

Two days after her release, Betancourt is greeted in Paris by Mayor Bertrand Delanoë; (below) a 2007 Colombian government photo of her jungle prison.



A LIVING HELL

FOR SIX YEARS, MOTHER-OF-TWO INGRID BETANCOURT SUFFERED AT THE HANDS OF COLOMBIAN GUERRILLAS. HER NEW BOOK RELIVES THE NIGHTMARE

STORY KATE BUSSMANN

Standing by the side of a dirt road with a rifle pointed at her, Ingrid Betancourt was convinced she was about to die. Moments earlier, she'd been pulled from her car into the searing heat, the barrel of a gun pushed into her back. She was dressed casually in a T-shirt, jeans, fleece jacket and hiking boots, but there was no point denying who she was – the car was covered with campaign posters bearing her name. A French-born senator and presidential candidate in Colombia – a nation torn apart by fighting between the government and guerrilla fighters – the 40-year-old was on the campaign trail, heading into one of the most dangerous regions of the country. She knew she was the one the gunmen wanted, not the four people travelling with her, who were now lined up across the road, surrounded by armed men.

Her mind foggy with fear, she began to pray. Images of her loved ones ran through her mind: her father, who'd recently had a heart attack; her mother, whom she'd spoken to hours earlier; her husband, who was sleeping in their Bogota apartment when she'd left before dawn – only her dog, Pom, had been awake for her to kiss goodbye; and her children, Melanie and Lorenzo, staying with their father, her first husband, in Auckland. (Betancourt had made her name as an outsider campaigning against corruption, “poking my finger in the eye of the monster”, as she puts it. When she received death threats, she sent her children away so she could continue her work without jeopardising their safety.)

The day everything changed was February 23, 2002. She and her team – her chief of logistics, who was behind the wheel; a cameraman; a photographer and Clara Rojas, an old friend

who'd just joined the campaign – were on their way to San Vicente del Caguán, a town at the centre of negotiations between the government and the guerrilla group FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). They hadn't gone far when they hit an unexpected roadblock manned by a group of men in camouflage. They were diverted up a dirt road, where Betancourt was separated from her companions at gunpoint.

“I thought, this is it, they're going to shoot me,” she recalls. “It was a dark moment. Then a car came with the commander. He said, ‘You're going to be safe, don't worry.’”

That's when the realisation hit that she wasn't going to be killed, she was being kidnapped. At the time, the FARC was abducting thousands of people every year, from children to high profile politicians they hoped to swap for imprisoned guerillas.

“I thought it would be two weeks, three at most, because I knew another senator who'd been abducted and released after three weeks. I thought it was going to be the same with me. Someone was going to talk to the FARC and explain that I was for peace.” She pauses, overcome with emotion. “That never happened.”

Little did she know she'd be waiting for six-and-a-half-years.

Today, when we meet in New York two years after help finally came, it's still hard for her to talk about her time in captivity. For a slight woman, she's a powerful presence – glamorous, intense and passionate. But as she lets her story unfold, another image springs to mind: the gaunt, broken figure in baggy camouflage caught on camera the day she and 14 other hostages were freed.

Betancourt and Rojas were driven for days into the jungle, then marched on foot from one

makeshift camp to another, always at gunpoint. Each time government forces caught up with the guerillas, they'd be moved. “The sound of helicopters meant the risk of being shot [in the crossfire]. We knew we had to take our things and run,” she says. “I was sick every time.”

Their captors ranged from overweight old men to beautiful teenage girls who'd joined the FARC to avoid being sold into sex slavery.

Terrified she'd be executed, Betancourt made several escape attempts. Once, she made it out at dusk, spending hours reaching a nearby river, before she was caught at dawn. Describing the event in her book, she chooses her words

carefully; it's apparent she was raped by three guards as punishment. For much of our interview, she looks me in the eye, speaking with a politician's fervour. But now, she breaks eye contact, her words hesitant. “There are things that have to be concealed, because if you talk about it, it exists all over the place,” she says. “Bury it and, in a way, it doesn't exist [anywhere] but in your mind.”

