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**In Colombia, an elite unit of soldiers hunt and destroy the jungle's most dangerous beast – hidden cocaine labs that produce billions of dollars worth of contraband...**

# RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE!

Helicopters provide  
extra cover

**H**idden in the thick rainforests of the Amazon are sophisticated laboratories where coca leaves are marinated in a toxic chemical stew, then converted into fine-grained Colombian marching powder. *FHM* rides along with Junglas – an elite division of the Colombian

National Police as they attack cocaine producers at their secret jungle outposts.

A Blackhawk helicopter flies low over the Colombian jungle. Packed inside are 16 commandos with automatic weapons, grenade launchers and crates of C4 explosives. Somewhere down below us is a hidden

village – a world where drug traffickers have built a collection of world-class cocaine labs.

From above, we can't see anything but endless treetops, wandering hills, flooded rivers and the occasional dirt road. The flight route is designed to avoid populated areas; locals occasionally call drug producers and

warn them the cops are coming. But, sitting inside the chopper is the Colombian National Police's secret weapon – an informant! His face is hidden behind a balaclava as he guides the helicopter pilot to his former workplace – a cocaine laboratory that produces more than 900kg of cocaine a week – worth millions of

dollars. Now the informant is helping Junglas – who will storm the lab, plant explosives and send a mushroom cloud 150 metres into the sky. Riding parallel to us is a second Blackhawk with commandos and above us a Huey helicopter ready to unleash cannon fire in case we're attacked... ▶▶▶



The root of it all...  
the coca plant



Junglas leaving the Blackhawk



Junglas police eating mango



Coke lab explosion on the jungle outskirts

## Each minigun can unleash 2 000 bullets a minute

### Uncle Sam's hand

The floor of the Blackhawk is covered by 5cm-thick kevlar plates, making it bulletproof against ground fire. "It's so heavy that you have to fly with two fewer people, but when you hear that 'Thump! Thump Thump!' of bullets, you are really glad," says Nick Callahan, a retired US Special Forces colonel who works closely with Junglas. Callahan oversees Junglas during months of specialised jungle survival training and live-fire exercises – and he helps administer about \$1 million a month in funding from the United States government.

As their advisor for the past seven years, Callahan – who everyone addresses as *Mi Coronel* – is proud as he spouts the latest accomplishments of the 500-man unit. In 2007, Junglas destroyed 62 labs. From the Andean foothills to the flat grazing lands of

Antioquia, Junglas have a singular mission – to disrupt the orderly production of cocaine.

"These guys are impressive because they are a police unit, but they are carrying out duties that special forces units usually do," says Chris Ryan, former SAS member and best-selling author. Ryan, who recently spent a week training with Junglas, says "I know the background because my colleagues started this unit in the late Eighties."

Though the British army founded Junglas, for the past 15 years it has been a US operation – the deadly tip of "Plan Colombia", in which the US government pours money into the Colombian armed forces and police.

Tools for the anti-narcotics police include seven Blackhawk helicopters, 52 Huey helicopters, unlimited ammunition and even reward money for informants. Since 2000, the US has provided Colombia with as

much as \$2-3 million a day in security aid, most of it to the police and army. When the Colombians want to take out an enemy of the state, be it drug lord or guerrilla leader, Junglas are called in.

Callahan stops talking as the Blackhawk hovers over a coke lab. The tension inside ratchets up. The gunner begins to pray. He touches his forehead and chest – his fingers lightly tracing a ritual. These are the most dangerous two minutes of the mission, even with a minigun mounted in each window.

### Prepare for war!

Each minigun can unleash 2 000 bullets a minute, but a well-hidden sniper can do more damage with just a single shot. Everyone aboard the Blackhawk knows that landing and takeoff are the traffickers' favourite moments for an ambush.

No one talks as the helicopter descends to 15 metres. At ten metres, the rotors are so powerful they snap healthy trees. Gunners hang out the windows and scan the jungle for signs of a trap. The doors slide open. Six

of us leap into the high grass. No incoming rounds or mortars – a good sign. The platoon quickly fans out. Rotor blades rip the jungle canopy apart and then the Blackhawk surges away. A slow green rain of leaves welcomes us into the jungle...

