

DISPATCH



An interceptor boat chases down drug boats. "If they try anything," says one lieutenant, "they get turned into driftwood."



Smugglers are frisked before being chained to the hangar's floor.



Maritime Enforcement Specialist Blake Gwinn geared up for an interdiction.

Drug War on the High Seas

Last year the Coast Guard seized three times more cocaine than did all U.S. law enforcement combined. And there seems to be no end to the supply. Here's how they do it. **by HUNTER ATKINS**

THE THWAP, THWAP, THWAP of a rotor's blades is the first indication that the smugglers are screwed. Out in the Pacific, 200 miles southwest of Guatemala, three Ecuadorean men look up to see an orange helicopter locked onto their 35-foot boat. If successful, their weeklong drug run would have netted each of them a year's income. Instead, they now start heaving \$25 million worth of cocaine overboard.

"Typical Ecuadorean-style *panga*," Lieutenant Commander James Terrell announced when the boat was first spotted that morning. "There's no reason for it to be in that area."

When Terrell got word of the *panga* — a narrow, high-speed boat that's often 40 feet long — from a plane monitoring the area, the seas were too rough to launch the helicopter and interceptor boats. So the U.S. Cutter Bertholf, the Coast Guard's most advanced counternarcotics ship, waited. As the Bertholf's operations officer, Terrell is essen-

tially the quarterback for drug interdictions, responsible for synchronizing everything so it goes off without anyone getting killed. It took until early evening, when the ocean was calm enough, before he gave the order to go.

While the smugglers frantically dump their cargo overboard, the helicopter pilot radios in to the boat and orders them to stop. But the boat speeds up, its bow shooting up and slamming down through five-foot swells. From the open side hatch of the helicopter, a sniper blasts thirteen .50 caliber bullets into water at the boat's bow. Then he fires more warning shots near the two outboard motors. Finally the *panga* slows to a halt and the chase is over.

As the sun lowers on the horizon, five maritime officers in body armor pull up alongside the *panga* in a 35-foot inflatable boat with their guns raised. "*Somos la Guardia Costa de los Estados Unidos. ¡Manos arriba!*" shouts Petty Officer First Class Alex Luna.

Luna, stocky and barrel-chested, is the

point person for making contact with smugglers, and he's participated in every Bertholf interdiction in the last three years. This one is as routine as it gets: Three smugglers surrender and 750 kilograms of cocaine is seized. It's the first of four interdictions in six days. "Every bust we make, that's drugs that aren't reaching America," Luna says. "It's poison that doesn't reach our streets."

IN THE THC-EUPHORIA surrounding the marijuana-legalization bills sweeping the country, it's easy to forget that we're still fighting an \$85 billion coke war. And these days it's the Coast Guard, the fifth, forgotten branch of the military, that's on the front lines. While a local task force may gloat about confiscating a few million dollars' worth of blow, between 2010 and 2015 the Coast Guard captured more than 500 tons of pure, uncut cocaine, with a wholesale value of nearly \$15 billion.

It's a remarkable feat, considering the

size of the area the Coast Guard monitors: 6 million square miles, from the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico to the entire eastern Pacific Ocean. Often the Coast Guard patrols the Pacific with just three cutters like the Bertholf. As one high-ranking admiral explains: "Imagine a police force trying to cover the entire U.S. with three cars. That's the tactical problem we're trying to solve."

Still, the latest hauls suggest they're gaining on the cartels. The fleet set a record in 2015, busting 503 smugglers and pulling in more drugs than in the previous three years combined. The success is due in part to a rebound from severe budget cuts, but also to improved intelligence: High-seas smugglers, it turns out, aren't exactly tight-lipped.

"This is not the Italian Mafia, where nobody talks," says Peter Hatch, a Homeland Security director. "These guys all talk."

From 2002 to 2011, according to the Coast Guard, its interdictions and the subsequent intel it gained on the cartels led to the extradition of nearly 75 percent of all Colombian drug kingpins. It also helped take down cocaine czar Carlos Arnoldo Lobo of Honduras and contributed to the second capture of narco-billionaire Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán.

