

## 2020 REPORT OF THE



# Eagles of the Desert

## Searching for the Lost in the Desert

By Sr. Maria Louise Edwards

Eight years ago, Ely Ortiz received a phone call from his brother and cousin. Severely dehydrated and exhausted, they had been left behind in the deserts of Arizona. Ely phoned several organizations, but no one was able to come to their aid. Frustrated and helpless, he had to give up — he never heard from them again.

Five months later, after multiple excursions into the unforgiving desert, Ely recovered their remains, and his own life was changed forever. He founded *Águilas del Desierto* (Eagles of the Desert) to be a resource for other families whose loved ones had gone missing.

At first, they were only able to send out a search party once a month. They mostly found and buried the bodies of migrants who succumbed to the desert, placing a simple cross at their grave as a reminder that every life matters. Their dream, however, was to operate as a search and rescue team.

Smugglers (“coyotes”) often tell migrants it’s only a two-day walk once they get to the U.S. In fact it is a 10- to 12-day walk — 120 miles with temperatures often in excess of 100° F (37° C). The Felician Sisters know this story well.

We have ministered to the poor and homeless of Pomona, California, for 11 years through the Angela Spirituality Center. We serve migrants who survived a trip across the border. Many have used their life savings to come to the U.S., and now have nothing. After learning of the *Águilas del Desierto*, my heart was shaken.

To help, we began making white crosses for the search teams, but we wanted to do more.

We volunteered for a search in the Ocotillo Desert. Within two hours, we found a human skull, part of a body and a child’s shoe still containing some of her foot.

We knew we needed to do more.

Knowing *Águilas* did not have the resources to respond to every call for help, we provided them with a grant to send out additional search parties.

The grant was a tremendous help. **In 2019, *Águilas* received more than 1,900 calls, helped rescue 27 migrants alive and recovered the remains of 24 individuals who didn’t survive the journey** — giving their loved ones much-needed closure. We pray for the day that all searches result in a rescue. ✨

**Why *Águilas* formed:** Ely Ortiz’s deceased cousin and brother.



Dear Friends,

Since 2012, the volunteers of *Águilas del Desierto* have conducted searches along the U.S.-Mexico border. Working with U.S. Border Patrol, BORSTAR (Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit), the Consulates of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and others, we help to rescue or recover the many men, women, and children who become lost in the deserts or mountains while attempting to cross the border.

In 2020, *Águilas* organized multiple searches, recovered the remains of 97 people, helped save 94 lives, and collaborated with the Pima County medical examiner to identify the remains of those recovered in the desert. To date, we have responded to more than 6,150 calls for help.

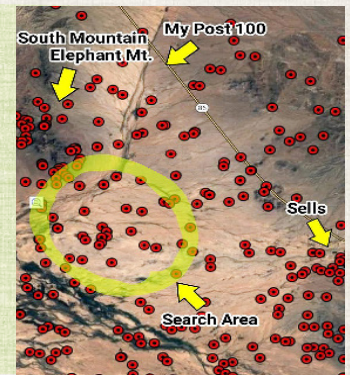
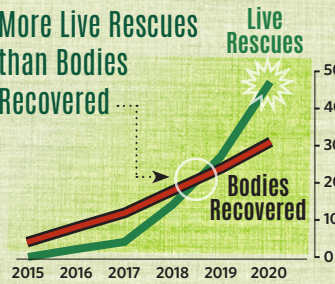
Through awareness campaigns, we also seek to dissuade people from attempting these dangerous trips across the border. Often, crossers are given false information by those who promise to guide them to the United States — then abandon them in the desert without sufficient supplies or a way to call for help.

As our resources have grown, so have the number of searches we can coordinate. To support our efforts with a donation or as a volunteer, please visit our website at [aguilasdeldesierto.org](http://aguilasdeldesierto.org).

Ely Ortiz, President and co-founder

### REACHING OUR GOAL:

More Live Rescues than Bodies Recovered



### WHEN A BODY IS FOUND:

Above, red dots mark where bodies were found; (left) *Águilas* pays respects, documents possessions, marks the location with a white cross, contacts local authorities and often repatriate the body.

“ I doubted they would find anything; the desert around the Carrizo Gorge Wilderness is vast and forbidding. But their planning was meticulous. They used satellite images, GPS mapping and intelligence gleaned from Border Patrol agents and smuggling networks. ”

— Simon Romero, *New York Times* reporter



Friends: *Águilas del Desierto* asks for your support in locating this young man who disappeared crossing the Texas border in search of a better future.  
Name: Martin Alvaro Garcia  
Last communication with him: July 30, 2019  
Let's join this noble cause.  
For information, contact *Águilas del Desierto* at (760) 521 3768



164 Comments 1.1K shares

One of the hundreds of contacts *Águilas* receives each month.