We remove our earplugs, and using a handheld GPS, head west. Not at a run, but with stealth and intent. The air assault has been heard for miles around. Every minute of delay allows the traffickers to pack up the evidence (hundreds of kilos of pure cocaine), melt away into the jungle and crucially, plan ambushes against us. Handmade landmines – known as *quita patas* [leg snatchers] – are the lethal tools of their trade.

The platoon is led by a three-man detachment that slides forward and follows a rutted trail. Horses and mules have ground away the dirt and carved a deep path through the muddy jungle. Then the radio crackles. Scouts have found a suspicious truck on a nearby road. The truck is abandoned, doors wide open as if the driver and passenger just sprinted into the jungle. The truck is loaded with barrels, filled with acetone – a chemical used in beauty salons... and the final stages of coke production. Even in fashion-conscious rural Colombia, a *campesino* [farmworker] is going to have a hard time arguing that 208 litres of acetone is for anything except a massive batch of cocaine.

### Jungle pharmacies

"These labs often stockpile thousands of kilos of chemicals used to turn the coca leaf into refined cocaine," says Callahan, as he

## The Junglas commando

Forget the Boogie Man, Colombian cocaine barons have this monster to fear!

Junglas don't only do one-off operations, they are also taught to survive for a week in the

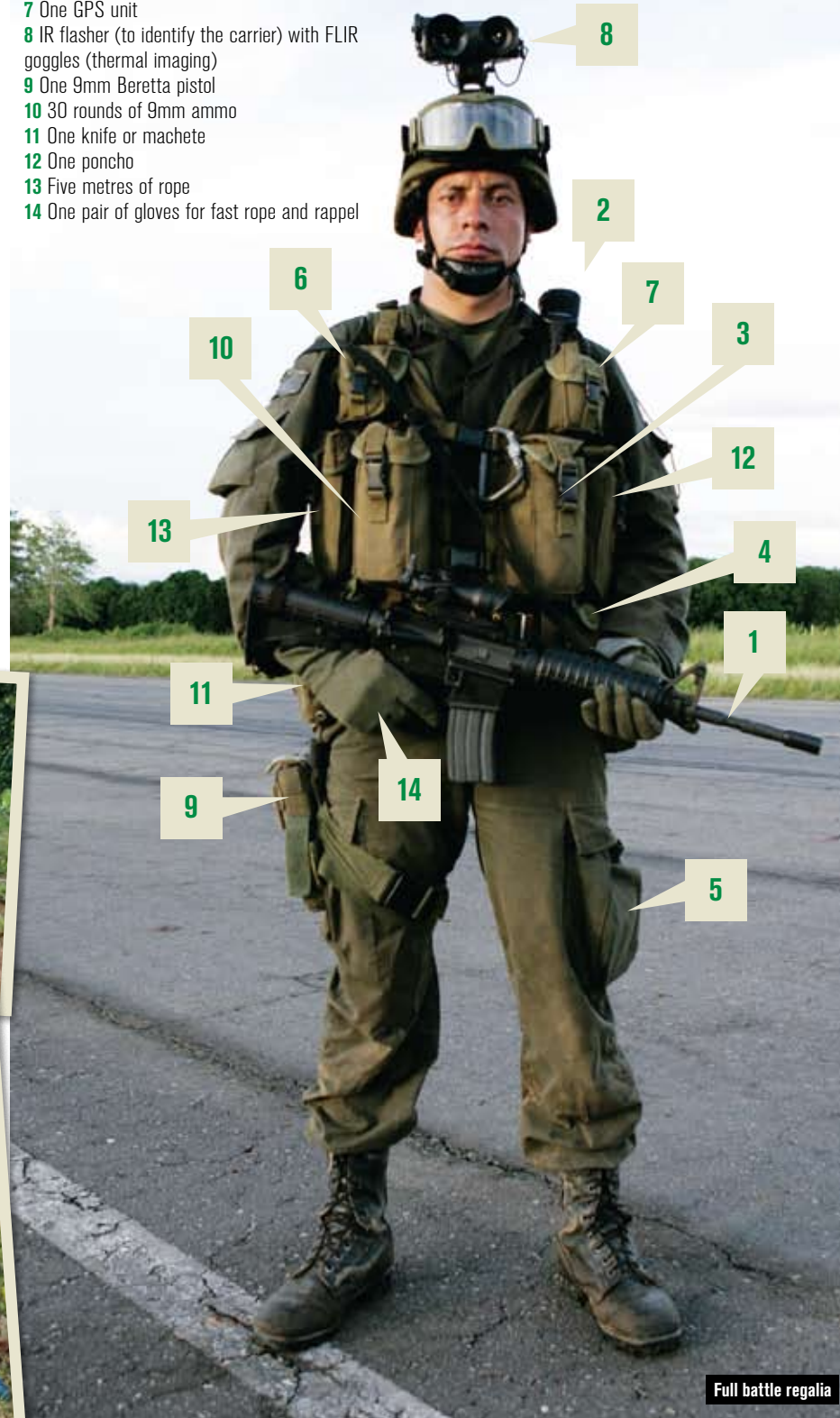
Amazon without any food or water – in case they get separated from the platoon. And they