As she speaks, she absentmindedly traces a scar on her neck. When she was brought back to the camp after that escape, she was chained by the throat, the other end attached to a tree.

“When you had a mean guard, he'd tighten the chain to the point where you couldn't swallow. But nothing compares with the emotional process. It's humiliating; the purpose is to diminish you as a human, to make you accept they can do with you whatever they want. Especially with me; I was a woman in a macho culture. I was literate, they were illiterate. That was something I had to pay for.”

By contrast, some guards were kind and tried to improve their conditions – one built them a table and chairs, others granted requests for books and DVDs they'd watch on laptops.

Jungle life was a mass of contradictions. They were surrounded by waterfalls and birds of paradise, but also snakes and poisonous ants. Fruit grew on the trees and the rivers teemed with fish, but the hostages had barely enough to eat. Betancourt became gravely ill several times, once with hepatitis, and was initially denied medication. But for all the physical suffering, it was boredom she dreaded most.

“The loss of my time was the cruelest of punishments,” she says. To fill the days, she learnt to weave belts similar to those the guerillas wore, and read any books she could lay her hands on, from the Bible to an encyclopedia.

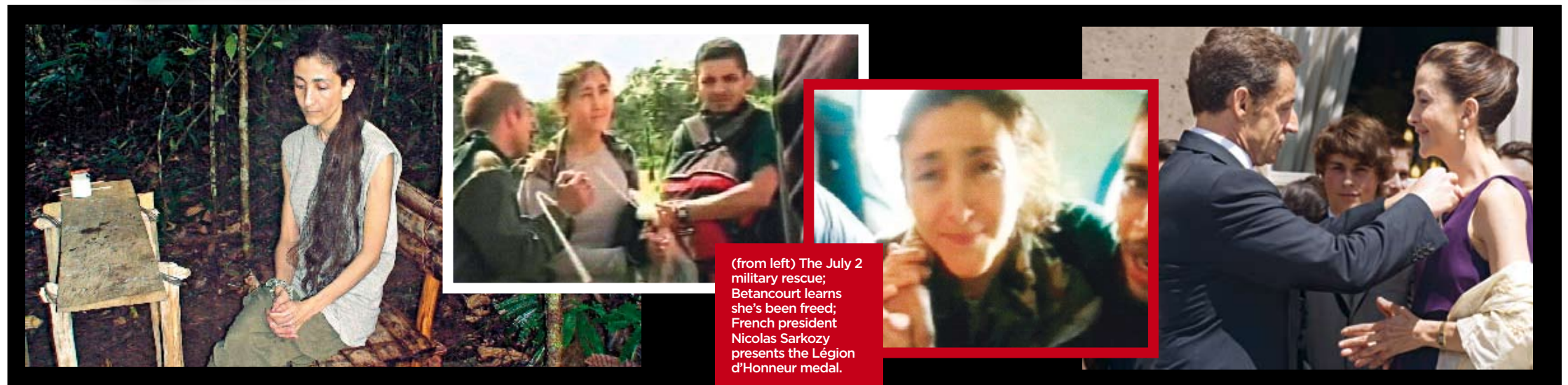
For a year of their captivity, Rojas and Betancourt were held in a cramped cage, which she describes as a “concentration

camp”. As well as overcrowding and starvation, informing was a big problem, and Betancourt's forthright personality made her some enemies.

Her relationship with her friend deteriorated under the strain, until Rojas gave birth, having fallen pregnant to one of the guards. (Betancourt implies it was consensual and deliberate, saying Rojas, then 40, was panicking about her biological clock.) Betancourt was made the child's godmother and says she's the only person who knows the identity of the father.

