

Agent's Death is Avenged

Customs Agents "Get"
the Man Who Killed
One of Their Buddies

By C. S. Van Dresser

GOVERNMENT NIGHT MESSAGE
RUSH

TUCSON, ARIZONA, JAN. 12.
TO: BUREAU OF CUSTOMS
INVESTIGATIVE UNIT
WASHINGTON, D. C.

"MOUNTED INSPECTOR OF CUSTOMS CLYDE M. BRISTOW WAS SHOT AND KILLED LAST NIGHT WHILE ATTEMPTING TO ARREST SMUGGLERS ENROUTE TO TUCSON ON NOGALES-TUCSON HIGHWAY STOP MURDERERS BELIEVED TO BE KNOWN STOP ALL LAW ENFORCING BODIES OUT IN EFFORT TO APPREHEND THEM"

(SIGNED AGENT REILLY.)

THAT cryptic message, flashed over the telegraph wires from Tucson, Ariz., to the Nation's capital one midnight started a man hunt that probably has no equal in the annals of Uncle Sam's Customs Service. For more than three years after that grim-visaged Federal customs agent tracked the murderer of their brother officer. The chase led through three countries and even strained diplomatic relations between Nicaragua and the United States. Here's the story:

On the night of January 12, 1932, Inspectors Bristow and Charles E. Jones, of the Nogales detail, drove along the Tucson highway. It was raining intermittently and the wind was blowing a gale.

"Do you think Flores will attempt to run a load tonight, Clyde?" asked Jones, shivering as the raw wind whipped his tunic.

"If the tip I got is straight, he will, and I certainly hope he does. Do you realize, Charlie, that if we can nab that Mexican tonight, we can bust up that smuggling gang of his!"

"Sure, I know it," agreed the other. "That's why I was so anxious to come with you tonight. Every darn one of the gang is out on bond, and another pinch now on the same charge will finish up Alberto Flores and his treacherous band for good. Two years of liquor and dope-smuggling, across the Mexican border is too much for one gang to get away with without a stiff jail sentence."

For a while the inspectors rode in silence, Bristow fighting the steering wheel as the light car swerved in the roaring wind and rain. "What a night for a murder," growled the customs agent, little realizing the portent of his ominous words.

In a few minutes they were aware of the lights of an overtaking car and slowed down. As the vehicle, a large touring model, roared past in the night, Jones recognized the occupants.

"It's them!" he shouted. "Flores and that Aguirre boy. Now's our chance—step on it, Clyde!"

The Federal man bore down on the accelerator and soon drew abreast of the fleeing bandits.

"Halt!" commanded Inspector Jones in Spanish as he snapped on his flashlight and drew his pistol, holding it so the occupants of the other machine could see it plainly.

The Mexican bandit car slowed to a stop; Jones jumped out of the Government car and jerked open the door of the fugitives' automobile. The youthful Aguirre, who was in the driver's seat, threw up his hands while Flores, sitting beside his companion, fumbled at his right side.

"None of that!" warned Jones as he pulled the scared Aguirre out of the car and took his place behind the wheel. Then Flores made a lunge for the patrolman's gun, missed, fell heavily against the door which flew open, tumbling him into the road on the opposite side of the car.



This is another of the series of "inside" true stories on how the United States Customs Agents wage a successful war on dope racketeers and smugglers.

With drawn guns the United States Customs Agents halted the car, which was carrying the wanted Mexican smuggler

While this was taking place, Bristow had come around to the right-hand side of the bandit's auto and Flores fell against him as he spilled out yelling in Spanish, "El pistola; get the pistola!"

Jones, thinking Aguirre might pull a gun, covered him while Bristow and Flores engaged in a rough-and-tumble battle. A shot rang out, followed by another—a third! Bristow fell to the ground and rolled into a ditch, while the killer fled in the darkness. Taking careful aim, Jones fired four shots at the running fugitive. None of them hit the mark. In the excitement, Aguirre also made good his escape.

Jones turned to his companion. To his horror and grief, his brother officer was dead. Shot through the heart.

It was a solemn gathering indeed that fatal night when the Nogales detail of the United States Customs Service under James W. McDonald mustered to their leader's call to arms. The men of the service don't take lightly to the murder of their fellow officers. Besides, Bristow was beloved by all his comrades. To add fuel to their determination for vengeance and justice was the thought of the slain patrolman's wife. Still grieving from the loss of two children killed in an automobile accident in El Paso a few months previous, she must now stand up under the unbearable anguish of the brutal slaying of her young husband.

