

The Story of Theodore L. Newton, Jr. and George F. Azrak

The morning was turning out to be anything but “all routine.” Edward McGillis knew there was trouble. As the Senior Patrol Inspector for the Temecula Border Patrol Station, McGillis was used to his men reporting in every hour, but two of his inspectors hadn’t been heard from since 2:00 a.m. It was now 7:00 a.m., Saturday June 17th, 1967.



Theodore L. Newton, Jr. was the senior of the two men who went missing. Just a year earlier, he had attended the 86th session of the Border Patrol Academy in Port Isabel, Texas, where he graduated top in his class. This after a successful four-year stint with the United States Air Force. Already with a wife and two small children, the 25-year-old originally from Concord, North Carolina, had a lot to be proud of.

His partner, George F. Azrak, had only been on the job for a little over a month. He was the son of a career Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agent, and he had recently completed his undergraduate degree in criminology at Florida State University. Now the 21-year-old judo expert, originally from Brooklyn, New York, was at the center of a missing persons investigation.



Inspector McGillis dispatched a patrol car to the Border Patrol checkpoint in Oak Grove, California where Newton and Azrak were assigned. The checkpoint was just a few miles south of the Riverside County line on Highway 79. It was located 75 miles north of the Mexican border, on a route frequented by illegal aliens and smugglers. Apprehensions and seizures in this area occurred on a near-daily basis.

It was now 8:00 in the morning, the time Newton and Azrak normally completed their eight-hour shift, but the checkpoint was deserted and there was no trace of Newton, Azrak, or either of their patrol vehicles. The only thing that was discovered at the scene was Newton’s logbook. The last entry, time stamped at 4:00 a.m., stated “all routine.” This gave the search team a timeframe to work with but little else.

With growing concern, McGillis contacted the highest echelons of the U.S. Border Patrol, and a massive search was soon underway, aided by the FBI and dozens of federal, state, and local agencies. More than 400 men fanned out in the areas of Anza, Terwilliger, and Lake Hemet. Richard Batchelor, the Deputy Chief of the Border Patrol in San Ysidro said of the two men, “they did not leave of their own free will.” Allan Gerhardt, who was the Chief Patrol Inspector

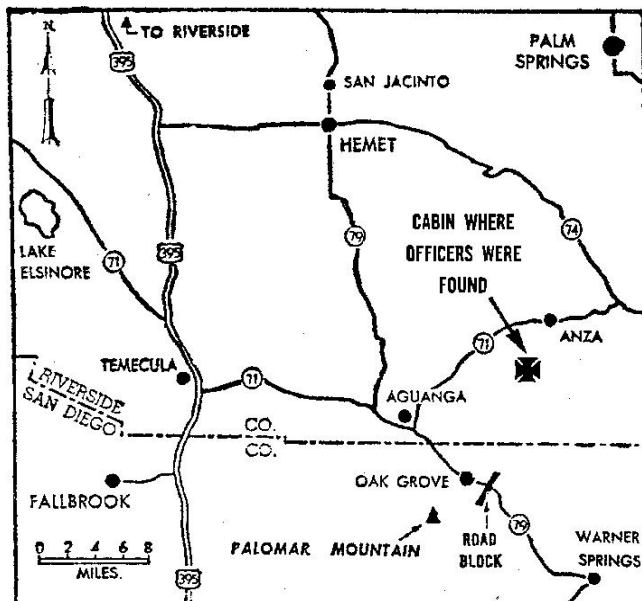
for the Border Patrol at the time, remained cautiously optimistic. He would not theorize as to what might have happened to the men however, stating only that he was “worried and very much concerned.”

Not long after the search began, one of the missing vehicles turned up. A Border Patrol jeep was discovered about a mile from the checkpoint. Although the keys were missing, investigators said there were no signs of foul play.

The search continued for more than two days, and a number of false leads were reported and subsequently dismissed. A witness claimed to have spotted one of the FBI’s ten most wanted fugitives in the area, a known bail jumper from Boston wanted for murder. The claim was never substantiated. Another report, filed by the attendant of a gas station north of Blythe, California, stated that a man wearing a Border Patrol uniform that was clearly too big for him had stopped and asked for gas and oil. This claim was also never substantiated.

