

INSIDE COLOMBIA'S ELITE JUNGLE COMMANDOS, PART 1

WHITE POWDER WAR

» BY JEFF RANDALL

Without moving his eyes from the jungle floor, the door gunner held up three fingers, indicating that we had three minutes until we hit the LZ.

A Jungla operator adjusted the strap on his helmet, while another bowed his head and crossed his chest with a simple wave of the hand. Not knowing what resistance might be waiting when the chopper left them in the bush below, they were prepared for war.

We were in the middle of enemy territory and about to take out a FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)

18th Front cocaine lab capable of producing hundreds of kilos of pure cocaine a day. The American DEA agent shouted above the high-pitched whine of the Blackhawk helicopter, "These guys hit their targets hard and fast. Keep your eyes open and your head down, and don't move off the LZ until it's secure. You're in FARC territory now!"

Colombia is a country mired in war, a war that has spanned decades, a war

knee-deep in narco-terrorists, guerrillas, paramilitaries and cocaine. No matter what you think of the war on drugs, the fact remains that the long-term security of the United States is indeed tied to what happens in Colombia. From the violence on the U.S./Mexican border to the price you pay at the gas pump, a stable Colombia is vital when it comes to our national security interests.

To hear most people report it, you

▼ Jungla forces scramble to reboard Blackhawk after blowing HCL lab. Sitting on LZ is most dangerous part of any mission, due to sniper fire and attack by enemy forces.



Blackhawk door gunner takes a break from his M134 mini-gun to check on his teammates. ^



Junglas are provided with best equipment in the world, including Blackhawk helicopters and mini-guns. ^



▲ Operator with Squad Automatic Weapon during training scenario in preparation for upcoming HVT operation.

◀ Jungla demolitions expert prepares tube of ANFO explosive while rigging jungle lab to be destroyed. In cocaine lab demolitions, operators use C4, TNT and ANFO as primary explosives.



would think that Latin America, the war on drugs and the U.S. involvement are a useless waste of money with absolutely no return on the investment. But as I've learned from past experience, ground truth always trumps what you hear on the news, and to find it you have to lace up your jungle boots and wade into the swamp.

S.W.A.T. Magazine wanted a first-hand look at Plan Colombia (U.S. legislation aimed at curbing drug smuggling by supporting different drug war activities in Colombia). Not just the nuts and

bolts of the aid package buried in government reports, but the what, where and how of the operators who put their butts on the line every day in this deadly game of chess. To do this, I would find myself in the middle of Colombia working with one of the most high-speed Special Ops groups in the world: the Colombian Jungla Commandos.

THE JUNGLA PROGRAM

Started in 1989 by British SAS, the Airmobile Interdiction (Jungla) Program now consists of 600 specially selected

Colombian police divided into three Jungla companies (Bogotá, Santa Marta and Tulua). The Jungla course takes 4 1/2 months to complete. During this time, the operators receive training in small arms use, drug lab destruction, night operations, small unit tactics, sniping, LRRP (Long Range Reconnaissance and Patrol), demolitions, and medical training.

All of the training is conducted by Colombian instructors, with some portions taught by U.S. Army Special Forces, CIA, DEA and other USG agencies. Selected Jungla personnel also receive advanced training at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) at Fort Benning, Georgia, and at the International Academy of the American Air Forces (IAAFA) in San Antonio, Texas.

The Junglas are perhaps the finest

Special Forces units in Colombia, if not all of Latin America. They have seized tremendous amounts of cocaine, destroyed hundreds of laboratories and captured numerous leaders of FARC, ELN (National Liberation Army), AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), and major narco-trafficking groups since their inception.

These airmobile operators are the force of choice for Colombian and U.S. government authorities seeking to capture HVTs (High Value Targets) such as narco-traffickers and FARC guerrilla leadership. In fact, the training and funding of Jungla forces is directly responsible for FARC's devastating losses in the last couple of years, with numerous front commanders either being captured or killed. FARC numbers that used to be estimated at 17,000 have now dwindled to just over 10,000. But with that decrease in numbers, the threat is becoming more concentrated.

