



Out of Captivity: Surviving 1,967 Days in the Colombian Jungle

Marc Gonsalves, Tom Howes, Keith Stansell, Gary Brozek

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On February 13, 2003, a plane carrying three American military contractors - Marc Gonsalves, Tom Howes, and Keith Stansell - crashed in the mountainous jungle of Colombia. Dazed and shaken, they awoke battered and covered in blood with automatic rifles pointing at their faces. As of that moment they belonged to the terrorist organization known as the FARC, the military arm of the Colombia Communist Party established in the 1960s. Thus began five-and-a-half years of captivity as these three men struggled to survive the madness of their surroundings. Gonsalves, Howes, and Stansell recount their amazing tale of survival, friendship, and, ultimately, rescue in its entirety for the first time. Revealing the story of their crash, their horrific treatment at the hands of the FARC, what they witnessed as captives, and how they survived, the book provides vivid and gruesome firsthand accounts of their years in the jungle. In their own words, they detail the brutality they endured both physically and mentally at the hands of their captors, describing month-long, unrelenting 'starvation' marches while suffering broken bones, dehydration, exhaustion, and infection. They speak of months of solitary confinement and heavy chains wrapped around their necks that often left them wishing for death. Offering a glimpse inside one of the world's most notorious terrorist organizations, "Out of Captivity" tells the story of how far three Americans were willing to go as they fought to survive for themselves, their families, and each other, providing unflinching insight into: their plane crash into a FARC strategic meeting site, and the FARC's execution-style murders of their crewmembers Tom Janis and Luis Cruz; the U.S. counter-narcotics surveillance role in 'Plan Colombia', including their aerial flights for electronic eavesdropping and FARC communication interceptions; the clandestine role they played as U.S Government contractors in the War on Drugs; their five-and-a-half years of captivity, torture, and deprivation; and, their experiences with other hostages, including their fraught relationship with fellow captive Ingrid Betancourt. This title also provides insight into: how they learned to live off the jungle and survive in some of the world's harshest conditions; how their friendship helped each of them to survive; how spirituality played a role for each during different phases of their imprisonment; the FARC's leaders, activities, movements, and organization; their dramatic rescue by special military units on the ground in Colombia; the reintegration process and the emotional reunions with their families and loved ones; and, how captivity has changed them and what their lives are like seven-and-a-half months after being rescued.

Out of Captivity: Surviving 1,967 Days in the Colombian Jungle Details

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From Reader Review Out of Captivity: Surviving 1,967 Days in the Colombian Jungle for online ebook

Jared says

In the book Out of captivity surviving 1,967 days in the Colombian jungle, by Marc Gonsalves, Tom Howes, Keith Stansell, and Gary Brozek, the authors discuss about their experience in being prisoners of a Colombian terrorist organization called the FARC. The authors' message that were mainly conveyed throughout the story is that with enough faith you can accomplish anything. An important quote from the book is "Sitting there with Patricia and my two boys made me feel like I'd been given another chance. I wasn't going to squander that opportunity to be washed clean, to remove some of the layers of selfishness and ego that had been building up on me long before I'd crashed in Colombia. If I hadn't gotten that message that giving of myself to others was a necessary and beneficial thing that enabled us all to survive our captivity, then Patricia's selfless devotion drove the point home so that even this big dumb country boy wouldn't forget it." on page 441. This is important because it shows that during his time in captivity all he had in his mind was seeing Patricia and his two boys, which led him to not give up.

Frederik says

Pour beaucoup de Français, Ingrid Bétancourt était une sainte. Une Jeanne d'Arc moderne aimé par nous tous. Après sa libération en 2008, des histoires moins positives commencent cependant à surgir : Sa réaction très peu généreuse vis-à-vis de son ex-mari, sa demande de 6 millions de dollars de l'état colombien (voracité ! criaient les médias colombiens) pour avoir négligé sa sécurité pendant sa campagne électorale.

