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I Was There

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Unsung Heroes

While working for an American firm in Wild West Colombia, one day the word came down: My associates and I were “requested” to assist in providing Medevac support for an ongoing, definitely shadowy, operation utilizing our air assets.

It didn't take long to click that DEA needed some help. Rumors would come and go that gringos were disappearing, likely KIAs during rapid deployment raids into drug-country (which takes in just about 100% of the nation).

The DEA guys kept to themselves, but it didn't take a neurosurgeon to recognize their average “spooks” at local watering-holes in Bogota. Of course, the planners would remain behind in their cushy offices while the blue-collar guys put their asses on-line. Status quo.

Eradication missions using chemical sprays to kill the coca plants are largely wasted efforts — but do provide PR pabulum for the Stateside public to lap up. What works is drug-interdiction ops where teams of gringos and Colombians are inserted by chopper. Sometimes we'd hit a *hot* LZ or lab site; other times there'd be nobody home. But when our bird suddenly drops into a small jungle clearing and we unass, our adrenals are pumping like mad and we can only expect to encounter hostile fire. The coke cartels' honchos don't cotton to outsiders — especially *yanquis* — screwing with their cocaine operations, so sizable bounties are put on the heads of *Norteamericanos* even remotely suspected of being part of the anti-drug crusade.

Selective assassinations of the cartels' *jefes* have been suggested by myself and others, but the powers that be have decided that's too radical an approach — they counter that interdiction ops are the better way to win the drug war. (God forbid we should piss-off highly juiced members of D.C.'s or Colombia's elite. Sometimes we don't know whose ox we'd truly gore.)

But don't get me wrong. The vast majority of the military, politicians and rank-and-file civilians are sufficiently straight, honest and gungho to send the druglords and their minions straight to hell. There are, though, highly placed individuals whose loyalties are questionable, at best.

It was early morning and good flying weather. Our small group of North Americans and Colombians (called *Junglos*) received our security briefing, during which we were advised of our day's targets, flying times en route, actions to take at the targets, radio frequencies and so forth. This information was disseminated only moments before launch to preclude our security being compromised.

After slurping down final cups of mega-octane coffee, we nervously mounted-up and lifted-off.



A detachment of *Junglos* awaits boarding of their “freedom bird” which will ferry them to some overdue R&R following long weeks at their jungle base camp. (left) My *amigo*, Gonzolo, being readied for his final flight. (below) Inbound toward the river, where death waited.



The *Junglos*' commander had gathered some recent intelligence on the locations of two sizable labs, one on either side of a river — but with only minimal insertion capability to bring in a chopper. It was decided to go for it — to land, secure the tiny LZ, and then move on to the laboratory, hit it, then ferry over by boat to the second lab and destroy it.

If we encountered any guerrillas we'd capture them or, failing that, take 'em out. While most are down-and-out *campesinos* trying to earn a buck or unfortunates simply forced to participate in coca cultivation, others are official cartel security, distribution and pro-

Continued on page 73

I Was There

Continued from page 29

cessing dudes whose livelihoods — and skins — hang in the balance.

I planned on keeping a heavy date back in Bogota come nightfall, so getting blown away at some shitty, triple-canopied jungle *cum* cocaine factory was not on my agenda.

Our chopper flight was just over an hour. We suddenly dropped in altitude, the bird banked, then hovered and we unassed. After setting LZ security, we proceeded into the dense bush, keeping alert for booby traps and the dreaded ambushes which had claimed so many lives over the past months. Anyone taken prisoner would be a prize — but a gringo could be ransomed or, more likely, tortured and interrogated, and then tortured and killed.

The AO was thus far devoid of anything — noise, people, hopefully, even danger. We inched through the jungle with our flank security elements barely visible because of the heavy brush. We reached a small clearing which contained the lab and found buildings and a shitload of chemicals — but no coke, and no Gs. We'd make the place history, but first we had to cross the river and recon the other site. We liberated several small boats and cautiously started across.

About three-quarters of the way to the far shore, they opened up! AK and M-16 fire pelted us. We immediately returned fire with our M-16s, CAR-15s, M-79s, you name it, and made it to cover, asses intact. Now I know why they needed my guys and me!

We set-up fighting positions and laid down a lethal wall of suppressive fire, then moved forward, closing on the Gs, who I estimated were squad-strength. Not many, but all it takes is one round to kill you.

Fire and move, fire and move. Their incoming stuttered to a virtual halt — but we kept firing. We low-crawled into the lab area and waited, our breaths coming short and quick. Nothing. The Gs had vanished — except for an unlucky trio taken out by multiple rounds whom we found near the main building. Just kids.

A young, gung-ho Junglo sergeant also bought it. A round had split his head. We Medevaced him to the nearest hospital, some 45 air minutes away. We were able to stabilize him for a short time but he couldn't hold on. At least he didn't have to linger and writhe about in agony like someone who was gutshot. His name was Gonzolo, and he was a brave troop. He was also my friend.

Over drinks that night back in the sweet confines of Bogota, my mind was locked on someone other than my attractive lady. My thoughts shot back to that then-serene jungle where Gonzolo had been hit — and to our frantic efforts to keep him breathing. My night went on forever.

A. G. Hawke has traveled and written in some of the world's most forboding locales. ✕