Unlike in the past, when FARC simply forced the owners of drug labs to pay a tax, FARC now owns and controls the labs. And make no mistake about it, the cocaine business is thriving, especially with the deadly Mexican cartels as major customers. Colombian jungle processing labs are now fortified with armed guerrillas, so taking them down is a wartime combat scenario instead of a simple police operation. But this type of combat is what Jungla forces are trained to do—and they do it very well.

When these young warriors put on their game face, they do it knowing they've received the best training and equipment money can buy. Much of their tactical equipment and training is funded by the U.S. State Department Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS), which has proven to be a decisive advantage for the Junglas when they're facing enemy combatants. Their gear generally reflects the same individual equipment issued to U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers: M4 carbine, M249 SAW, M60, M224 Mortar, advanced night vision, encrypted communications, mine detection, E&E and survival equipment.

Having been trained as a high-speed air assault team, the Junglas simply don't screw around when it comes to doing their job. When target intelligence

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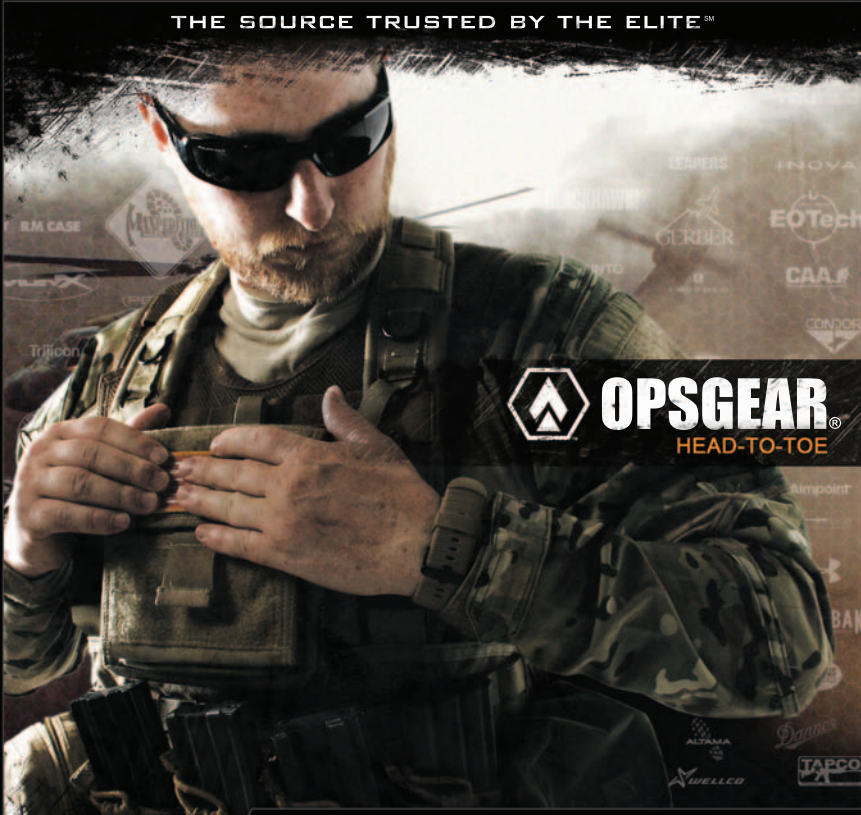


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has been verified, assets are allocated and a Jungla team is brought in and briefed. Immediately after the briefing, they are mobilized onto the target area. If there is no suitable LZ, the operators will fast rope into the jungle, while additional Blackhawks fly security with their M134 mini-guns. Once on the ground, the action is swift and decisive, with most ops lasting less than an hour from the time they hit the LZ.

It's pretty safe to say if HVTs get on the Junglas' dance card, they'd be better off turning themselves in instead of waiting for their skies to be darkened by these warriors. The lure of cocaine money and the quest for power, however, keep these narco-terrorists moving, building and

networking, thus providing the Junglas with a constant supply of fresh targets. It's the ultimate cat and mouse game.