Peut-être Out of Captivity, qui raconte l'histoire des co-otages américains Keith, Marc et Tom, dévoile le plus clairement la personnalité d'Ingrid Bétancourt: une femme dominante, manipulatrice et égoïste qui fait flèche de tout bois afin de protéger ses propres intérêts. Qui a raison? Bonne question, car Bétancourt ne cesse dans son livre de critiquer les américains d'être peu cultivés, matérialistes, simples d'esprit et de ne parler que du fric.

Ostensiblement, le livre se distingue clairement de la version de Bétancourt en étant moins philosophique et moins profond, cela est sûr. Néanmoins, les descriptions des chocs quotidiens entre les soldats simples et notre chère héroïne et le développement d'une hiérarchie au sein du groupe d'otages fait que la lecture n'est pas complètement dépourvu d'intérêt.

Stephanie Vincent says

Let's see... after seeing lots of interviews and documentaries about Ingrid and these 3 Americans being kidnapped I decided to read both books, as most reviews said that both books were opposite to each other. To my surprise I realized that this book is pretty similar to Ingrid Betancourt's when it comes to the boredom, the way they were treated, what they were fed, etc, but I thought most of the stories of confrontation with Ingrid were gonna be completely different... and they are not. Both books show the human side of all the hostages, and both books admit their mistakes and how captivity brought the best and worse in all of them.

So I liked this book a lot, especially to see how 3 coworkers become brothers in captivity I highly recommend it.

Andy Miller says

I remember reading at the time about the French woman's captivity and then escape from FARC and then again when this book was first published with a different perspective on her relations with the captors and fellow hostages. That's why I bought it. But this book was much more than that. It was written by the three American hostages who I think showed great courage and preseverance during their long ordeal. It was a great book, read like a novel and avoided simplistic depictions of their captors, fellow hostages and the political situation. Also showed great sensitivity to their families as well as their fellow hostages(and some captors, one of whom committed suicide)

Kelly says

Ugh, it pains me to write this about this book, considering these men went through an obviously traumatic experience. But, 6 years in the jungle leads to a lot of down time..... and that's pretty much what the book was about: Not a whole lot. They were forced to hike everywhere and told us about the long (and probably torturous) walks that lasted for weeks and months on end. They sat in camps with nothing to do, and told us about it, repeatedly. The problem with this book, is that three men are writing their experiences separately, and thus repeating a lot of the same story over and over again. And with the six year story being a bit bland as is, it was a bit hard to get through. I could feel their boredom, as I was bored, too.

While the book was a little snoozy, I do not wish to take away from these men's experiences and how awful it must have been for them. I commend them for staying strong and making it through what must have been a horrendously demanding and damaging experience, both psychologically and physically.

Veronica says

Some heavy hints resulted in my getting this book for Christmas – along with Clara Rojas' book. It certainly hasn't dethroned Ingrid Betancourt's book, which remains one of the best I've read this year, but it was interesting getting these totally different perspectives on some of the same events.

I didn't feel the three men delivered any real insights into their states of mind during this unimaginably long captivity the way that Betancourt did. The narrative plays up the stereotype of American resolve and self-belief, of a band of brothers standing together, when in reality they must have had times of doubt and depression. And like Betancourt's, the book could have been shorter.

They were clearly three very different characters, and it was a bit of a pity that having a ghost writer smoothed out some of the differences; often I had to check who was "writing". I liked Tom's analytical approach, and Marc's "touchy-feely" character, always willing to give people a second chance even when they'd behaved badly. It was predictable that I'd feel the least sympathy for alpha-male Keith, who'd behaved badly himself and described Betancourt as "the most disgusting human being I've ever met". He seems to have decided from the outset that he loathed her so that behaviour that he'd find acceptable in

others (including the FARC) suddenly became despicable when she did it, and her more courageous acts (including escape attempts which the Americans never dared try) were only grudgingly acknowledged or dismissed as "stupid". He's clearly not a man who is comfortable with the idea of an ambitious, powerful woman. In particular, the account of the "radio incident" here didn't change my mind about the despicable way he behaved; if he'd been on the receiving end of his bluff, I think he'd have reacted the same way Ingrid did. But I could admire him too; he was a very tough guy and must have played a large role in the cohesion and survival of the three men, who developed a deep bond despite their different characters. And he did have the strength to re-evaluate his own behaviour and decide to change it.

