



Rapid shotgun blasts ring out as Marine Interdiction Agent Eli Palma from the San Diego Marine Unit practices disabling fire at a simulated run-away vessel. Supervisory Air and Marine Agent and Instructor Andres “Andy” Blanco evaluates.

Disabling fire

Shooters practice disabling fire on plastic outboard engines and human torso dummies affixed to a bullet-riddled target craft at the end of a long line being towed by another vessel. They role play the pursuit vessel and the conditions are challenging. Their vessel bobs from side-to-side, spray fills the air and there’s a brisk wind. Agents hand out shotguns, ammunition and ear protection, yelling over the engines noise. Today, disabling fire won’t be easy.

The target approaches. At the vessel commander’s signal, the shooter goes into action and directs a rapid, ear-ringing fusillade at the dummies. Then the exercise repeats—another commander and shooter will show their skills.

Center staff instruct on six interceptor vessels. Four are long and sleek multi-engine boats with pointed and extended hulls ranging from 39 to 41 feet that can reach speeds of nearly 70 miles per hour. The newest interceptor—and the center’s largest—is 41 feet with four 350 horse-power engines. It weighs

22,000 pounds—nearly 6,000 pounds more than the other three—and can travel 74 miles per hour.

AMO’s other two interceptors are SAFE boats: 33-foot and 38-foot vessels. The smaller craft at 13,300 pounds has three 300 horse-power engines and can travel 51 miles per hour. The other weighs 18,000 pounds has four 300 horse-power engines and tops out at 57 miles per hour. SAFE stands for Secure All-around Flotation Equipped, denoting the vessel’s wrap-around foam collar, providing added stability and buoyancy.

Training also covers the riverine world—rivers and lakes, where the Border Patrol operates 207 vessels.

In the bay just off the center’s dock, U.S. Border Patrol agents prepare to tow a disabled boat. It’s a delicate task. As their 21-foot riverine shallow draft vessel, or RSDV, gently glides alongside the stranded boat, the agents tell the occupants how to prepare for the tow. When the two vessels finally touch, agents unravel coiled lines and carefully tie the two craft together. In this case, the RSDV performs a side tow.

Supervisory Border Patrol Agent and Instructor Milke Arietta evaluates the maneuver. “Make sure they understand what you want,” he tells them. “It’s one of the most dangerous times when two boats are next to each other. You can lose fingers.”

Agents practice two types of towing, Arietta said—side tows for short distances in calm water and stern towing for long distances in rough water.