At some point the detainees from the latest bust will be brought to U.S. shores to stand trial. But for now officers escort them to the helicopter hangar. When the military introduced the Bertholf in 2008 — the first of what will eventually be nine new high-endurance cutters — it did not expect the success it would unleash. "Even the Coast Guard didn't know how capable this ship was going to be," Terrell says. "They didn't build a jail." Instead they rely on the hangar, in the middle of the ship. Its ceiling is high, but otherwise it's the size of a living room.

It's 1 AM, nearly 20 hours since the first spotting of the smugglers, when the final one is escorted to a foam mat in the hangar and then, like the others, shackled by his ankle to a steel cable embedded in the floor. Each detainee has a wool blanket, toiletries, and a pillow. One officer said he once placed chocolates atop the pillows, calling the accommodations "five-star quality."

Following the long interdiction, Luna jokes with another officer. "You know what we should get for the hangar?" he says with a devilish grin. "A vacancy sign."

THESE DAYS THE BUSTS tend to blur together, the end of one bleeding into the



Captain Collins, who's been in the Coast Guard since 1994, does yoga on deck during downtime.

beginning of another, drugs and detainees piling up. Fourteen hours after the smugglers from the first interdiction are put to bed, the next panga appears on the radar. This time the helicopter sniper is forced to shoot out the boat's engines, but the boarding goes smoothly. Soon three new Ecuadorean men join the rest of the detainees.

A scrawny D-student and skater punk from El Paso, Texas, Terrell joined the Coast Guard out of high school in 1996. Eighteen years later he assumed the Bertholf's most complex position, operations officer. Since he spends his waking hours chambered inside the Combat Information Center — a dark, frigid room of monitors, where all the classified intelligence is parsed — he wears a hoodie pulled to the sides of his thick-framed glasses and a bushy mustache. He keeps two skateboards in his room and doodles graffiti-style art during briefings.

"I love watching the numbers stack up," he says of the interdictions. "It feels good, like we aren't just cutting holes in the water."

Terrell appears out of place in the armed forces. Like most onboard, he has an outlandish, by military standards, hairdo: sides shaved, with a short flop of hair swept over one side, and a decidedly trashy mustache. Further diverging from the rest of the military, this crew is one-fifth female, including Captain Laura Collins, a former college softball and basketball player, who reinforces the laid-back culture. "It's hours of boredom interrupted by moments of excitement," she says of the missions. In her free time she crochets and does yoga on the bow.

During the long wait between interdictions, Coasties, as they call themselves, are

"YOU KNOW WHAT WE SHOULD GET FOR THE HANGAR? A VACANCY SIGN."

responsible for monitoring engines, standing watch over a barren horizon for any sign of a boat, and sitting in lawn chairs guarding detainees. In their downtime they play video games, watch TV shows stored on voluminous hard drives, and occasionally fish off the bow of the ship. When it's slow, a collective dark humor envelops the crew.

"I watched a guy wipe his ass 10 times today," one officer on guard duty says. "I counted."

DETAINMENT IS A TRICKY matter in international waters. When boarding the smugglers' vessel, the Coast Guard must navigate an entanglement of rules to respect various countries' sovereignty. These arrangements are meant to streamline the process of giving the U.S. jurisdiction to search foreign vessels. Still, it often takes half a day to transmit information through multiple bureaucracies and to hear back with approval before officers are allowed to board and detain the smugglers.

This is all assuming they find evidence of drugs. Smugglers sometimes hand off shipments at sea to another panga that finishes the drug run. Last year the Bertholf conducted two simultaneous boardings that lasted 13 hours, and both came up empty.

"Everyone out here is dirty," says Lieutenant Laurence Chen. "It's just whether

BEHIND THE NUMBERS: THE COAST GUARD'S ENDLESS COKE BUSTS

6,000,000

Number of square miles the Coast Guard patrols in the eastern Pacific.

158,243

Pounds of cocaine seized in the eastern Pacific in 2015, a 588 percent increase over 2012.

