



Held as a prisoner in the Amazon jungle, Ingrid Betancourt was chained, starved and raped by her captors. Yet, it was not knowing if she would ever be free again that almost destroyed her. She talks to **David Leser** about the joy of freedom and of a former life lost forever.

Rising

OUT OF THE ASHES

FOR INGRID BETANCOURT, the worst part of her six and a half years in captivity was not being raped by her abductors, shocking though that was, nor being starved, beaten and humiliated on a daily basis.

Nor was it being placed in a cage, chained by her neck to a tree, blindfolded and frogmarched through the Amazon rainforest. It wasn't even the terror of the jungle – the lions, tigers, jaguars, crocodiles, pirhanas, anacondas and scorpions that lay in deadly wait for her, should she try and escape, which she did on 12 separate occasions.

No, the worst thing about her imprisonment was never knowing whether it would ever end.

As a Colombian presidential candidate during the 2002 election campaign, and as the daughter of a diplomat-father and a one-time senator-mother, Ingrid had long known the perils of Colombian politics, particularly the murderous tactics of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Throughout their nearly half century of terror, these Marxist rebels had kidnapped hundreds of Colombian and foreign nationals – politicians, diplomats, soldiers and civilians alike – holding them hostage for years in hellish conditions, and just as often on a whim, summarily executing them. Ingrid knew this, and it was her fear of abduction, more than assassination, that frightened her most. That's why, when her car ran into a roadblock on its way into the remote village of San Vicente during the presidential campaign of 2002, she knew she was in deep trouble.

She knew the danger signs immediately. Soldiers from the Colombian military always wore boots made out of leather. FARC rebels wore theirs made from rubber. The men at this roadblock were all wearing rubber boots.

"Are you Ingrid Betancourt?" one of them demanded. "Yes, I am," she replied. There was no use denying it. Her name was plastered all over the car. Escorted for 30 minutes along a dusty road, she was then ordered to get out at gunpoint. "I thought of all the people I loved," she would write later, "and I thought it was so stupid to die like this."

Then she met the man who had masterminded her abduction, "El Mocho" Julio Cesar, leader of FARC's 15th Front, who arrived in his Toyota pick-up truck, smiling to his prisoner. "*Doctora* Ingrid, *Doctora* Ingrid ... Get in. Don't worry, you're safe with me." And then, more chillingly, "You're starting a new life with us. You must be prepared. I'll do my best to make things easier, but it's going to be hard for you."

The date was February 23, 2002, and Ingrid Betancourt, the 40-year-old Colombian-born, French-educated mother of two (and stepmother of one), and presidential candidate for the country's new Greens party, Verde Oxigeno, had just become the world's most famous hostage.

"I didn't have the capacity to imagine the worst," she tells *The Weekly* in an interview in Sydney, three years after her spectacular rescue from the jungle. "I was a virgin of any cruelty. I'd never had anything comparable to this. I was brought up in a family where we were two loved children.

"And in my professional life I didn't really have to bear things like gender discrimination ... I was this girl who had grown up in France. So I was not prepared, no, no, no ... I couldn't see what was coming."

What was coming was beyond her imagination. Her home was to become a cage, although more like a jungle tomb. The chains that bound her would be so tight they would cut deep into her skin.

Sleep would often prove impossible. Her toilet would be a fetid hole in the ground. Forced marches would become commonplace, often across raging rivers and through storms of biblical intensity. Guards would drag her by the hair, stab her in the ribs with their rifles, threaten to execute her.

Insects swarmed like airborne divisions – mosquitoes in their millions, ants that secreted a burning acid, fleas and microscopic ticks that would ravage her bleeding skin. Food would turn into a regimen of slow starvation, relief only coming from the occasional goggle-eyed fish floating in a bowl, a hen's foot or the skull of a smiling pig.

More than this physical hell, however, would be the psychological torment of being torn from those she loved – her teenage daughter, Melanie, her young son, Lorenzo, her stepson, Sebastian, her husband, Colombian advertising executive, Juan Carlos Lecompte, her sister, Astride, her mother, Yolanda, whom she adored, and her dying father, Gabriel, a distinguished former diplomat whom she worshipped. And the even greater torment of them not knowing whether she was alive or dead.

"I would say the worst part of it was not knowing when the abduction would end," Ingrid says now. "I would just beg so much for being free, but there was no response anywhere. There was no hope, there was nothing. So, as much as I could, I would focus on preparing another escape. I thought, ➤



Left: Days of darkness and despair ... Ingrid Betancourt pictured as a hostage of FARC in an image released by the Colombian presidential press office in November 2007, eight months before her release from her captivity. Opposite: Ingrid pictured in August 2010.

H. LEUTWYLER/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES; HO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES.

‘I will do what it takes to get back to my children.’ ”

To escape meant having to face her fear of the jungle, a fear she could confront, but never conquer. Shortly after being taken hostage the guards had shown her an anaconda they’d just captured. It was designed to terrify her, which it did.

“It was a huge thing, and it was horrible,” she says, “and I just remember thinking ‘That thing could have swallowed me’, because it was a monster.