carry enough weaponry and equipment to do so. "We used to carry even more stuff," says Lt.

Esteban of Junglas, "but they had to cut back – the guys' knees were wearing out."

- 1 One M4 with M203 grenade launcher
- 2 400 rounds of 5.56 ammo (on his back)
- 3 Four hand grenades
- 4 Two canteens of water
- 5 One day's food
- 6 One lensatic compass (identifies stationary terrain)
- 7 One GPS unit
- 8 IR flasher (to identify the carrier) with FLIR goggles (thermal imaging)
- 9 One 9mm Beretta pistol
- 10 30 rounds of 9mm ammo
- 11 One knife or machete
- 12 One poncho
- 13 Five metres of rope
- 14 One pair of gloves for fast rope and rappel

- The following are in his backpack**
- Ten 40mm grenades for M203 grenade launcher
  - One hammock
  - Two kilos of C4 explosives
  - Three metres of detonation cord



Full battle regalia



Drug truck stopped on a dirt road



Coke lab worker getting arrested



Coca leaves being processed



Liquid cocaine, last stage before it gets dried and packed



Cocaine, scale and a homemade shotgun found in a lab



Microwaves used to dry the liquid cocaine in the final stage

### The politics of power

Today the Colombian economy is booming at six per cent annual growth, while the murder rate has fallen even faster. “Colombians felt kidnapped in their own country – you couldn’t move,” recalls Guillermo Galdos, a Peruvian journalist with a deep understanding of the cocaine business. “The days of Pablo Escobar are over.” Escobar was, in the Eighties, the epitome of the Colombian cocaine baron. Equal parts playboy, pothead (he rarely used cocaine) and psychopath, he turned the informal cocaine business into an organised industry. At the height of his power, Escobar even offered to pay off Colombia’s entire foreign debt – a staggering sum of more than \$10 billion!

But will Colombia be able to free itself of the mayhem associated with the international cocaine trade? After spending a week in-country, interviewing everyone from judges to prisoners, the answer is a suprising yes! Junglas are the lethal, fine point of a very

## Pablo Escobar offered to pay off Colombia’s debt

explains the difference between a base lab that produces a thick yellowish paste, and the HCL lab where the paste is converted into fine white powder. “When you take out a base lab you are halting not only the cocaine production, but also money for the Farc.”

Cocaine production in this corner of Colombia is organized by the Farc (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), a guerrilla army that has morphed from preachers of Marxist ideology into marketing wizards for the multibillion-dollar cocaine industry. Profits from the Farc business (\$20 billion annually) are used to finance attacks on police stations and purchase weapons for the shadow army’s 8 000 troops.

long spear jointly held by the Pentagon and the Colombian government.