Relationships in the outside world were kept alive through radio shows aimed at hostages, in which families would call in with messages. Betancourt's mother phoned every day. >

“I THOUGHT, THEY'RE GOING TO SHOOT ME. IT WAS A DARK MOMENT”



(from left) The July 2 military rescue; Betancourt learns she's been freed; French president Nicolas Sarkozy presents the Légion d'Honneur medal.

After a few years, Betancourt was allowed to write a letter to her family. She let them know she heard the messages, and her children began to call, too. But her husband stopped calling by Christmas 2003, and she heard reports he'd moved on with his life. "I won't judge, because it was very hard for him, I'm sure," she says, her voice devoid of emotion. "It was many years."

The nightmare finally ended on July 2, 2008. Days earlier, the FARC commander had told her that a European commission was coming and some hostages might be freed. It was a story Betancourt had heard often over the years. When the helicopter landed, her heart sank, because none of the occupants had a European accent.

"I thought, they're going to move us and it will last 10 more years. Then everyone rebelled. Nobody wanted to go in the helicopter. They handcuffed us, pushed us in and closed the door."

It turned out, the helicopter was manned by commandos in disguise and the hostages had nearly foiled their own rescue. Over the previous weeks, the Colombian army had cracked radio codes and tricked the kidnapers into handing over captives and two high ranking guerillas.

"One man took off his cap and shouted, 'We're the Colombian army! You're free!'" Betancourt's eyes well up. "It was the best moment of my life."

"ONE MAN TOOK OFF HIS CAP AND SHOUTED, 'YOU'RE FREE!' IT WAS THE BEST MOMENT OF MY LIFE"



Betancourt is reunited with her children, Melanie and Lorenzo, in Bogota.

A short flight later, she was reunited with her mother. The next day, after more than six years, she saw her children – Melanie, by then 22, and Lorenzo, 19. "I'd created an image of what they'd look like, but they were so much better."

Since her release, Betancourt has set up a charity, The Ingrid Betancourt Foundation, aimed at promoting peace and fighting social injustice. The FARC still has hostages and she hopes to offer support to their families. She's also won and been nominated for numerous awards, including last year's Nobel Peace Prize.

Now 48, she splits her time between New York, where Melanie has just finished studying, and Paris, where Lorenzo lives. She's in contact with most of her fellow hostages, and there are rumours she's involved romantically with one of them, an American called Marc Gonsalves. "We have a very nice, deep relationship," is all she'll say. Her main focus is her family.

"In the jungle, what became clear was that I had to shift my priorities, that [family] would come before everything. For now, all I need is my quiet little life. Peace... it's a treasure." **SM**

Even Silence Has an End: My Six Years of Captivity in the Colombian Jungle (*Virago*, \$35) by Ingrid Betancourt is out now.

*18 Month. Delivery by air. Conditions, terms & charges apply. Please refer to all relevant. On-line with 11. 10. 2010. Subject to availability.

Leather Republic™ BAY

Visit www.blr.com.au



EXTRA-THICK LEATHER
Thick, plump, comfortable, durable



REINFORCED FOUNDATION
For consistent comfort and long-term support



EXCLUSIVE COLLECTION
Pavane Gallery at no additional charge

Homecenter
Homecenter Dept
720 Danks Rd
Tel 9574 4388

Homecenter
5700 Hoppers Bay
Tel 9555 5523

Homecenter
2677 Whitehorse Rd
Tel 9467 4244

Homecenter
5187 French Street
Tel 9429 3815



GALLERY

Streamlined comfort

3 Seater Modular + Chair

NEW \$3499

HOT PRICE



shown in Graphite



Separately \$999,
Purchased with
3 Seater Modular + Chair
\$499

HALF PRICE GALLERY ARMCHAIR

PURCHASE 3 SEATER MODULAR + CHAIR BEFORE 11 OCTOBER AND RECEIVE MATCHING LEATHER ARMCHAIR FOR HALF PRICE

ORDER TODAY WITH ZERO DEPOSIT AND MAKE 18 MONTHLY PAYMENTS FOR

18 MONTHS