

25 of 162 DOCUMENTS

The New York Times

August 14, 2006 Monday
Late Edition - Final

Poised Against Incursions, a Man on the Border, Armed and Philosophical

BYLINE: By CHARLIE LeDUFF

SECTION: Section A; Column 1; National Desk; AMERICAN ALBUM; Pg. 16

LENGTH: 1052 words

DATELINE: CAMPO, Calif.

Five miles past the paved road, up on a hill of no name, lives a one-eyed man with a one-eyed cat.

They sleep in a van parked against the patchwork fence that lines the border with Mexico. He is solitary, lean, trying to hold back a tidal wave of humanity. The cat is overweight.

Britt Craig describes himself as a 57-year-old Spartan, a decorated war veteran, a Buddhist, a damaged and lonesome man, a lover of books who can pull bits of philosophy from the corners of his confinement.

"The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made so and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself," Mr. Craig says in the 100-degree heat, quoting John Stuart Mill almost perfectly.

He is a member of the Minuteman Project, a group of civilians dedicated to fighting illegal immigration from Mexico. He has done his part simply by standing here, watching, for 500 days.

The Minutemen claim 8,000 members, but that number is dubious at best. Consider that there are only two full-timers living on this 10-mile stretch of the 2,000-mile border now that the smuggling season is slow, the temperatures are blistering and the news media have gone on to other distractions.

The son of a Georgia newspaperman, the grandson of a Georgia newspaperman and the great-grandson of a gentleman farmer, Mr. Craig never lived up to family expectations.

He did poorly in school and thought he would prove himself as a warrior. He enlisted as a paratrooper and lost his left eye in Vietnam. By his account, he came home to mockery and derision and this knocked him sideways.

So he drifted. Sailed. Fished. Pounded nails. Made music in Puerto Rico. Knew a few women and forgot a few women. Finally, in his later years, he grew roots on this hill. He makes his morning toilet with a bucket and a shovel.

"I never got that 1945 reception," he says from beneath the shadow of his canvas brim. "Maybe now I'm doing something the American people appreciate."

The battle disfigurement entitles him to a \$2,500-a-month disability check, more than enough to cover this life in the desert.

While some, including President Bush, call people like Mr. Craig a vigilante, more consider him a concerned citizen, if some polls are to be believed. And while the Minutemen do carry guns, the Border Patrol says there have been no reports of immigrants being shot or abused by them since they began their campaign more than a year ago.

Mr. Craig, in turn, says he has been robbed, sniped at and pelted with stones by smugglers coming across the border. There are chips in his windshield.

Poised Against Incursions, a Man on the Border, Armed and Philosophical The New York Times August 14, 2006
Monday

"A society that cannot enforce its most basic rules is not a society at all," he says.

Mr. Craig, unlike some of the weekend warriors who flock to the border, is not a beer drinker from the blue-collar suburbs, a "big game hunter" or a bored retiree.

In fact, these types of Minutemen are obsequious toward this hermit on the hill. They refer to him as the Pirate, because of the patch over his ruined eye. They treat him as some sort of Colonel Kurtz, whisper in hushed conspiratorial tones about the greatness of the warrior who sits and spends his hours thinking, watching.

"He doesn't like being approached without radio contact," says a man who goes by the moniker Gadget. "He's only got one eye, but he knows how to use it."

Out here petty jealousies, rivalries and divisions have arisen. Across the country, the Minuteman movement has splintered into a half-dozen factions, Mr. Craig answering only to himself.

There is another man who lives on a hill on the horizon to the west. He, too, is an Army veteran, a retired fisherman and a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week "scout." He flies a large American flag from a makeshift 30-foot pole, carries a .45 pistol in his waistband and lives in relative luxury in an R.V. with a port-a-potty. That man, Robert Cook, also 57, goes by the nom de guerre Little Dog.

Mr. Cook is annoyed that Mr. Craig will not respect his position as director of Campo border operations for the Minuteman Project. And so he has referred to Mr. Craig as a phony war hero, compared him to male genitalia and rifled off an e-mail message to CNN calling Mr. Craig a swine who lives in a cat box.

This led to fisticuffs on the main street of town when the men happened to come off their hilltops at the same time for water and supplies. Mr. Craig, vigorous and perhaps a foot taller, gave Mr. Cook four chances to take the insults back, which Mr. Cook refused to do, ending in the breakage of Mr. Cook's eyeglasses.

The men have divided their territory at the obelisk marking the beginning of the Pacific Trail, creating yet another border within the border. A reporter tried to arrange a meeting between the two.

Mr. Cook agreed. Mr. Craig refused, saying, "I'd rather see the Mexican horde pour over the border than deal with that lying runt."

"I am content to sit on a hill and sulk," he said after producing his military papers from a plastic blue pouch, which confirmed his war legacy.

Mr. Craig came to be a Minuteman from St. Augustine, Fla., for what he called Second Amendment reasons. Namely; he wanted to know whether a man could still belong to a militia and carry a gun on federal land. He found he could.

"But what I really found out was how messed up the border situation really is," he says. "I'm not saying we are at war. But in the course of human history, wars have always started because of one tribe pushing into the traditional boundaries of another."

And in that spirit, he has parked himself in the middle of a drug smuggling route, at serious risk to his own life. Men on horseback have uprooted his camp. Border Patrol agents testify to that. Still, Mexicans rarely cross his way anymore. They go around.

Each morning he takes his 12-gauge and his 9-millimeter pistol and inspects the smuggling paths. He lets it be known that he has respect for the young coyote. Especially the one who wears size 7 soccer cleats. Mr. Craig has often noticed his tracks.

"I respect that man immensely," he says. "I harbor no ill will against him. He's very good. I would do the same thing in his position. Still, I'd like to see those cleats hanging from my mirror like baby shoes."

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com>

LOAD-DATE: August 14, 2006

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

Poised Against Incursions, a Man on the Border, Armed and Philosophical The New York Times August 14, 2006
Monday

GRAPHIC: Photos: KEEPING AN EYE TURNED SOUTH -- Britt Craig has spent more than a year along the Mexican border. He is what some people would call a vigilante. He prefers "Spartan." (Photographs by Stephen Crowley/The New York Times)

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company