BLACK BOOK

BIRDS OF PREY

Armed with heavy artillery and dead-eye aim, an elite squad of Coast Guard snipers is targeting drug runners from above. By Jonathan Franklin with Samuel Logan

On a sunny fall day 300 miles off the west coast of Guatemala, Coast Guard pilot Dan Roberts readied for combat from the front seat of his MH-68A Stingray helicopter. In the back of the chopper, gunner Andrew Kramer—30 years old and tightly wound—loaded his .50-caliber rifle, each bullet as thick and long as a hot dog and strong enough to rip through two inches of steel. Somewhere in the vast Pacific Ocean below, a band of armed smugglers in a camouflaged speedboat was barreling north with 4,000 pounds—$80 million—of cocaine onboard. They were aimed for the coast of Mexico, probably Acapulco, where a brutal and entrepreneurial Mexican cartel would ship the product north to the target market: the nostrils of America.

Roberts—who sports a shaved head and the swagger that comes with 17 years in the military—was on patrol for the Coast Guard's Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON), an elite team tasked with tracking down and attacking cocaine shipments from South America. Since the Navy cannot legally open fire on civilian boats that refuse to stop, they call in HITRON, the only U.S. military unit authorized to shoot out the boats' motors—a tactic that spares a bloody mess to explain to the press or foreign governments. Based in Jacksonville, Florida, the helicopters are the military's safest and most successful tool for stopping the drug boats known as "go-fasts," and have a territorial range that includes the entire Caribbean Sea and the eastern Pacific Ocean.

Inside Roberts's helicopter, the radio crackled with intelligence updates from their Coast Guard cutter and a Border Patrol plane overhead. His quarry—poorly paid peasants from Ecuador and Colombia working for the Colombian cartels—are typically dispatched from Buenaventura in primitive 40-foot boats propelled by 800-horsepower engines. The boats are stripped to the minimum weight, their decks streamlined to hold the essentials—food, water, and cocaine. Sometimes they even skip the food. "The traffickers' ability to vary routes and tactics is amazing," said pilot Eric Belleque. "You're on a cutter and you get word a go-fast is taking off 200 miles east. The race is on."

But even the lightest speedboat is no match for the Coast Guard's helicopters, which easily top 150 mph. When Roberts finally caught sight of the telltale wake from the speedboat, he lowered the chopper to just 50 feet off the water and roared up from behind, blindsiding the crew. "If we can get a line on the wake, we position ourselves nicely to start the show on our terms," he explained to me later. "Surprise and chaos onboard a go-fast always works to our advantage, especially at night."

As Roberts pulled the helicopter to the boat's starboard for a clean shot, his copilot hit a flashing blue light, keyed on the aircraft's megaphone, and ordered, "Stop your vessel!" and in Spanish, "*Pare su barco, esta es la Guarda Costa*!" For a moment, the crew stood like statues—then frantically organized a fire-bucket brigade to pass the suitcase-size bales of Colombian marching powder, each worth $3 million, up from the cargo hold and over the rail as the boat sped on. (Instead of sinking, the evidence popped back up, serving as a rest stop for tired seagulls until being retrieved by the feds or washing up on shore for lucky coastal residents.)

Roberts called for a weapons check, then gave the order: "Commence fire." Kramer slung his other weapon, an M240 machine gun, into position and unleashed a series of 30 shots, each hitting just in front of the bow—no small feat of accuracy given the bouncing target and the *black book* >32

CUSTODY BATTLES
TOP: A Coast Guard sniper wields his .50-caliber rifle. BELOW, FROM LEFT: Members of Mexico's Gulf Cartel do the perp walk; cocaine seized by the Coast Guard.

LOCK AND LOAD Using a thick nylon strap for stability, a HITRON gunner puts a speedboat in his crosshairs.

high winds swaying the chopper. When the go-fast ignored them, Kramer trained his rifle's laser-guided sights on the Yamaha engines—the bull's-eye no bigger than a shoebox. With painstaking care to avoid the fuel tanks, he fired a single shot, burning through the metal housings and killing the first motor. Two shots later and the third and final motor was dead. "The driver just threw his hands up," said Roberts. "Mission complete, no one was hurt, and the cavalry is on the horizon to take the bad guys into custody. This is a gentleman's war."

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, go-fasts simply outran U.S. drug forces. Coast Guard helicopters would track the shipments from overhead but had no authority to use force. The brazen smugglers knew the rules and would laugh at or even flip off the Coast Guard bird hovering above them. For more than a decade, kingpins lived the *Miami Vice* life—cash, women, and speedboats.

But in 1998, the Coast Guard convinced the Justice Department to authorize a novel antidrug technique: training marksmen to fire high-caliber bullets into the outboard motors. With an average of two shots per engine, practically any boat could be debilitated at zero diplomatic cost. Only problem was, unlike other units of the military, the "Coasties" are more civilian than commando, so the idea of armed airborne ops against boats raised immediate suspicion. Coast Guard brass fretted that flying snipers might be a bunch of yahoo cowboys. They were right. The early HITRON pilots—recently liberated from the Army or Navy—were hotshots who delighted in buzzing the bridge and rattling the gentlemanly admirals.