A CAUSE FOR WAR

What was once FARC's guerrilla war over policy and politics has turned into a war for profits. Even the disbanded remnants of the AUC have become nothing more than DTOs (Drug Trafficking Organizations). And considering how much money there is in cocaine, I doubt we will see an end to this war anytime soon.

The average HCL (Cocaine Hydrochloride) lab costs up to \$500K, which is peanuts in the world of cocaine, so destroying a lab hardly hurts the pocket-

books of the narcos. They simply rebuild it with more cocaine money. However, lab destruction does set the narcos back when it comes to time expended. It's excruciating work to build an HCL lab: it takes months to haul boards, barrels and equipment through horrendous terrain, by mule, dugout canoe and on the backs of workers, consequently slowing the production of cocaine. So the Junglas' war on cocaine is not a fruitless cause.

The U.S. border with Mexico is rampant with deadly cartels that are funded and equipped by Colombian cocaine. Every time we destroy a lab or take out an HVT, we disrupt the flow of cash, weapons and drugs that cartels depend on to wage their war. This in itself is rea-

Jungla operator
keeps an eye
on the LZ as HCL
lab explodes.



son enough to continue fighting the war in Colombia. In fact, it is my opinion that we should be adding assets to the conflict. As a DEA agent tasked as liaison for the Junglas told me, "There's no shortage of targets, but we do have a shortage of assets." He was referring to the limited number of Blackhawk helicopters in Colombia.

Even with limited assets, Colombia is upping the ante in this war. In addition to destroying labs and concentrating on single HVTs, it's now zeroing in on the traffickers, support networks and workers that help to make cocaine. New special operations groups are being formed and trained to infiltrate and take out the command and control structure, as well


as provide intelligence and SNA (social network analysis) on everyone associated with the cocaine trade and guerrilla activities. As with the Jungla program, NAS, DEA, CIA and other USG assets will provide funding and training, but once these new programs go live, they will operate autonomously under the command of the Colombian government.

The political landscape in Colombia is changing, and the operatives on the ground say that the war will be changing as well. While I was in-country, the top news story was the rumor that FARC has acquired up to 20 Russian SAMs (Surface to Air Missiles). If this turns out to be true, it

could prove to be a major game changer in the way a mission is carried out.

Regardless of what the war will morph into, taking out HVTs and drug labs will always be a high-stakes poker game for the players involved. And I took a seat at the table as a heavily armed Jungla operator slid open our Blackhawk's door in FARC territory...

[Author's note: Colombian and American operators face many threats in this war, and S.W.A.T. Magazine is not in the business of putting warriors' lives at risk. Consequently, all photos have been cleared for publication. Stay tuned for Part 2 of this article in the February issue of S.W.A.T.]



◀ Jungla forces move through the bush, training for future ops that may require capturing an HVT in the jungle or taking down an HCL lab.

▼ Jungla forces move off of LZ as Blackhawk flies security in the background.

With a new world war igniting Europe in 1939, U.S. Army senior commanders witnessed a tactic not seen in the previous conflict of 1914-1918.

Germany had developed the concept of *blitzkrieg*—the use of parachute and mechanized units supported by aviation to strike, achieve quick penetration into rear areas and destroy communications, supplies and reinforcements before the enemy could react. For the first time in modern warfare, there were no clearly defined front lines.

Consequently, the U.S. Army realized that rear echelon troops, officers and NCOs would need a weapon that offered more fighting capability than the M1911 pistol with which many were armed, yet was handier than the M1 Garand main battle rifle. These troops would need to carry on their assigned duties of communications, supply, command, etc, yet

required a fighting capability through a weapon designed to bridge the gap between pistol and rifle.

BIRTH OF THE M1 CARBINE

On 15 June 1940, the Secretary of War issued orders for the development of a “light rifle” designed to meet the needs of other-than-front-line combat troops. The

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO AN OLD WARRIOR

M1 CARBINE TACTICAL UPGRADE

» BY SHEPPARD KELLY



JUNGLA COMMANDOS HIT NARCO-TERR LAB, PART 2

➤ Jungla Commando secures LZ as Blackhawk drops operators close to cocaine lab.