By dawn almost every available man in the Nogales area was mustered to form a posse. Men of the Immigration Service, Border Patrolmen, the Sheriff and his deputies, even private citizens, as well as the complete Nogales Customs detail, were organized to track down the murderers. Bloodhounds were brought to the scene of the shooting. Overhead, airplanes circled, looking for signs of the fugitives.

By noon the next day Aguirre was rounded up in a desolate canyon, seeking to make his way into Mexico. His capture was made by Agent H. S. Cunningham, of the Customs Service. Bristow's death was now partially avenged. As Flores was a Mexican, it was but natural that he too would seek his native land after the killing.

More than three years elapsed and still no definite sign of the wanted killer came to the Arizona customs men, but their determination to avenge Bristow's death never wavered. From time to time whispered reports came in to Nogales. "Flores was in Sonora." "Flores had gone to Guadalajara." "The wanted man was in hiding with relatives in Mexico City."

Each time these vague rumors trickled in one or more members of the Nogales detail who happened to be on leave, ruthlessly tracked it down. Month after month rolled by, and still no trace of the vanished murderer. During all this time hardly a man left the detail, even on vacation. The customs men, loyal to their slain comrade, remained on duty almost constantly, hoping against hope that some day information would arrive that would lead to the apprehension of Flores.

On March 27, 1935, more than three years after the death of the gallant Federal man, the first definite news of Flores' whereabouts seeped in to Nogales. Customs Agent W. K. Kennedy, of the Arizona detail, immediately wired Washington. Part of his message was:

"WE NOW HAVE CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION THAT FLORES IS LOCATED AT THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS: DEPARTAMENTO CENTRAL DE AVIACION, CALLE DEL CAMP MANTE NO. 398, CLAVE NO. 3, CITY OF MANAGUA, NICARAGUA, CENTRAL AMERICA."

Customs headquarters in Washington then communicated with the Treasury representative at the American Embassy in Havana, Cuba, with the request that an agent be dispatched from Havana to Nicaragua as soon as possible.

Accordingly a customs undercover agent, whose identity cannot be revealed, was supplied with photographs of Flores and took the next boat from Cuba for the Central American Republic.

His passport was not in proper order, but he went immediately, drawing \$300 in 100-dollar bills as expense money.

At that time Cuba was much concerned over the famous Bonet kidnaping case. The criminals guilty of that deed were at large with the extorted ransom, and

Cuban officials were making every effort to apprehend them.

Some over-zealous official in Panama took the Federal man for one of the kidnapers and arrested him as he was on his way to Nicaragua through the Republic of Panama. The fact that the Federal sleuth's passport was not in order and the large denomination of the bills he was carrying looked suspicious. This forced the Government agent to reveal his identity and business before he was released. The newspapers played up the incident and Flores, if he actually was in Nicaragua, took alarm and fled. The confidential operative, after he got out of his temporary difficulties in the Canal Zone, proceeded to Central America and went through the city of Managua with a fine-toothed comb. He found no trace of the killer.

A month later a sudden and dramatic final curtain was lowered on the three-year search. Alberto Flores was killed in Mexico City "by a person or persons unknown." The newspapers carried the report that a "certain Federico Rodriguez Sanchez, a notorious bandit and gunman of Mexico, did the killing by hitting Flores over the head with a heavy instrument, thereby causing his death."

Mystery shrouds the demise of Agent Bristow's murderer. His killer was never apprehended and the boys of the Nogales detail of the Customs Service talk very little about it, but some exchange knowing glances when upon rare occasions the subject is mentioned.

This much is known, however, but it appears in no official records: During the three years that Flores remained at large the agents of the Arizona detail contributed to a fund that was offered as a reward to any one who could supply information that would lead to the capture of the Mexican bandit. That reward was never paid, but several times, during the interim between the shooting of Agent Bristow and the killing of Flores, various customs agents on leave made mysterious trips into Mexico. Further than that, no information is forthcoming.

However, the Nogales division feels a certain satisfaction. The death of Clyde M. Bristow has been avenged. They don't forget murder in the United States Customs Service.