To counter the risks of killing innocent boaters and sinking the Coast Guard's noble history of search-and-rescue missions, the Justice Department drew up an elaborate system of rules to govern shooting ops (the target must be moving, have no flag, and be suspected of drug smuggling). Following these guidelines, the Coasties have flourished. While thousands of street cops and sting operations try to snag a half-pound here or a kilo there, HITRON fishes upstream, catching the traffickers shortly after they depart the inland cocaine labs of South America. Over the past decade, HITRON ops have confiscated $9 billion worth of cocaine—roughly 10 to 20 percent of all coke intercepted by the feds. Only one boat is known to have escaped the helicopters, limping toward shore when its pursuer ran low on fuel. In the other 130 cases where HITRON was summoned, snipers either totaled the engine or the smugglers surrendered—and only one trafficker has ever been injured by flying engine shrapnel.

The Justice Department has authorized a novel antidrug technique: firing high-caliber bullets into smugglers' motors.

But even with their near-perfect record, HITRON is handicapped by its budget. While the Navy or Marines can throw hundreds of millions of dollars into weapons research, HITRON has been patrolling the entire eastern Pacific and Caribbean—a total area larger than the continental U.S.—with a fleet of only eight helicopters, several of which are usually in the shop for repair. In other words, the entire southern gateway is covered by a measly four helicopters. "It's like having two cops to give parking tickets for the whole nation," one HITRON crew member said. (HITRON is now upgrading its fleet to 10 MH-65C Dolphin helicopters.)

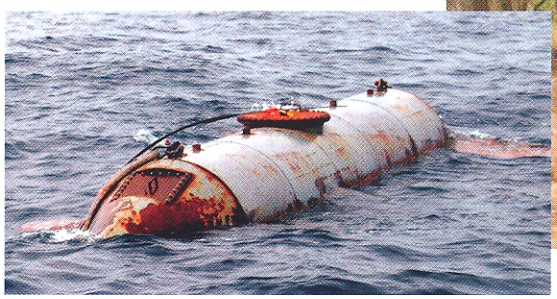
Despite their marginal machinery, Coast Guard officials place great value on HITRON. They know if they can't cripple a go-fast before it hits a country's territorial waters—usually the 12 nautical miles closest to land—that the game is up. And though Washington crows about cooperation in the drug war, the reality on the ground is more complicated. According to interviews with Coast Guard and foreign drug officials, our putative allies Nicaragua, Jamaica, and Venezuela are not always cooperative. In particular, one Coast Guard officer said, "the Mexicans are very, very difficult."

HITRON's mission is further complicated by the atomization of the coke business. In the late eighties, several huge cartels ran the show. Today, the business is decentralized, entrepreneurial, and fly-by-night. With the advent of smaller Colombian cartels, an alliance with the Mexican mob was inevitable, and usually the shipments are directed to one of the big three Mexican cartels: the Sinaloa, the Gulf, or the Juarez. Colombia's FARC guerrillas, for example, have been linked to multiple Mexican cartels, selling roughly $428 million in cocaine—more than half their annual supply—to the Mexicans. And the recent release of a top member of the Arellano–Félix drug cartel (a dismembered network once favored by the FARC) will likely increase traffic on the FARC–Mexico cocaine highway.

POWDER KEG Coast Guardsmen display their latest catch, 9,700 pounds of Colombian cocaine.

But HITRON is just the tip of a long and invisible spear. At a command center in Key West, representatives from the CIA, DEA, FBI, NSA, and Department of Defense coordinate antidrug efforts while Navy ships across the region relay go-fast sightings and suspicious activity. "This is law enforcement, not warfare," insisted Edward Greiner, the HITRON commander who tactfully calls the sniper shots "disabling fire."

While it's easy to focus on the cocaine that slips by—or its stable market price, or smugglers' craftiness in finding new routes—HITRON provides something even more valuable than the *black book >34*



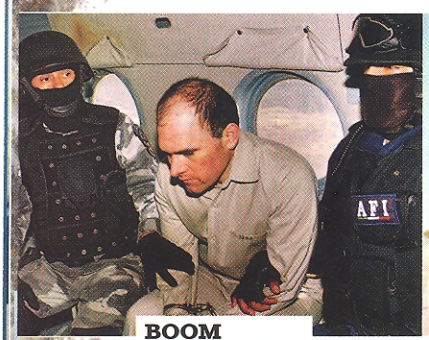
SUB PAR
Drug runners have lately resorted to crude submarine-like vessels, which have been found in the Gulf of Mexico, LEFT, and Guajira, Colombia, ABOVE.