The upshot was that I felt even sadder for Betancourt. The three Americans were very lucky to have each other, and in general they were treated better than the Colombian prisoners. It comes across here, more than it does in her own book, how hard it must have been for Betancourt to be (for much of the time) the only female hostage in the group, especially when her spiky character made her not that approachable, and when the FARC isolated her from what human contact she could have with people who were sympathetic to her. No wonder she went a bit crazy.

So of you only read one book about this, I would still say "Read Betancourt's". Even then, it's still impossible for anyone who wasn't there to imagine what this captivity was like. And neither this book nor Betancourt's sheds light on what I'm most curious about: the miserable living conditions that cause teenagers to join FARC in the first place. How bad must their lives be if this is better?

Footnote: it's kind of shocking to see from reviews here how little public awareness there was in the US of what these men were going through, and how little the US government apparently did to help them, at least in the first few years. If you lived in France and didn't know about Betancourt, it was because you were living under a rock.

Oh, and while reading this, remember that unlike Ingrid Betancourt, these men knew little to nothing about Colombian politics and culture. They were working there for the money, had little interest in the country they spent much of their time in, and initially only Tom (who was married to a Peruvian woman) spoke passable Spanish. So take their views on politics with a few pinches of salt.

Tess Julia says

I felt their pain. I lived for three years in Ecuador as a volunteer, including one in the rainforest, and living next to the country of Colombia is enough to arouse fear whenever the word kidnapping comes up. My husband, who I met and married while in Ecuador, comes from a Colombian family, and I was already familiar with a lot of the history before reading this book.

Prior to reading this book, I highly recommend reading Hostage Nation, as it gives a much broader political account and history of the situation surrounding their kidnapping and eventual rescue.

Having lived in the region, I understand a little bit better than most why people chose to join a movement such as FARC, while not condoning their behavior at all. The three Americans described their lack of education, illiteracy, being brainwashed, and lack of personal awareness, which is sadly true. One of the things I did there was teach adults how to read and write, and even if they are "literate" they often do not comprehend what they read. Lacking ability to obtain abstract thinking and reason, they are easy targets for brainwashing. The extreme poverty and hopelessness of their environment make perfect targets for the FARC to recruit them at early ages. My husband has said that they kidnap children/teenagers to make them soldiers, which seems to have truth to it from what I have read. Compare it to our inner city gang problem

and you might get the idea.

I can't imagine the life these men were forced to endure for all that time, and being a CNN junky, I was shocked to learn their story after the fact because I don't recall EVER hearing them mentioned on the news. Having read Hostage Nation first, I don't believe the U.S. had much of anything to do with their rescue, which is a cautionary tale for anyone traveling to the area.

I do have to say that when I began reading the book, I was disappointed with two of the men for not making any attempt to learn the language and culture of the country they were working in. I was glad to see that that changed eventually, and they made clear that not all Colombians were bad. In fact, I think they gave credit where it was due in their rescue.

Spoiler alert- I was saddened to learn that their wives' had moved on, and while I thought it noble of the men to not blame them for it, nor to even say a negative thing about them, I DO blame them. While the memories of their families helped them survive the impossible, these women lived in comfort, being cared for by the company their husbands had worked for, and that they would not stand by them when they returned? Shame on them.

Pamela says

Haunting. These guys were hostages in Colombia while we lived there in Bogota. There are times during the book when I could correlate what I was doing and where I was at....at that time. We lived within 2 miles of the car bombing at the military academy. I clearly remember that day, the communication from the Embassy to stay in our apartment behind the armored door...and to not leave until they communicated to us a level of safety.

That said...

Amazing true story. I am glad to begin with this biography vs. the Ingrid Betancourt version. I'd like to read them all...Ingrid's and Clara Rojas's as well...and I believe, I'll read Clara's next and leave Ingrid to last. For obvious reasons when you've read this book.

Truly a testament to the far reaches of humanity...survival, loyalty, endurance...as well as brutality and evil.

