

# 64 THE EXAMPLE OF DON ALEJO

By Barrett Tillman

Courage is where you find it.

Often it's found in quiet places where people refuse to give in to debilitating injuries or fatal disease. Sometimes it's found in dirty, dingy prison cells. In 1945 it was commonly found among kamikaze pilots, U-boat crews, and Soviet tank riders – all with extraordinarily poor chances of survival. On 9-11-2001 it was found on United Flight 93 over Pennsylvania.

On November 14, 2010, it was found in Mexico in the person of Alejo Garza Tamen.

Seventy-seven years old, Garza Tamen was known as "Don Alejo," the *patron* of the family ranch in Tamaulipas State. In Mexico, *don* is an honorific, a title denoting seniority rather than actual nobility. In Garza's case, it carried considerable respect as well.

Tamaulipas is in northeastern Mexico, bordering Texas and the Gulf coast. Don Alejo's

hacienda was nine miles outside the state capital, Ciudad Victoria, some 175 miles south-southwest of Brownsville. That geographic fact made the estate attractive to drug cartels moving their products to *del norte*. It also forced many remote landowners to rely upon themselves rather than the government.

Against a background of prolonged violence and civil war, the Mexican constitution of 1917 ensured individuals the right to possess firearms, but in 1968 widespread unrest led to severe restrictions by state and federal authorities.

Government policy is to conduct "permanent educational campaigns that induce the reduction of the possession, the carrying and the use of arms of any type." Simply put, the constitution was invalidated by legislation and regulation, with the defense ministry maintaining a national firearms database.

Generally, the largest permissible sidearm caliber for civilians is .380, though 9mm and even .357 may be exempted, go figger. (Mexican law presumably accounts for the perennial shortage of .380 ammo in Arizona.)

Some exemptions exist for shotguns and rifles (commonly .22s) in rural areas, though licenses still are required. Reportedly compliance with the more onerous regulations is low. Furthermore, in some cases the army has disarmed police in areas sympathetic to antigovernment movements. In that

context, the huge majority of Mexican citizens are defenseless in a nation where narcoviolence has escalated massively. Available figures indicate fewer than 100 cartel-related deaths in 2006, rocketing to nearly 10,000 each in the last two years. It's so dire that mayors of some Mexican border towns spend the night across the river.

The Garza family received no support from the local authorities, so Don Alejo was left on his own. Subsequently, a Spanish-language blog addressing the subject proposed organ transplants, as certain Mexican politicians require a set of *cojones*. Other comments lamented the country's gun laws, which make self defense difficult to impossible, though community defense groups have formed in some areas to resist to the extent possible.

Meanwhile, there was no help for Don Alejo.

On Saturday, November 13, drug traffickers drove to the hacienda, announcing that the owners had 24 hours to vacate.

Garza was not intimidated. Reared in an outdoor environment – his family ran a timber and sawmill business – he knew the wild and reportedly he was a founder of the local hunting, shooting, and fishing club. Familiar with firearms and willing to use them in self defense, he set his mental trigger. The

*patron* informed the gang members that he would meet violence in kind. After they departed he told his employees they would not be needed the next day, and suggested they leave. Thereupon, Don Alejo tended to his weapons and planned his defense. What weapons he possessed are unknown, but news accounts emphasize hunting rifles. He positioned guns and ammo at doors and windows around the house for easy access.

Around 4:00 Sunday morning, at least two vehicles approached, entering the wooden fence perimeter about 50 yards from the house and stopping near the hacienda entrance. Reportedly they called upon the *patron* to leave, firing threatening shots. At that point the fight was on.

It probably didn't last long, though apparently the attackers fired hundreds of rounds and threw grenades. Don Alejo killed four assailants within a few yards of the entrance, then died in his front room. When the gunmen fled, they left two of their *compadres* bleeding into the dirt, unconscious but alive.

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**de-fi-ance** [dih-fahy-uhns] – **noun**

1. The act of defying, putting in opposition, or provoking to combat; a challenge; a provocation; a summons to combat.

"A war without a just **defiance** made." – Dryden.

2. A state of opposition; willingness to flight; disposition to resist; contempt of opposition.

"He breathed **defiance** to my ears." – Shak.

3. A casting aside; renunciation; rejection. [Obs.] "**Defiance** to thy kindness." – Ford.