“And when I came back to the camp I said to the guard, ‘If you know these monsters are out there, how can you just go on living in this jungle?’ And he said, ‘I could be shot by a bullet or die because a tree falls on top of me, or be eaten by a jaguar. I’m not going to pass my life thinking how I’m going to die. I want to live and when the day comes I will face it.’”

That was a turning point for Ingrid. Not long afterwards, she staged one of her most daring escapes. It was five weeks

after her capture, at dusk, and she fled into the jungle with Clara Rojas, her campaign manager who’d been taken hostage with her. For the first hour they walked, groped and ran blind through the thick vegetation, before realising they were being followed.

“The feeling was immediate,” Ingrid recounted later, “and I stopped dead in my tracks. Someone was definitely moving around in the dark. I almost thought I could hear his breath. The silence was leaden. He came closer. I could feel the heat from his body ... his odour rose to my nostrils, feeding my panic.

“Out of instinct I looked down. What was near me was not a man. The creature growled at my feet. It came up as high as my knees. It was a wild animal. Minutes that lasted forever went by in the deathly silence.”

It was a jaguar and, as she and Clara watched frozen with fear, the stalk-and-ambush predator disappeared into the undergrowth. Two days later, the women were recaptured, exhausted and starving, having only just survived an attack from a swarm of hornets. The rebels celebrated their victory by firing their machine guns in the air.

Ingrid Betancourt arrives for our interview on a crisp, blue Sydney afternoon, a study of French elegance and Buddhist-like calm. She is wearing black silk pants and matching top, and the fragrance she wears lingers long after she’s gone.

During her more than six years in captivity, the now 49-year-old Colombian-

born French national promised herself that, if she were ever to win her freedom, she would pay close attention to the small details of life – cooking for her loved ones, dressing nicely, wearing perfume, buying fresh flowers for her home.

It seems she has been true to her word, the thirst for life unquenched and palpable. “I appreciate everything,” she says in a melodious half-whisper. “I appreciate things as basic as deciding when I’m going to put out the lights, when I’m going to start sleeping, and when I’m going to wake up. Choosing what I’m going to eat, how I’m going to dress, whom I’m going to speak to, or where I’m going to go. Everything is an expression of my freedom. I appreciate it more than ever.”

She derives deep pleasure from people and conversation, but also from the solitude she has come to see as essential to her wellbeing. For six and a half years – from the age of 40 to 46 – the most fundamental parts of herself were challenged.

Who was she when stripped of everything she’d known? Who was she – at the very core of her being – when chained by the neck and raped on the orders of a commander, the men circling her like hyenas?

Her physical violation is not a subject she cares to discuss today ... “There are things that are not useful to anybody [to talk about] ... and it just makes you a prisoner even more of the events” ... but what she *will* say is that, even in those desperate, dehumanising moments, she knew she had a choice – to succumb to hatred or not.

She chose not to, and it was this stubborn refusal that became her most significant victory. Hate, not for the guards who beat and chained her, or who mocked her constantly by telling her she would grow old in captivity. Hate, not for some of her fellow hostages who turned against her because they saw her as a haughty, self-possessed woman, demanding of special treatment.

Keith Stansell, an American intelligence analyst and ex-Marine who’d been captured with two of his companions, Thomas Howes and Marc Gonsalves, was a case in point. Nine months after their cocaine-spotting plane plummeted into ▶



Above: On July 3, 2008, the newly liberated Ingrid is reunited with two of her children, Melanie (left) and Lorenzo Delloye, at Bogota airport. Right: Ingrid makes a loving gesture to her mother, Yolanda Pulecio, after her release by Colombian commandos.





Ingrid had to endure hearing about the death of her beloved father from a newspaper.

the jungle and they were taken hostage, they were moved to a new camp with Ingrid and her fellow prisoners.

The result was endless, fractious bickering over access to sleeping hammocks, books, stolen radios, talcum powder and food that would poison certain relationships forever.

In a broadside levelled at Ingrid following their rescue, Keith Stansell described her as “the most disgusting human being” he’d ever encountered. What he objected to most was the way she’d taken more than her fair share of scarce food during their captivity. His words devastated Ingrid and dismayed the other Americans.

“For me,” Stansell’s fellow American, Marc Gonsalves said, “she is a courageous person. She behaved like only heroes do. This is why I am so hurt with Keith’s attacks.”

All Ingrid will say now about Stansell is, “With one hostage I am not talking anymore.”

Who can judge these differing accounts, or the effect such cruel deprivation might

have on a human being? As Ingrid Betancourt sits in her hotel room today overlooking the glorious sweep of Sydney Harbour, the one word that seems to capture her best is dignity. The dignity of her strong, slender frame and quiet composure. The dignity of suffering.

Throughout her jungle imprisonment, she defiantly refused to answer to a number when that number was called. “My name is Ingrid Betancourt,” she would insist. She kept plotting her escape and, even when harnessed to a tree, she would manage to exercise in her confinement, knowing that physical discipline could offer her some kind of mental clarity.