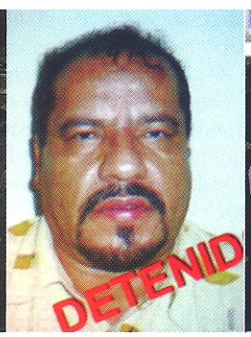
cocaine itself: the crew. After being arrested, suspected traffickers are handed over to FBI and DEA agents working with Panama Express, an intelligence operation founded in 2000. Led by tenacious Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph Ruddy, PANEX's now-permanent investigative team has—with the help of a platoon of informants—nabbed over 1,250 drug runners.

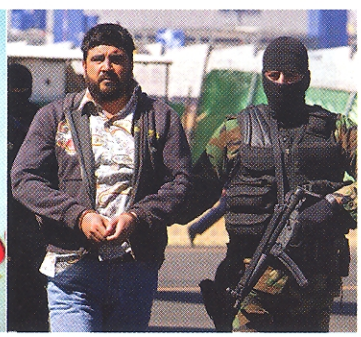
Working out of Tampa, Florida, PANEX targets the cartel leadership by interrogating and then cutting deals with arrested traffickers. To avoid a lengthy prison term or a one-way ticket back to Colombia, they agree to take on the world's most dangerous job: working as a U.S. agent inside the cartels of South America. It is these informants—sometimes working for years at the highest levels—who help the feds ambush tankers and fishing boats stuffed to the gills with cocaine. One such bust came in March 2007 when the Coast Guard and PANEX snagged 34,000 pounds from the hold of a rusty freighter off the coast of Panama—at the time the largest cocaine seizure ever.

For a week last fall, I immersed myself in HITRON at its Jacksonville, Florida, headquarters, a massive airplane hangar that's meticulously clean and weirdly Spartan. I interviewed pilots and crew members, watched riveting chase videos, and flew on helicopter training missions as the pilots zoomed low over the Atlantic, searching for cokemobiles.

But just how harrowing is it from the traffickers' point of view? The Coast Guard let me find out. One evening at dusk, it stuck me aboard what may be the fastest boat in the country—a 1,000-horsepower go-fast with a full tank of gas and a top speed of 70 mph. With a burly Coastie named Rich as my guide, I was sent off with simple orders: Get lost. I roared off into the sunset with a 10-minute lead time; after that, a pair of Coast Guard choppers would hunt me down. How long could I outwit them?







BOOM AND BUST
FROM LEFT: The Gulf Cartel's Osiel Cárdenas; the Arellano-Félix Cartel's Jorge Félix; and the Sinaloa Cartel's Alfredo Leyva.

As it turned out, locating the choppers at that speed is nearly impossible, and both helicopters were above me faster than I could say, "Let me drive again." Rich yanked the boat into a sick U-turn that felt like it was going to roll us, but the helicopters circled wide, and within 30 seconds we were again in bullet range. The HITRON sniper trained a laser right on our motor and I took some comfort in knowing these guys only kill Yamahas.

Experienced traffickers who are aware that HITRON can't legally shoot them sometimes throw their bodies atop the engines, defying the sniper to take them out. But even if a bullet didn't kill you, there is practically no way to avoid being catapulted into the open ocean. From the smuggler's point of view, there are only two options: give up or shoot back at your pursuers.

"If they downed a chopper, the wrath of hell would be upon them," said Roberts, who noted that in his three years of flying interception missions, traffickers had never fired back at HITRON. This isn't to say HITRON doesn't fear some kind of retribution. "We wear helmets with visors and no one ever sees our faces," Roberts added, "which is good, because otherwise a Pablo Escobar type might send some goons up here to send us a message." (Certain last names were changed in this article to provide anonymity to HITRON members.)

I began to understand why HITRON is the perfect military mission for these young soldiers. The Coast Guard is not nearly as bureaucratic as the Army or Navy. Vacation and work schedules mirror civilian life enough for the team to feel like an extended family, and most of the crew are married with children. And despite its adrenaline-fueled missions, the Coast Guard culture is still as old-school as a Midwestern fire department. HITRON brass award prizes for good behavior that include books, free sailboat rides, and savings bonds. While Navy pilots might be found at raucous local watering holes, the Coasties are more into Cabernet and goat cheese. At a recent wine tasting I attended in Jacksonville with HITRON members, the overall vibe was quiet, understated confidence. Roberts, for example, has a restored Chevy Nova, no Coast Guard stickers, and just an air-speed indicator slotted into the dashboard—an inside joke for fellow pilots. "We don't market ourselves," said one crew member. "A corporation needs marketing and national recognition. We don't. The people who do the funding in Washington all know what HITRON does."

Apparently, so do the cocaine cartels, who in the past two years have begun an even more audacious smuggling op: mini-submarines, built in the jungles of Colombia by FARC guerrillas. Navigating just below the surface, these mini-subs hold a four-man crew and thousands of pounds of cocaine, and a handful have been seized since 2005. But unlike a real submarine, these are homemade fiberglass contraptions, badly painted, barely welded, and capable of a maximum speed of only eight mph. The journey from Colombia to Mexico at that rate could take a week. Now HITRON has a new target—the go-slows. □