Then on Monday June 19th, the search moved from Oak Grove to Anza, after investigators got their first good lead. Dale Lesniak, a fireman with the Anza Volunteer Station of the California Division of Forestry, reported that he had seen a Border Patrol car driving through the area around 8:00 a.m. Saturday morning, the same time it was discovered that Newton and Azrak were missing. At first, Lesniak didn’t think much of it, as Border Patrol cars were often seen in the vicinity. But given the situation, he decided to report it. According to Lesniak, he saw a lone male occupant in the car as it passed. Fifteen minutes later, he spotted the car again with the same driver, this time headed in the opposite direction. Investigators, including hundreds of volunteers, converged on the area.

One such volunteer was Ron Davidson, a firefighter from Los Angeles and a member of the Hemet Jeep Club, which was called into service to aid in the search. Davidson met with other volunteers at the Anza fire station at 5:00 a.m., to begin an intensive search of the area.



Map of Area

Davidson received his assignment and began surveying an area southwest of Anza. The trail took him near the Bailey Ranch on the south side of Highway 71 (now Highway 371), near the Cahuilla Indian Reservation. It was 25 miles away from the checkpoint where Newton and Azrak were last seen, and at first, Davidson didn’t have cause to think that this particular area would turn up any evidence. “It seemed too tough for a passenger car,” he later recounted.

It was now 8:00 a.m., exactly 48 hours since the search had begun, and Davidson spotted

something in the underbrush that he couldn't ignore. He got out of his jeep and approached the object, which he now recognized as an abandoned vehicle. Instinctively, he knew that it was the missing Border Patrol car, the same one issued to Newton and Azrak. It had been very carefully hidden beneath the shrubs of the desert, according to Davidson, in an effort to make it impossible to spot from the air. Whoever left it there had never counted on a search by land.

The license plate, still bearing the number J-8346, was intact, and that was all it took for Davidson to confirm its identity. He wanted to inspect the car, as well as an old mining shack he spotted on a ridge nearby, but he remembered his instructions from earlier that day, and headed back to the Anza fire station.



After reporting his discovery to officials in Anza, Davidson led the search teams back to the area where he'd spotted the car.

Investigators approached the cabin with caution, hoping that whoever had abandoned the car would still be inside. Unfortunately, their worst fears were about to be realized.

The cabin was in a horrible state of disrepair. Garbage, broken glass, and overturned furniture littered the small room from one end to the other. At the center of the mess was an old stove, and it was here that they found the bodies of Theodore Newton and George Azrak. They had been shot in the head at point-blank range.



What had started as a missing persons investigation turned into a nationwide manhunt for the killers, one that would have investigators on the case for most of the summer.



It had been almost fifteen years since a Border Patrol inspector had been murdered. Patrol Inspector Edwin Wheeler had given his life in July 1952, outside of Mathis, Texas. He was the 20th inspector to die in this manner since the Border Patrol's creation in 1924. Newton and Azrak would become the 21st and 22nd.

The FBI headed up the investigation, bringing in trackers to scour the area. The trackers were mostly skilled Border Patrol inspectors, trained in spotting trails left by man or machine. They discovered a series of footprints but little else.

By Tuesday June 20th, the FBI was already focusing in on a possible suspect, a 26-year-old narcotics smuggler by the name of Victor Jerald Bono. Three months earlier, Bono had jumped bail in Los Angeles, after having being caught with more than 2,000 pounds of marijuana. Bono was the type of person who could find trouble in a Sunday school class, and he had ties to Anza. As a small boy, he had herded cattle in the area of the cabin.

On June 26th, the FBI received another tip that pointed in the direction of Bono. A customer sitting in a bar overheard the man next to him discussing a large haul of stolen narcotics. The man was known to be a major player in the criminal underworld, so the bar patron paid very close attention on that night.

He followed the man to his car, taking note of the make, model, and color. He also got a partial license plate number. Once he turned the information over to the FBI, agents spotted the car parked in Los Angeles, and quickly set up a stakeout. A few hours later when the owner returned, agents questioned him at length. The man turned out to be an associate of Victor Bono's. He named Bono and three others in the Border Patrol killings.

Investigators were now certain that Bono was involved, and on June 28th they raided his home in Perris, California, 35 miles from the scene of the crime. Bono wasn't there, but investigators found a small arsenal. The search turned up seven rifles, four shotguns, three submachine guns, one pistol, more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition, a machete, a bayonet, gunsmith tools, surgical instruments, and more than 400 pounds of marijuana. In addition, Bono's wife, Eleanor, was taken into custody.

Two days later on June 30th, Bono's name was added to the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted" list, along with another suspect named by Bono's associate four days earlier, Florencio Lopez Mationg. Investigators would have to wait two more weeks however, before either suspect surfaced.



