were assisted by a Tijuana police chief.

In handing down the sentences and \$250,000 fines for each, U.S. District Judge John A. Houston told the brothers he was “disgusted” by their actions. The judge also noted that ignoring their duty to protect the border “impacted national security,” and that he wanted the lengthy sentences to send a message that such a serious violation of the public’s trust would not be tolerated.

At the hearing, Assistant U.S. Attorney Tim Salel urged the judge to impose the harshest sentence, primarily because the brothers abused the sacred trust of the public and neglected to protect the border. But he also noted that as law enforcement closed in, the brothers planned to kill co-conspirators to prevent them from testifying. And he argued the brothers deserved a long sentence because they had no regard for the safety of the illegal border crossers who were recklessly jammed into Border Patrol vehicles and transported at high speeds over treacherous terrain, just to maximize profits.

“This is a case of unmitigated greed and betrayal by two senior Border Patrol agents who smuggled aliens while on duty instead of patrolling the border,” Salel told the court. “The defendants are experienced agents, 10-year veterans. This was not a case of misguided rookies who got involved with the wrong crowd. They knew they had pledged to defend the border. Yet these guys set up their own organization to line their pockets.”

U.S. Attorney Laura Duffy said she was very pleased with the outcome of the case.

“The audacious way these brothers so easily tossed aside their loyalty to their country and to fellow agents, who put their lives on the line every day protecting our borders, is appalling,” Duffy said. “This sentence provides justice for a public betrayed, and reflects that this was, by far, among the most egregious violations of the public’s trust we’ve seen by federal officials in many years.”

“Today’s sentencing sends a clear message: DHS will not tolerate any type of employee misconduct, especially criminal activity that undermines the core values of our organization and the thousands of DHS employees who uphold those values in their mission to protect the American public,” said Joe Jeronimo, special agent in charge for the Office of Professional Responsibility, Western Region. “I commend the integrity and perseverance of all the investigators and prosecutors who worked tirelessly to ensure that justice was fully served in a criminal case that unfortunately involved a very egregious breach of public trust.”

Dennis M. McGunagle, special agent in charge of the Office of Inspector General, Department of Homeland Security, said, “The DHS Office of Inspector General has no tolerance for acts of corruption committed by DHS employees. We commend the efforts of the U.S. Attorney’s office for bringing these individuals to justice.”

While working as agents, the brothers formed a smuggling organization with what seemed to be the perfect cover: Many of their customers were shuttled in squad cars by a Tijuana police chief to the border. The customers would be transported down rugged Otay Mountain trails or through remote areas near Imperial Beach by the Villarreal family in Border Patrol vehicles on the way to remote drop-off locations. If anyone were to question them, they could claim the passengers were being arrested. It’s what they referred to as the “guaranteed method.”

“The Villarreal brothers used their specialized training and knowledge of the border – particularly the vulnerable smuggling routes near Imperial Beach and Otay Mountain – to smuggle aliens,” Salel wrote in court documents. “By pretending to arrest the aliens and transporting them in their assigned Border Patrol vehicles, the Villarreal brothers could ‘hide in plain sight’ and maintain plausible deniability if another law enforcement agent was watching them.”

Raul Villarreal, the younger brother who was hired by the Border Patrol in 1995 to work at the Imperial Beach station, eventually became a public information officer and once made a public service announcement warning the Mexican people about the dangers of alien smugglers who take advantage of illegal border crossers. Ironically, for the announcement Raul played the part of an unscrupulous smuggler who showed callous indifference to the welfare of crossers. Judge Houston said his sentence was longer because he was the organizer and ring leader.

Fidel Villarreal, who was hired in 1998, also rose through the ranks to become a mountain supervisor for the Brown Field Border Patrol station. He was the supervisor and manager of the smuggling operation.

The brothers operated the smuggling business for 14 months in 2005 and 2006, conspiring with partners in Tijuana – including Claudia Gonzalez, Armando Garcia and even a Tijuana police chief.

Gonzalez would leave envelopes containing cash – usually around \$10,000 to \$13,000 per smuggling trip, three or four times a week and sometimes multiple times a day - under the front seat of the Villarreal brothers’ luxury vehicles, which were usually parked at a shopping mall in Tijuana. Fidel had a BMW and Raul had a Mercedes SUV.

During the investigation, agents used multiple confidential informants to infiltrate the criminal organization, and installed cameras on poles in areas where migrants were dropped off. They planted undercover recording devices, put tracking instruments on Border Patrol vehicles and even followed a smuggling load by airplane.

In June of 2006, the Villarreal brothers were tipped off about the investigation, abruptly resigned and fled to Guadalajara along with other coconspirators. While living in Mexico, they kept tabs on the investigation and warned members of the organization not to cooperate with authorities. The brothers’ desperation piqued and they made plans to have coconspirators murdered in Mexico. The murders never took place.

In one instance, they held a gun to the head of a coconspirator, who supervised some of the drivers who the Villarreal brothers suspected of cooperating with U.S. officials, but he was able to escape. Unbeknownst to the Villarreal brothers, the coconspirator met with another coconspirator in a graveyard in Tijuana, warning her of the plot to kill her and urging her to go to San Diego.

In April of 2008, the brothers were indicted, along with Garcia and Gonzalez. They were arrested in Tijuana in October of 2008 and eventually extradited to the U.S. to face trial. Garcia was convicted along with the Villarreal brothers; Gonzalez pled guilty on December 10, 2009 to conspiracy to bring in illegal aliens for financial gain, bribery, and money laundering. Garcia is scheduled for sentencing on July 22. Gonzalez was sentenced in August 2012 to time served, which was three years, 10 months.

DEFENDANTS

Case Number: 08CR1332-JAH

Raul Villarreal
Fidel Villarreal
Armando Garcia
Claudia Gonzalez

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

Conspiracy to Bring in Illegal Aliens for Financial Gain - Title 18, United States Code, 371

Maximum penalties: 5 years' imprisonment and \$250,000 fine

Bringing in illegal aliens for financial gain - Title 8, United States Code, Sections 1324(a)(2)(B)(ii)

Maximum penalties: 10 years' imprisonment and \$250,000 fine

Bribery - Title 18, United States Code, Sections 201(b)(2)(A) and (C)

Maximum penalties: 15 years' imprisonment and greater of \$250,000 fine or three times the amount of the bribe

Conspiracy To Launder Money - Title 18, United States Code, Sections 1956(a)(2)(A) and (h)

Maximum penalties: 20 years' imprisonment and greater of \$500,000 fine or twice the value of the funds

AGENCIES

Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations
Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General
ICE Office of Professional Responsibility
U.S. Border Patrol