## You Can Help.



### VOLUNTEER

We rely on volunteers. Searches in Arizona take place Friday to Sunday twice a month. Terrain is perilous. Temperatures reach 120 degrees. We cover approx. 10-15 miles per day. Overnight arrangements are tent camping.

**Training is mandatory for your safety.**

**Required:** Hiking shoes, comfortable jeans, long-sleeved shirt, hat, sunscreen, sunglasses, and a durable backpack to hold food and water.

**For full details and to sign up, please call *Águilas* at (760) 521 3768.**

### PRAY

Keep us and migrants in your prayers.

### SHARE

Help us spread the word about the dangers of border crossings by sharing this publication with a friend, relative, parish or organization.

### DONATE

Help us help others, every donation counts.

[aguilasdeldesierto.org/donate](http://aguilasdeldesierto.org/donate)

## PARTNERSHIP

# Building Trust with Indigenous Nation Leads to Approval of Search on Native Homeland

*Águilas* has not been on this journey alone. Building relationships with various groups and organizations has helped to increase the number of searches and more importantly — rescues. For many years, *Águilas* sought to search on the native homeland of the Tohono O'odham Nation. As a reserved society, it took a long time to arrange an introduction meeting with their leaders.

*Águilas* volunteer Gene O'Meara worked tirelessly to secure this meeting. The Tohono were receptive to a search being conducted on their homelands, but Nation law had several requirements. First, *Águilas* needed permission from the group of District Chairmen, then from each District Council involved, and finally, from each Village Council affected by the proposed search. Gene attended various Nation-level meetings, made presentations, and followed up with each leader. It took nearly eight months — but he secured the permissions needed to conduct the search.

Accompanied by members of the Nation and a ranger from their Public Safety Force, *Águilas* searched a portion of

their homeland. The remains of nine people were recovered and thankfully, a young man was found alive.

While it is never easy to recover the remains of our brothers and sisters, we know it is necessary for their loved ones to have closure. And on this search, we rejoiced in the life that was saved.

Following the search, *Águilas* volunteers were invited to dinner at the house of the Tohono O'odham Elder. After dinner, the Elder's daughter sang a sacred native blessing over the remains of those recovered that day. The blessing asked the spirits of the deceased to remain at peace and not attach themselves to *Águilas* searchers. This was a significant gesture and great honor, indicating that trust and respect had been earned by *Águilas*. ✨



### The Rescue:

Dehydrated and close to death, a migrant asks to be taken to the hospital.

Gloria Zazueta (pictured, in blue) was involved in the search and posted details afterward.

Gloria Zazueta  
March 7 -

Today was a very hard day filled with many emotions. We had our friends from *Águilas del Desierto* out of California, a total of 35 members plus my family to do a search and recovery on the Tohono O'odham Nation. We found 5 human remains 3 incomplete human remains. We walked a total of 10 miles in 6 hours. We hope that some families will get closure knowing that these remains will go home to someone. We pray that the families find peace that their loved one is coming home. I would like to say a special thank you to everyone involved to help us with search. Prayers are much appreciated! Sending love and peace to all!

Henri LeBlanc, Ely-mariseta Ortiz and 72 others 20 Comments 22 Shares

## Follow us

@aguilas.busquedayrescate

/aguilas.busquedayrescate

## Who Crosses the Border and Why? (Why they risk their lives)

Many border crossers are not single men but *families*. High rates of violence, corruption, and murder are a reality in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala which reportedly have the highest homicide rates in the world. When a gang wants to recruit your son or daughter, there is nowhere to turn for help. The only recourse is to leave.

Gang violence, years of drought, and smugglers force starving and desperate families to risk everything for survival and in hopes of a better life. ✨

**What some migrants wear and carry as they attempt to cross the desert.** The thick-heeled shoes of a young child are not appropriate for the rocky desert terrain. The purse was filled with makeup and lip gloss.

### WHO'S CROSSING: (BASED ON 2019 BORDER ARRESTS)



473,682 travelers with family  
301,806 individuals  
76,020 unaccompanied children

source: cbp.gov





**On a mission:** *Águilas* co-founder Vicente Rodriguez (left) drove 7,000 miles stopping at numerous migrant centers from Tijuana to Guatemala with *Águilas* educational materials, warning migrants of the risks and dangers.