I love Colombia. I love the culture, the people, the music...and the beauty of the country. I miss living in Bogota. I hope Colombians find peace someday....and thank you God for bringing these men home to the United States of America. How lucky we are to be FREE.....

Karen says

This book was fascinating; of course, I had a special interest in reading it as my husband used to work with these guys in Colombia. I can relate to everything in the book... all the political ideas, the fear of doing a job like that, etc. I recommend it for anyone who is interested in learning about the drug cartel and the risks these government contractors take in trying to keep illegal drugs out of America.

Trish says

I could feel their pain...and boredom...I decided not to be held captive. (March 2009)

(November 2010) I returned to this book after reading Ingrid Betancourt's Even Silence has an End. Betancourt's narrative allowed me to understand what exactly conditions were like in the Colombian Amazon as a prisoner of the FARC rebels. Her beautifully written memoir provided the necessary interface with which an ordinary citizen might be able to enter the terror, pain, boredom, and physical punishment that is an everyday expectation of life as a prisoner in the Amazon jungle. As a result, the book written by the three American contractors held simultaneously with Betancourt is far more interesting and accessible to me now.

One of the more interesting aspects of this memoir are the personal voices of three men. The personalities of each are evident in their choice of language and choice of things to relate. Most fascinating of all, perhaps, is the story of *how* they managed to come out of the forest so healthy and well-looking, despite lingering illnesses each would battle over the coming years. Undoubtedly the reliance of each man on the other two served them well over that time, and one wishes them peace now, and a measure of satisfaction for having survived the ordeal.

One does wonder about the FARC rebels after all these books: how do they manage to maintain discipline, sort priorities, get supplies, inculcate a sense of structure and belonging in such a diffuse environment? It is not exactly easy-street to pack up a camp and move for 40 days through a rain forest. They must suffer as much as the prisoners they hold. I can't help but think a reality television show or TV series set in such an environment would be compulsive, required watching. How crass is that? That's the American in me, to ignore their platform of *revolución* and think only of ways to popularize and capitalize on it. No, truthfully, I'd like to hear something coherent from the FARC--to see if they can support the somewhat ridiculous notion of hostage-taking with some reason.

thewanderingjew says

When I chose this book, I did not know that Pvt. Bow Bergdahl would be traded for five terrorists and brought back home to the United States. However, because of that release, after approximately five years, the book is far more pertinent than I thought it would be, and it enlightened me regarding the conditions under which a captive is forced to live and the supreme effort that must be made in order to survive, both mentally and physically.

Although Private Bergdahl has been accused by his fellow soldiers of knowingly and willingly deserting his post, his experiences during his period of incarceration must have been similar. The language barrier, deprivation and abuse along with the terror he must have felt and the abject loneliness he had to endure, had to bring him to the brink of insanity, and if not that, the edge of hopelessness.

Gonsalves, Howes and Stansell were taken captive under totally different circumstances. They went "unwillingly into the dark night". Somewhere over the jungles of Colombia, their small plane developed engine trouble and crash landed in the best clearing they could find. They were on a mission to stop the flow of drugs into the United States. All the men on board the plane were working for private companies, but for one who was part of the Colombian military. Of the six originally on the plane, only three made it out of the jungle after almost 5 ½ years.

When the men climbed out of their plane, damaged beyond repair, they discovered they had landed in the

middle of a war zone and bullets rained down around them. The FARC - The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, a left-wing rebel group, captured them and marched them through the jungle terrain for almost a month, rarely paying any attention to their need for food or drink, sleep or rest, or their inability to understand their language.

Over the five+ years of their captivity, they were moved from place to place, housed in different prison camps, chained, starved, exhausted, kept in solitary, blindfolded, terrorized and deprived of contact with their loved ones. In order to survive, the three of them devised a plan to always keep hope in their hearts, to stick together and do whatever was needed to live through their ordeal. They created a community for themselves, wherever they were taken. They had no idea their imprisonment would go on for years. They had hoped to be rescued within weeks of their capture. They knew that they were being held for some kind of ransom since that was the practice of this rebel group. They also knew they randomly and wantonly committed murder, as well. They often went from a state of hopefulness to a state of utter despair, but they roused and inspired each other to keep on going until they were free and back on US soil. They wanted to live to tell their tale to the world and to be reunited with their friends and family.