Harold Otto Montoya and his brother Alfred Arthur Montoya were also named in the investigation. They were known accomplices of Bono and Mationg, and were believed to have been involved with the killings. The FBI received a tip that the brothers had been spotted crossing the Mexican border days after the double murder, driving a pair of brand new, expensive motorcycles. Investigators followed up on the lead, which led them to a ranch near Hermosillo, Mexico, where the brothers had been hiding. On July 7th, they were taken into custody by the Sonora Judicial Police, and handed over to U.S. authorities.

During questioning, the brothers admitted to being with Bono and Mationg the night the agents were killed. They claimed that they fled the scene, however, as soon as Bono and Mationg pulled their weapons on Newton and Azrak. The brothers said that they were totally unaware of the murders until days later, when they read about them in the newspaper. Agents asked them if they'd help track down the suspects, and the brother gave them some promising leads.

By Sunday July 16th, the FBI had tracked the fugitives to a rooming house in Los Angeles. In the predawn hours, agents escorted most of the tenants out of the building, leaving Bono and

Mationg alone in their upstairs flat. The killers had watched the entire operation from their bedroom window.

Once the civilians were secure, agents moved in. They ordered Bono and Mationg out of the building with their hands up. When no response was forthcoming, the FBI launched tear gas into the residence. Within moments, Bono was the first to emerge, crying and cursing at the same time. Mationg, more subdued, was taken into custody shortly thereafter.

On July 27th, all four suspects appeared before the grand jury in Los Angeles. Based on their cooperation with authorities, the Montoya brothers were each charged with second degree murder. Bono and Mationg, identified as the ringleaders of the plot, were each charged with first degree murder, as well as the theft of official government property. They were held without bail, and awaited their trial.

With the suspects in custody, the Border Patrol now had the time to consider those left behind. Theodore Newton was the father of two small children, and the agency quickly established the Newton-Azrak Memorial Fund. It would see to it that both children received college educations.

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With the four prime suspects all in federal custody, the events of that tragic night slowly came into focus. Sometime after 4:00 a.m., Patrol Inspector Newton stopped an old surplus ambulance that was coming through his checkpoint. The two occupants, Bono and Mationg, claimed to be returning from a camping trip. Initially, Newton let the vehicle pass. As it rolled forward however, he noticed that its springs were oversized and sagging, which indicated that they were being pressed down by something much heavier than camping equipment. Newton ordered the vehicle to stop, but Bono and Mationg decided to make a run for it.

Newton and Azrak jumped in their patrol car and gave chase. The old ambulance, loaded down with more than 800 pounds of marijuana, was in no condition for a high-speed pursuit. The inspectors quickly had Bono and Mationg in custody. What they did not know however, was that there was a second car running back door.

The Montoya brothers arrived in their light pickup truck and caught the inspectors off guard. They secured the inspector's service weapons and released the Bono and Mationg. One of the brothers fled the scene driving the ambulance. Bono and Mationg commandeered the Border Patrol car, ordering their hostages into the trunk. They took off for the cabin, with the other brother following close behind.

Once they arrived in Anza, the inspectors were escorted into the cabin by Bono and Mationg, who instructed Montoya to ditch the Border Patrol car. Not familiar with the area at all,

Montoya headed away from the cabin, and it was during this time that the car was seen by Dale Lesniak. Montoya eventually decided to return to the cabin and leave the car there.

Back in the cabin, Newton and Azrak were ordered to the floor and then handcuffed to the stove. Bono and Mationg had already decided what they were going to do, and nothing was going to change their minds, especially the last-minute pleas of two condemned men.

Theodore Newton stared down the barrel of his own weapon, now in the hands of Florencio Mationg. A single shot was fired, striking the agent in the head, killing him where he lay.

Mationg turned the weapon over to Bono and ordered him to kill George Azrak. Bono fired a single shot into his chest, but Azrak survived the assault. As he prayed for God to spare his life, Bono finished the job with two more shots, this time to the head.

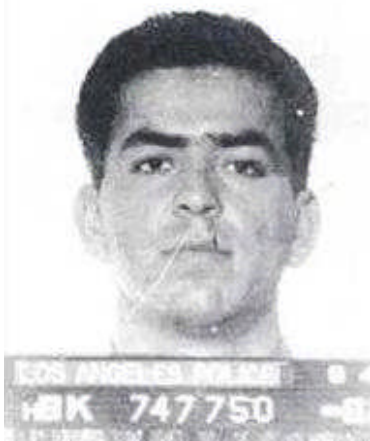
The bodies were unceremoniously left in the cabin, as the sun shone down on them through the dilapidated roof.