There's a sense of finality to bailing out of a Blackhawk in enemy territory.

It's a lonely feeling as the chopper departs, pinning me to the ground with its prop wash as if to say, "You're here to stay." Having read numerous accounts of Colombian police and military being sniped at, killed or kidnapped once they were on the ground, it's always in the back of my mind that this may be the day a well-armed FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) column decides to stand and fight. Being on "the wrong side of the tracks" with a mission of disrupting a multi-million dollar business, there's a good chance I could be stuck in the jungle for a long time if things go bad.

HITTING THE GROUND

I was with Colombia's Special Ops group the Jungla Commandos, and our target was a FARC 18th Front HCL (Hydrochloride Cocaine) lab located about 95 clicks east of Medellin. The informant

had given us accurate GPS coordinates, but finding black-tarped structures in a jungle is not the easiest thing to do. We circled the location for 30 minutes before finally settling into the jungle. When the door opened, the Junglas and DEA fanned out to set up a secure perimeter as the helicopter left us on the ground. Not more than 50 yards from the LZ, a Jungla bent down and picked up a full magazine of 5.56mm ammo dropped by the FARC during a hasty retreat. Maybe they had decided that today wasn't a good day to die.

As we entered the lab's kitchen, the soup on the stove was still too hot to touch, freshly washed clothes dripped water from the clothesline, and the door on the chest refrigerator had been left open. These guys left in a hurry! Rum-maging through the belongings, we found uniforms and a military hat with a red star in the center. It was pretty ob-

vious that the only thing these terrorists took with them were the clothes on their backs and their weapons.

FARC fears Air Assault teams more than anything else. In the book *Out of Captivity*, written by the three American contractors who were kidnapped and held captive for more than five years, one of the things that stood out is how terrified FARC is of Colombia's Blackhawk Commandos.

But they also know that helicopter door gunners are not likely to fire among their own troops, so anytime they can kidnap and use prisoners as a human shield, they will. They have also been known to wait until the helicopter leaves the LZ and then ambush operators with hit-and-run style tactics. One of the Junglas even commented that the armed combatants guarding this particular lab were probably no more than 300 meters in the jungle, with eyes on our every move.



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▲ top: Final processing portion of an HCL drug lab. Large hydraulic press is used for pressing final product into 2.2-pound (1 kilo) blocks of pure cocaine.

▲ above left: Making cocaine requires a lot of chemicals, which are transported to lab in bulk, then mixed in recipes and stored in large containers.

▲ above right: The “worm” is one of the main components of an HCL lab. This is where coca paste is cooked with chemicals to make final substance known as pure cocaine.

It's a strange feeling knowing that some young kid may have a set of cross-hairs on your chest and his finger on the trigger, but that's reality in the screwed-up world of FARC and the drug trade, a place where logic, reason and human life have no value. If you're going to play in this game, you have to accept that it may not always be experience or training that keeps you alive—sometimes it's simply a decision by someone not to pull the trigger.

THE DEVIL'S POWDER

No matter what your opinion may be about drugs, the story of cocaine is fas-

cinating. In fact, I can't think of another single product that has captivated and corrupted governments, nations and people in the way cocaine has.

The powder that people snort up their noses, turn into potent crack, and free-base for its powerful effect on the human body originates from the harmless lime-green leaves of the coca plant. They are hand picked, dried, and then placed into a “well” that contains chemicals to leach out the drug. Once the leaching process is complete, the whitish-brown substance that remains is called coca base, or paste.

This base then moves to an HCL lab,



Many times a single FARC HCL lab will produce cocaine for various drug kingpins, so identifying brands (such as the *69, FM and OO shown here) are placed in each kilo for identification purposes.

where it undergoes a transformation that includes being placed in pressure vessels and subjected to various chemicals such as Acetone and Rendex (an additive to make the finished product whiter and shinier). After being pressurized, cooked in chemicals and drained, it is pressed into kilo-sized blocks using a

hydraulic press, and then dried. A brand is also pressed into the 2.2-pound bricks so the lot can be identified. Then it's vacuum packed and shipped through various smuggling channels all over the world.