The very young soldiers who were responsible for their detention and their care seemed like teenagers; they were barely able to care for themselves. They were unsure of how to treat their hostages and as they traveled from place to place, situation to situation, they experimented with various methods. As a result, the men went from highs to lows, as each day passed, as they were subjected to more and more deprivation, more and more marching, more and more isolation, more and more broken promises and threats. They were hungry, thirsty, filthy, and too tired to keep on moving, although they were forced to continue. They drew on stores of energy they didn't know they had, and they encouraged each other and helped each other when they succumbed to illness or weakness. The years they lost as prisoners and the relationships they had at home, went on, continued without them, and their lives were profoundly impacted, permanently, by their period of imprisonment. The time that was stolen could not be returned.

The book was very detailed but it seemed too clinical. It felt like a sanitized version of their days in FARC custody. Although I walked through the jungle with them, saw their prison camps and felt some of their fear, I did not feel emotionally attached to them or any of the characters they described, except for one, and he was a rebel who realized the errors of his ways, maintained his own humanity, and escaped in the only way he could. Also, I think it would have been better if there were three readers for this audio book, one for each of the survivors, Mark, Keith and Tom, so that the person speaking in each chapter relating his past, present and hopes for the future would have been easier to identify.

Dorinda Abner says

This was a fascinating book. The authors did such a wonderful job of describing their ordeal, you couldn't help but feel their pain. I know they had a co-writer, but it is amazing to me how 3 men, who are not authors, could put such so much of themselves into their words. Thankfully they were allowed to have paper and pencil so they could chronicle their days in captivity. I had no idea that these prisoners even existed until hearing of their safe return. These men survived together, and thankfully they were kept together, by sheer mind over matter and a positive attitude. They should be an inspiration to all who read their story, I know they are to me. I must say, I was a little disappointed that they didn't share more of their return to freedom and their families, but that is, perhaps, private for them. It was a wonderful book, I would recommend it to everyone.

Kevin says

First off, I am a bit disappointed in myself for not having known this story before I read this book. Three Americans were held hostage for more than 5 years in the jungles of Colombia, were just rescued in 2008 and I didn't know anything about this? I need to be more aware of things going on in this world.

This book was written in a three person narrative style that worked very well. By having each of the three men tell the events from their perspective made for a more thought provoking read. I especially liked how they didn't sensationalize anything but more just gave the facts and their feelings about those facts. The whole time I was reading I was trying to put myself in their shoes and to understand what they must have been going through physically and emotionally. The book told more of personal journeys of these men and did not add much in the ways of crude or unnecessary details which would have cheapened the story. These men, plus many of the other hostages mentioned and still being held are heroes. They beat the FARQ troops by being tougher and enduring. This book also opened my eyes to the hundreds of other hostages still being held in Columbia and other places. My heart is saddened by what these people and their families are going through.

My only suggestion would have been to include more about their lives after freedom. We invested much in their lives and what they were going to do when they were free and that was reduced to just a few pages. We care and are interested. A good read and an important story.

Valerity (Val) says

Just finished this, stayed up all night to do so. It was quite engrossing, once I got into it. These 3 men, who were doing surveillance for a private company over Columbia in a plane, to make good money for their young families, end up crashing due to engine failure. They are captured by the FARC, and held captive for what ends up being 5 whole years out of their lives! The story kept me "captivated", I had to say! I couldn't stop reading it, with all the things that they endured. I just had to keep reading, to see how it turned out, I guess. I have a thing for true exciting stories, that's for sure. Check it out yourself.

Diana says

"Without stating it directly, they made it clear that Marc, Keith, and I would not be separated from one another for long periods of time."p.432

"You can't pick your family members, you're born with them. The same goes for your fellow hostages. We are family now. And together we did it; we survived. I love you, my brothers." p.457

Excellent, excellent book! these three guys told their story in such a warm and caring way! my favorite part was the incredible bond and the respect they shared with each other!