### Tall grass and hot lead

Because the jungle area where the Blackhawk dropped us is a known a Farc stronghold, Junglas only operate until 2pm. No one, not even these elite fighters, wants to spend the night on the guerillas’ home turf. The informant guides us straight to a lab on a ridge, under a barn-sized roof. As we approach, people enter a large house next to the laboratory. “Stop moving,” Private Lopez yells out. A young man ignores the warning. “Braaaaap! Braaaaap!” Forty rounds from the M249 (the Saw) – a huge gun – stop him



C4 used to blow up barrels



Lunch. Yum.



Spraypainting stencils used by the manufacturer



Junglas leaving a burning base lab

## A landmine ripped the leg off one policeman

### Up in smoke

Junglas take inventory of the lab – hundreds of gallons of gasoline, acetone and other toxic, highly flammable liquids. Hauling the evidence out of the jungle is impossible without an army of mules, so they choose a more direct solution – C4 explosives!

But first they soak the entire structure in gasoline – the thatched roof, the cement floor, the scales for weighing leaves, and the massive blender used to chop the leaves.

Now its time to depart – and leave a message. Commando Reyes pulls a grey block of high-explosive C4 from his rucksack, slices off a chunk the size of a deck of cards and places the explosive inside a barrel of gasoline. With detonation cord conveniently marked off in one-minute segments, Reyes creates a four-minute fuse and prepares to destroy the site. Other Junglas quickly move hundreds of litres of chemicals across the wooden floor. The thick jungle makes for slow moving and

we are barely 50m away when the detonation shakes the ground. The inferno makes a whooshing sound, as the air is sucked away. Then orange flames, 50m high, consume the building. Black smoke rises above the tree line – the signal that Junglas are here!

As we wait for the Blackhawk, the guys chomp cereal bars, clean their weapons and munch on mangos. The intelligence reports begin to stream in from three other Junglas units. One soldier was badly burnt when chemicals at a lab exploded in his face. A landmine ripped the leg off one policeman and killed another.

Then the good news – the Tulua Jungla unit hit the jackpot! Over 12 700 kilos of cocaine in a bunker! While detectives in London or Moscow might celebrate a 20-kilo bust, for Junglas, that is only a crumb. Junglas typically destroy 900kg caches of cocaine, making it a good day for the comandos and a nightmare for the cartels. **FHM**

### The History Of Cocaine

Taking you from its humble beginnings as a useful coca leaf, to the main ingredient in the devil’s dandruff...

■ For more than 1 000 years, South American natives have chewed the coca leaf, not only for the cocaine alkaloid – that improves energy and respiration at high altitudes – but also for the plant’s nutrients.

■ Invading Spanish conquistadores banned the practice, but reversed the decision when locals became too lethargic to work as slaves.

■ Cocaine was first isolated in a laboratory in 1855 – creating a product that retained brain-stimulating effects, without the leaf’s nutritional value.

■ During the 1880s, it was used as a local anaesthetic in eye, nose, and throat surgeries.

■ Massive use and distribution flourished in the late 19th century as it was transformed into liquids, powders, soaps and even mouthwash.

■ Cocaine was heralded by European doctors as a wonder drug that cured fatigue, toothaches, headaches and a variety of other ailments. Vin Mariani – a distillation of coca leaves in wine – was even endorsed by two popes.

■ By the late 1880s, cocaine was being used as an anaesthetic. By early 1900, it had become an ingredient in everyday items in America, such as hayfever and nerve tonics.

■ Even Coca-Cola contained cocaine until 1903, when it was replaced with

caffeine. By some estimates, the American public was consuming as much cocaine in 1906 as it would in 1976 – with only half the latter’s population. From the 1920s to 1970s, coke was the drug of choice for artists and outsiders only. But during the drug experimentation of the late Sixties, it soared back into popularity.

■ During the disco Seventies, coke was it! In the Eighties it spawned a stronger cousin – crack cocaine. Crack devastated the underclass in several US cities.



Try as he might, knife couldn’t kick the habit

■ Despite the heightened crackdown of the past two decades, under the Yank-driven “War on Drugs” campaign, the white stuff continues to be as widely available as Coca-Cola itself. Prohibition it seems, has had no effect.