

# An Ambush on the Rio Grande

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**Ambush – a surprise attack by people lying in a concealed position.**

**Oxford Languages Online Dictionary**

The weather was cool and dry on Friday, November 24, 1933, as U.S. Customs Mounted Inspectors Rollin C. Nichols, John H. Shaffer and Leslie S. Porter were patrolling the border just east of El Paso, Texas. At about 9:15 p.m., the officers spotted a suspicious automobile with its headlights sending signals across the Rio Grande River into Mexico. The officers decided to investigate what they suspected was a planned rendezvous between bootleggers and smugglers. By the time the mounted inspectors had turned their vehicle around, the suspicious vehicle disappeared; but the officers were not alone on the dark, desolate riverbank which would soon become a crime scene.

As the officers approached the scene where they had observed the suspect vehicle, they noticed at least seven men lingering in the brush. One man was located about twenty-five yards from the officers' vehicle while the others were further away heading toward the river. Officer Nichols jumped out of the inspectors' vehicle to cover the first suspect while the other officers stayed behind to detain the other six men.

The instant Mounted Inspector Nichols' foot hit the ground, the roar of gunfire erupted on both sides of the vehicle and from across the river in Mexico. Mauser rifles, shotguns and even a machine gun were used in the attack on the officers. Mounted Inspector Nichols was struck in the head almost immediately by a blast of buckshot fired at close range.

Officers Shaffer and Porter both dove for cover and attempted to return fire as their vehicle was riddled with over sixty bullets. During the barrage of bullets, Officer Shaffer could see that Nichols was gravely wounded and in danger of choking to death on his own blood. With bullets flying overhead, Officer Shaffer was able to crawl over to Nichols and place him in a position where he was able to breathe. Then in another act of courage, Officer Porter jumped into the officers' vehicle, turned it around and with Shaffer's help, loaded the gravely wounded

Nichols into their car and sped to a hospital in El Paso. All the suspects, estimated to be as many as fifteen, escaped and no contraband was found at the scene. It is believed that this vicious ambush may have been in retaliation for a large liquor seizure that these officers had made one week earlier.

Unfortunately, 39-year-old Mounted Inspector Rollin C. Nichols died four days later from an infection that resulted from the three buckshot pellets that had penetrated his skull and lodged in his brain.

Author Samuel K. Dolan wrote in his book *Cowboys and Gangsters* that officer Nichols was the last officer shot to death by bootleggers before the repeal of Prohibition on December 5, 1933. Officer Nichols was buried at the Kenedy Cemetery in Kenedy, Karnes County, Texas. Mounted Inspector Nichols was married to Alice Dee Nichols and had one daughter, Cathryn.

Inspector Nichols is honored on the Texas Peace Officers Memorial in Austin, Texas, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Wall of Honor, and the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington, D.C.

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