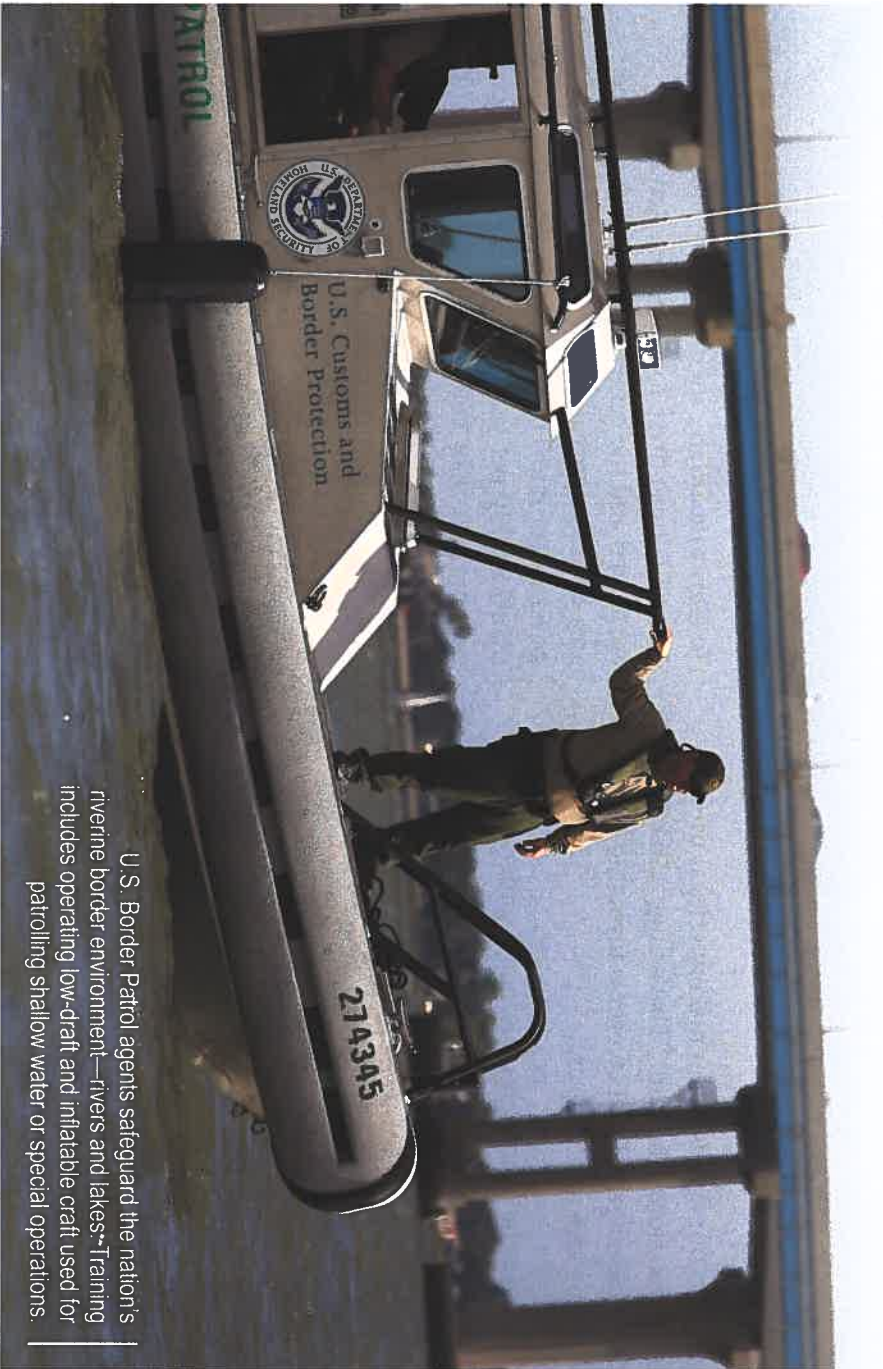
RSDVs are perfect for shallow water, said Border Patrol Agent Alberto Casusus from the Del Rio Sector, taking the initial vessel commander course. Casusus patrols Lake Amistad, a lake that extends into Mexico.

By funneling water through its 260 horse-power water-jet engine, an RSDV can hydroplane, he said. “You can stop in 11 inches of water,” Casusus noted, or operate in “just four inches if you keep moving.” RSDVs can travel nearly 35 miles per hour.

SAFE and RSDV craft, 12-foot inflatable powered boats, air boats and 16-foot, low-draft connectors that resemble small recreational craft, are used at the center for riverine and special operations training. Agents can earn certifications in any of these vessels, said L. Keith Weeks, a supervisory border patrol agent and instructor.

Calling the shots

While speed, tactics and firepower give AMO agents the edge, the real advantage is the training and experience that allow AMO vessel commanders to authorize disabling fire without supervisory concurrence. This authority gives AMO the capability to disable non-compliant vessels, stop dangerous pursuits quickly and prevent these vessels from reaching our shores. CBP is the only federal agency that delegates this authority to its operators regardless of rank, Wade confirmed. “There’s a tremendous amount of trust and responsibility



U.S. Border Patrol agents safeguard the nation’s riverine border environment—rivers and lakes. Training includes operating low-draft and inflatable craft used for patrolling shallow water or special operations.