Of course this is an oversimplified version of the cocaine operation. In ac-

tuality, producing cocaine is a fairly tedious process, so most labs hire chemists to make sure they get the formulas correct. They also run test batches through another lab to verify purity.

DIRTY BUSINESS

While the powder itself may be pure, the business is dirty—all the way from the Colombian drug lord to the local street-corner crack dealer. From the moment a processor poisons the ground with concentrated acetone and caustic soda until the time the product reaches the cutting table of a drug dealer in the United States, nothing clean or honorable has, or ever will, come from it. To manufacture this poison requires a small army of construction workers, welders, chemists, cooks and other tradesmen, with the DTOs (Drug Trafficking Organizations) and FARC supplying the cash to put it together.

While it may appear that such a business would be wonderful for the local economies, make no mistake about it: the coca grower, the lab workers and the

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▲ Sure sign of a coca lab being close by is a jungle structure containing large quantities of chemicals such as this calcium chloride.

◀ American agent and Jungla operator stand inside lab's kitchen area waiting for sappers to set charges of C4 in main lab processing area.



nancing a terrorist guerrilla war against the Colombian people, propping up terrorist cells in Peru, wreaking havoc in Mexico, and addicting users by the day all over the world. It is truly the devil's powder.

BARBECUE TIME

If there's an upside to being on the front line in the war on drugs, it's the pure satisfaction of watching a lab that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars be reduced to charred rubble. And while there is no shortage of labs in the country of Colombia, the labs are international. Cocaine is a lucrative business, and FARC will partner with anyone who can provide cash, including deadly Mexican cartels and other terrorist organizations. A single HCL lab may be owned by one

smuggling mules barely make enough to stay alive. Not to mention they are almost always under threat of being killed or injured and oftentimes live under horrific conditions just to make the cocaine wheel go round.

During my years of researching this fascinating but deadly business, I have met with coca growers, processors and smugglers. All of them say they don't like the business, but it's the best way

they can support their families due to the depressed economies of their countries. Some of these workers are nothing more than slave labor, working at the point of a gun or the threat of their loved ones being murdered if they refuse.

When it comes to the cocaine game, the only "winners" are the terrorist organizations, DTOs and drug kingpins. This simple white substance that's created in remote jungle labs in South America is fi-

group, but will typically produce cocaine for various international customers and DTOs. So taking out a large lab has a ripple effect that exerts pressure across the board.

The lab we were standing in was big even by the standards of seasoned DEA agents. It consisted of 14 buildings, including sleeping quarters for the estimated 40 workers, kitchen, bathroom, shower facilities and all the processing buildings. According to the Junglas, it had the capability of producing 500 kilos of cocaine per day. When we stepped into the main area, steam was coming out of the "worm" (a long series of buckets with boiling water heating the contents of chemicals and coca paste), and the smell of hot Acetone was heavy in the air. Base coca was spread around in large white bags. It was obvious that this lab was about to go full-force at pumping out pure cocaine.

While the Junglas provided perimeter security, the demo team started to wire the lab with C4 explosives. Taping charges to propane tanks and positioning them around the hard equipment and coca powder left no doubt that little would be left.

As the Junglas worked, an American agent and I discussed the danger and magnitude of these operations. His radio interrupted our conversation, letting us know it was time to go. Moving toward the LZ, he ended our discussion by saying, "A lot of folks back home don't realize this is a war zone. Every time you bail out of the Blackhawk, you don't know if it will be your last. But it's the right thing to do."

An hour after we arrived, we had already moved to our extraction point. With everyone clear, the sappers initiated two explosions that sent up a blazing belch of smoke and flame, leaving nothing but a charred jungle floor. The Blackhawks wasted no time swooping in to pick up the operators. Rising above the mountainous terrain, the ship full of sweaty commandos relaxed and nodded off as the adrenaline started to wear away.

It was a good day—nobody died and the narco-terrorists took a major hit. Just another day in the life of the Colombian Jungla forces.... ●

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