By this point, Montoya had finished hiding the stolen car, and the three took off in the pickup truck. Eventually, the four met up in Glendale, Arizona, where they went their separate ways.

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From the beginning, everyone involved steadfastly maintained their innocence. Bono and Mationg claimed that the Montoyas had been the trigger men that night, and that they were merely innocent bystanders. But the evidence didn't support their claims, and prosecutors were certain they had the right men.

As their trial approached however, Bono and Mationg began to truly consider their situation. If convicted of capital murder, the two would most certainly receive the death penalty. On October 12th, after months of careful consideration, the two changed their positions, pleading guilty to murder.



Harold Otto Montoya was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to a thirty-year term in a maximum security prison.

He only served half the sentence, however, as he was paroled for good behavior in 1982. Following his release, he steered clear of trouble, living a semi-reclusive life.

Alfred Arthur Montoya was also convicted of second-degree murder, receiving the same sentence as his brother. Alfred, however, served the full thirty-year sentence, as he was not paroled until 1996.

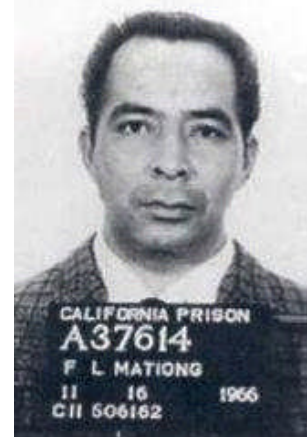


Despite having had three decades to consider where his life had taken him, Alfred quickly fell back into his pre-prison lifestyle. He was arrested in 1997 for smuggling narcotics, and was sent straight back to prison.



Victor Jerald Bono was convicted of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to two consecutive life terms plus two consecutive 15-year terms for armed robbery. He would never serve his full sentence. In 1998, Bono was granted parole, after his lawyer successfully argued that Bono's Parole Commission had vindictively violated his parole hearing rights. Family members of both Newton and Azrak were shocked and outraged, as they were never informed of the parole until after Bono was a free man.

Florencio Lopez Mationg was also convicted of first-degree murder, and sentenced to two consecutive life terms plus two consecutive 15-year terms for armed robbery. Determined to prevent Mationg from achieving freedom, as did Victor Bono, the extended Border Patrol family, active and retired, mounted an aggressive letter writing campaign to the U.S. Parole Commission every time Mationg received a parole hearing. In 2006, members of the Newton and Azrak families were allowed to offer testimony at one such hearing. Harold Newton relayed how his brother's murder had affected the entire Newton family. His parents never recovered from the tragedy, and their remaining years were filled with sorrow. Theodore's two children, Theodore III and Margaret Louise, had to grow up without their father. They were both mere toddlers in 1967, and neither one had any clear memories of the man who had been taken from them.



After carefully considering the damage Mationg had inflicted on so many others, the parole board denied his request. Mationg was denied parole at all of his subsequent hearings and remained incarcerated until his death on December 9th, 2010.

Every year on June 17th, agents of the Border Patrol take time to remember their fallen comrades. Many of the agency's customs and traditions honor the memories of Theodore L. Newton, Jr. and George F. Azrak.

The Newton-Azrak Award is a proud and important part of the Border Patrol's tradition and this highest of honors is bestowed upon recipients for the exercise of unusual courage or bravery in the line of duty, or heroic acts during times of extreme stress or emergency.



Theodore L. Newton, Jr.



George F. Azrak

The U.S. Border Patrol Museum in El Paso, Texas maintains a permanent memorial display for Border Patrol Inspectors Newton and Azrak.





A memorial to the inspectors was unveiled on November 18th, 2000. Located at the site where their checkpoint used to be, the monument serves as an eternal reminder of the tragedy that occurred that night. A plaque embedded within a stone pillar recounts the tragedy, and it speaks of the inspectors for whom it is named.

On July 19, 2007, the newly built Murrieta Border Patrol Station (formerly the Temecula Station) was dedicated to Patrol Inspectors Theodore L. Newton, Jr. and George F. Azrak in a ceremony that was attended by members of both of the families.

The tragic deaths of Newton and Azrak brought public awareness to a little known government agency. Indeed, in the forty years prior, most Americans had never even heard of the U.S. Border Patrol. Now, decades later, border security is one of the single most important issues of our time. So as we pay tribute to the two who gave their lives that night, we must also remember those who've fallen since, as well as those who put on the uniform every day. The motto of the Border Patrol has never been heard more clearly.



~ Honor First ~

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