

The Herald

A Typical Night on Beach Patrol

Editor's Note: The Cameron County Parks Police Department allowed Brownsville Herald reporter Sergio Chapa to ride along with Sgt. Pedro "Pete" Collazo while on Spring Break beach patrol late Friday night and early Saturday morning.

*BY SERGIO CHAPA
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March 19, 2006 - SOUTH PADRE ISLAND — Metallica's "Enter Sandman" plays on the radio as Cameron County Parks Police Sgt. Pete Collazo drives up the beach to a remote area where hundreds of visiting and local Spring Breakers have converged late Friday night.

Collazo is one of five park rangers on beach patrol, but the meaning of the hard rock lyrics "exit light ... enter night" are not lost as the headlights of his 4x4 patrol truck pierce the darkness and fog of a shore peppered with groups of Texas Week visitors.

White headlights, red taillights and shadows of people walking back and forth can be seen as the truck cuts through clouds of fog and sand while approaching South Padre Island's Beach Access 5.

"To tell you the truth, I haven't been able to take a break," Collazo said of 12-hour shifts while driving a patrol truck with a lingering odor of vomit from an intoxicated Spring Breaker. "I just eat when I get home, but for now, our diet is strictly caffeine, cigarettes and water."

The Friday night patrol started with routine stops for speeding and other misdemeanors, but by Saturday morning, park rangers had shut down one of the Island's beaches after a group of six suspects fired a handgun on a crowded beach.

Among other incidents, law enforcement officials arrested a Rockwell man for an auto-pedestrian accident at Isla Blanca Park, as well as the owner of an SUV for dragging a park ranger more than 30 feet.

Later Saturday morning, two San Antonio men allegedly assaulted a Spring Breaker with a handgun and a Corpus Christi teenager died from injuries he received after falling off a rooftop patio of a two-story building.

Pedestrian Hit

While Collazo was at the scene of an auto accident south of Beach Access 5, park rangers received word from Isla Blanca Park that 21-year-old Gregory Richard Boucher of Houston had been hit by a white Honda Civic.

Boucher was walking with a friend along the 100 block of South Park Road 100 at 1:20 a.m. Saturday when he was hit, according to reports.

Paramedics took Boucher to the Valley Regional Medical Center in Brownsville, while South Padre Island police arrested 22-year-old Enrique Aguilar of Rockwell on an intoxicated assault charge.

Officer Dragged

Around 2 a.m. Saturday, county park ranger Juan Jaime “JJ” Garcia was closing down Beach Access 5 to incoming traffic when 19-year-old Christopher Petro of Dixon allegedly and stubbornly drove his gray Dodge Durango past the entrance.

The 39-year-old officer was dragged by Petro’s SUV for more than 30 feet after his shoulder radio became caught on the Durango’s rear-view mirror.

Paramedics treated Garcia at the scene and he was back on duty Saturday afternoon, but Texas Department of Public Safety troopers arrested and charged Petro with aggravated assault of a peace officer with a motor vehicle.

Beach Shooting

While Collazo was waiting for a tow truck to pick up a car whose driver was suspected of driving while intoxicated at Beach Access 4, four or five gun shots were heard from behind the gulfside sand dunes at 2:32 a.m. Saturday.

Collazo called for backup and drove into the entrance with the DWI suspect in the back seat.

Authorities did not let anyone leave the area until after they had searched the beach.

Nobody was injured in the incident, but campers said they had seen six males firing a handgun on the beach.

Park rangers closed Beach Access 4, asking everyone to leave the area for their safety.

The DWI suspect fell asleep in the backseat but was finally booked into South Padre Island’s jail at 3 a.m. Saturday.

Handgun Assault

South Padre Island police arrested San Antonio residents Joe A. Medina, 20, and Andrew Flores, 22, who were accused of using a 9 mm handgun to assault 19-year-old Alejandro Resendez of Progreso.

Medina and Flores allegedly assaulted Resendez on the 1100 block of Padre Boulevard shortly after 3 a.m. Saturday, according to reports.

Both men are facing aggravated assault with a deadly weapon charges, while Medina is facing the additional charge of unlawfully carrying a weapon.

Balcony Death

In the last major incident of Saturday morning, Drew Bingham, 18, a criminal justice student at Northwest Vista College in San Antonio, died from injuries he received from a two-story fall.

The Corpus Christi native fell from the roof of the Dos Sueños building at 5211 Gulf Blvd. shortly after 3 a.m. Saturday, according to reports.

South Padre Island police are waiting on autopsy results for the cause of Bingham’s death.

Higher Visibility

Despite the incidents, Cameron County Parks Police Chief Juan Mendoza said this year's Spring Break seems more "calm" when compared to the past.

"Last year, we had numerous sexual assaults and aggravated assaults," Mendoza said. "This year, we've issued numerous citations for public intoxication and other misdemeanors."

Mendoza said one of the major differences from last year is that Cameron County Precinct 1 Constable Saul Ochoa assigned his deputy constables to patrol county property at Isla Blanca Park, freeing his eight park rangers and lieutenant to patrol the north end of the Island where they are needed more.

"The more you are seen out there, the less the public will act up," Mendoza said.

Like Beach Access 6 to the north, the remote area of the Island is more popular with Rio Grande Valley residents than Spring Breakers.

On any given night during Spring Break, hundreds of Valley residents, mostly male teenagers, come to cruise the beach in their cars while others park along the shore to socialize. Some residents bring their families and camp on the beach.

In one anecdote, Collazo said a group of Anglo Spring Breakers arrived at Beach Access 5 earlier this week, saw it was mostly young Mexican-American males and asked them if there was another way out.

Collazo said he directed them to the exit at Beach Access 6 and last saw them speeding off in that direction.

Although the county allows camping on the north Island beaches, Mendoza said park rangers close them to incoming traffic at 2 a.m. each night.

Mendoza said rangers are also cracking down on after-hours drinking, which is prohibited on public beaches past 2:15 a.m.

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