## EDUCATION

# Prevention: Informing Migrants of True Danger in Desert Crossings

In addition to search and rescue, *Águilas* is dedicated to spreading awareness about the very real dangers of crossing the border. Recently they received a grant from the San Diego-based organization International Relief Teams (IRT) to help fund an annual awareness and prevention campaign targeting migrant shelters throughout Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Many migrants are misinformed — sometimes intentionally — about the time, distance, and physical demands of attempting to cross the desert. They believe the trip takes only a few hours or a couple of days,

when it might take up to 12 days of walking in extreme desert conditions.

A person needs approximately a gallon or two of water *per day* to cross the desert, which they must physically carry. Additional hazards (cartels, snakes, rough terrain, exposure to the elements, etc.) further complicate the grueling trek.

According to the International Organization of Migration's (IOM) Missing Migrant's Project, more than 3,600 people have been reported dead or missing since 2014 in the Americas. Sixty percent of these deaths

## INCREASE IN DEATHS ON THE SOUTHWEST BORDER



were documented on the border between Mexico and the United States.

*Águilas'* yearly awareness campaign takes four to five weeks, covering migrant shelters from Mexico to Honduras. Volunteers will travel by car to each site, speak to groups, distribute educational pamphlets, and put up posters to inform migrants of the many dangers of the desert, as well as how to call for help if they need to be rescued. To view or download a copy of the awareness campaign materials, visit [aguilasdeldesierto.org/campaign](http://aguilasdeldesierto.org/campaign).



L-R: Henri Migala; Marisela and Ely Ortiz; Henry Giovanni Ortiz Asturias, Consul for Guatemala; Danny Morales; Irene Munoz, Consulate secretary; and Vicente Rodriguez.

## PARTNERSHIP

# Meeting with the Consulate of Guatemala

*Águilas del Desierto* met with Henry Giovanni Ortiz Asturias, Consul for Guatemala, in San Bernardino. This introductory meeting allowed us to explain *Águilas'* mission and inform him of our upcoming public awareness and prevention campaign that will target migrant shelters from Tijuana to Guatemala. Mr. Asturias offered his advice and counsel on how to make the campaign a success.

Mr. Asturias was grateful for our visit, impressed with our mission, and promised to contact his counterparts in Mexico and Honduras. He encouraged us to reach

out to his colleagues if we should need support or information on the latest local developments regarding safety issues, as well as the most effective places to target our campaign efforts. This partnership is one of many *Águilas* has worked to establish. As a result, *Águilas* is sometimes contacted or accompanied by U.S. Border Patrol, BORSTAR (Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit), the Consulates of Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras, South Texas Human Rights Center, Eduardo Human Rights Channels of Texas, and many others.

## ON THE HORIZON

# Reaching More!

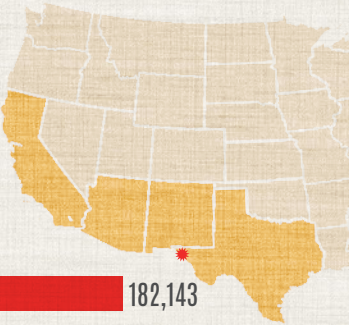
Although *Águilas del Desierto* mainly searches the borderlands in Arizona and California (where many of our volunteers live), we also coordinate searches along the Texas border, another major crossing point for migrants.

In 2020 we received many calls from Texas and shared that information with U.S. Border Patrol. As a result, the lives of two men were saved. *Águilas'* long-range goal is to establish a partner organization in Texas to help rescue the high number of missing migrants there. 🌱

### 477% SURGE IN MIGRANTS DETAINED IN EL PASO, 2019



source: pewresearch.org



**OUR GOAL** *Águilas del Desierto, Inc.*, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded June 2012, is composed of volunteers who reduce pain and suffering along the U.S.-Mexico border by rescuing and recovering men, women, and children lost in the deserts or mountains while attempting to cross the border. *Águilas* educates about the many dangers of crossing the border. We partner with U.S. Border Patrol, BORSTAR (Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit), Consulates of Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, the South Texas Human Rights Center, and more.



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## Knowledge is Power

Many factors force families and individuals to migrate, sometimes at great risk. Understanding the true danger of the desert is key to accepting that risk, or surviving the journey. *Águilas del Desierto* has created a campaign to educate those preparing to cross, with information often left out of the conversation. Campaign flyers paint a realistic picture of the perils and true time frame involved in the trek. The flyers are distributed in Mexico and Central America at various migrant shelters and are available at our website: [aguilasdeldesierto.org/campaign](http://aguilasdeldesierto.org/campaign).

We are grateful to local and national media for telling our story. Visit our website to read or watch featured stories by these and other news outlets:

The New York Times

kpbs

CNN

CN Cronkite News