1.23 BILLION

Street value, in dollars, of cocaine seized by the U.S. Cutter Bertholf in the last three years.

110

Number of smugglers the Bertholf has detained since 2013.

38

Number of drug-transporting submarines the Coast Guard has caught since 2006.



The crew with 650 kilograms of cocaine from one bust. The Bertholf's four-month deployment netted a total of over 11 tons.

they're dirty right now."

Once apprehended, detainees can be held at sea for weeks or months until they get transferred to the U.S. for prosecution. Some may not touch land for 100 days. In order to avoid breaking any laws, the Coast Guard must hold detainees in international waters. So when a cutter makes a foreign-port call to restock the ship, the smugglers are off-loaded onto another vessel that remains at sea.

New detainees will occasionally know the others already in custody. Once, an entire group stood up and bowed for two heavily tattooed Mexican smugglers, a rare catch on the Pacific. "It definitely made me nervous," says the officer who witnessed the encounter. Another time, an Ecuadorean fisherman gave his pancakes to a Colombian in what seemed like a sign of respect—or at least subservience.

"I've always had sympathy for them," Collins says. "They're the worker bees. They look desperate. Sometimes they're dressed in clothes that are like rags, frankly."

"You'll see tears in their eyes, and people are like, 'Oh my God, I feel sorry for them,'" says Luna. "I don't feel sorry for them. I understand that they're going through hardship back in their country, but there's also guys who are doing this because it's their business."

THE COAST GUARD KNOWS of up to 90 percent of the drug shipments that are being trafficked across the ocean. It knows who is sending them and where they are headed. It also knows that the best shot at stopping the drugs from entering the U.S. is catching them

"EVERYONE OUT HERE IS DIRTY. IT'S JUST WHETHER THEY'RE DIRTY RIGHT NOW."

before they reach Mexico, where they are then brought across the border by nearly any means available. But the Coast Guard has the resources to stop only between 11 and 20 percent of high-seas shipments in a given year.

"We're going to grind ourselves trying to do as much good as we can, only getting 20 percent," Petty Officer First Class Jonathan D'Arcy says. "That's our plight in life."

D'Arcy signed up for the service after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, expecting to save lives. This hope has faded over time. The endless interdictions have burned him out.

"I tell my daughter, 'Daddy's doing good, busting bad guys and saving turtles,' because she's six years old," he says. "But when she's 16, it'll be like, 'Yeah, we get 20 percent of the drugs, and the rest goes to your friends.'"

Nearly every boat the Coast Guard catches is a panga. But in recent years the cartels have turned to self-propelled semi-submersibles (SPSS) that quietly bob across the ocean, usually with a four-man crew crammed inside. An SPSS costs around \$500,000 to build and can deliver loads worth hundreds of millions of dollars. They're constructed from wood

and fiberglass in the Colombian jungles, with an exhaust pipe barely visible above water. A low profile and blue paint make them almost impossible to detect with the naked eye. It's mostly by chance that a maritime aircraft using infrared spots one, and then it sends down a light beam for a cutter to see.

Coasties fantasize about finding a drug submarine as if it were Moby Dick, and the Coast Guard has interdicted 38 of these narco subs since discovering the first one in 2006. "This thing was huge," Terrell says of one sub they captured. "You could kick soccer balls in there." But for all the chest-thumping these megabusts inspire, they illuminate a more troublesome truth: Tactics are not deciding the drug war; resources are. There is no telling how many subs are slipping through.

IN MARCH, THE BERTHOLF steamed 500 miles northwest of the Galápagos to catch its mother lode: a 40-foot sub stuffed with over \$200 million worth of cocaine. Scores like that fuel the exhausting missions. By early April, the Bertholf returned to Alameda, California, after interdicting 22 smugglers and over 11 tons of cocaine, valued at \$329 million. Even though cartels still thrive, this has got to sting.

"Not enforcing the law is not the answer," Terrell says, pointing to the never-ending demand for drugs. "I think most people understand that it's a problem that has to be attacked from both sides, and we're doing our part. That's how the crew internalizes it. We get disappointed, but we move on. We have to. We know there's more coming." ■