She studied the Bible and read the encyclopaedic dictionary, which – after much pleading to her captors – had finally been granted to her. She broadened her knowledge of medicine, philosophy, history. She deepened her faith, finding solace in prayer and meditation.

She even befriended some of the guards, not through a need to co-operate with

her captors, but through a desire to understand what had led them to such cruelty and violence. She came to see in them occasional glimpses of humanity, and in so doing, saw herself as no better, no worse than they. She could see in her own defects, as well as in theirs, all the defects of humanity.

When she discovered her father, Gabriel Betancourt, had died one month after her abduction – she learnt of this after reading a newspaper cutting – she thought she would expire from grief. She thought of their last meeting in hospital, just before she’d been abducted, and how she wanted to remain by his bedside.

“I adored my father,” she says now. “He was my source of inspiration. And I said to him [in the hospital], ‘I want to stay with you.’ And he said, ‘Yes, but you have given your word so you should go.’” Her last words to her father were, “Papa, wait for me! If anything should happen to me, you wait for me! You are not going to die!”

During her captivity, she often pushed her loved ones from her mind, such was the pain of separation. Only on her children’s birthdays did she deliberately bring them to the fore. She would ask her captors to let her make a cake, and then she would sing them happy birthday, quietly in her head, praying that the vibrations of her words might reach them from her jungle prison.

A number of times she came close to death, particularly after developing hepatitis. She lay on the ground unable to move, thousands of insects and black bees clinging to her hair, to her socks and underwear, crawling into her nostrils and eyes. Then one day, out of the clear blue sky, the miracle of all miracles arrived.

On the morning of July 2, 2008 two helicopters landed in the jungle with a group of new FARC rebels aboard. The men told the guards on the ground that their orders were to take the hostages to another camp to meet the incoming FARC commander, Alfonso Cano.

It was a gigantic bluff. The men in the helicopters were Colombian military intelligence agents dressed as rebels, ➤

“SHE BEHAVED LIKE ONLY HEROES DO.”

After her release, Ingrid was feted by world leaders. On Bastille Day, July 14, 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy awarded the Franco-Colombian politician the Légion d'honneur, France's highest decoration, at the Elysée Palace.



part of a team that had been infiltrating FARC's command structure for months.

Once airborne, the officer in charge of the operation, code-named "Jaque" (Spanish for "check", as in checkmate) declared to the 15 hostages, "We are the Colombian Army. You are free".

Ingrid could not believe her ears. "Every time I talk about this, it's always emotional," she says now, her eyes glistening. "It was too good to be true ... to even understand what he was saying. Everybody was screaming ... and it was not a scream of joy. It was an animal scream that we couldn't control. And we were crying ... and then we realised we were free.

"But it was like this bird trapped in a cage for so long, and then you open the cage and the bird knows that it is open and he looks outside the door, but he stays there for quite a long moment until he dares to fly away."

The commanding officer then lifted Ingrid from her seat, hugged her and said, "I want you to understand, Ingrid, that we've all been behind you, every day, bearing your pain like our own cross, all Colombians."

At 1pm the news flashed around the world, triggering celebrations throughout Colombia and France. French President Nicolas Sarkozy sent a plane to the Colombian capital, Bogota, to bring Ingrid back to her adopted land. Her children, now grown up, flew to Bogota for a tearful reunion they'd all feared would never occur. Ingrid's mother was

on a mobile phone handed to Ingrid at the first military base they arrived at.

"Hello, Mum?"

"Astride [Ingrid's sister's name], is that you?"

"No Mum, it's me, it's Ingrid."

It was the same scene Ingrid had repeatedly played out in her dreams during her captivity. The phone would ring, her mother would mistake her for her sister, and then on realising her daughter was free, she would burst into tears.

Ingrid's return to France was a rapturous affair, the French president and his wife, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, greeting her at the airport and then, later, during the Bastille Day celebrations, awarding her the Legion of Honour. She was feted by world leaders, received by the Pope and nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Her reunion with her husband, Juan Carlos Lecompte, however, was less heart-warming. His first reported words to her, when she stepped off the plane, were, "Can I still live in your apartment?"

Their estrangement had begun soon after Ingrid had been captured, he allegedly starting a "new life" in her absence. By March of 2009, Ingrid was filing for divorce, with Lecompte then counter-suing by claiming Ingrid had formed a relationship with a fellow hostage during her imprisonment.

Last year Lecompte sought half his wife's fortune, including a share

of royalties from the book she had just penned about her captivity, *Even Silence Has An End*.

Asked about this now, she says, "You come back from six and a half years of abduction and the guy in front of you is not the same, and you are not the same. Your lives have changed in a way that you don't even want to have the same kind of life. And going back is not an option. You have to look forward together or break. We were not able to foresee ourselves in the future together."

And, finally, there was her request for \$6 million in compensation from the Colombian state, which was met with widespread indignation throughout Colombia. The country's vice-president, Francisco Santos, described the request as deserving of a "world prize for greed, ungratefulness and gall".

Ingrid later withdrew the claim, but insists now her compensation claim was based on her security guards and escort having been withdrawn by the Colombian president just before entering the territory from which she was abducted.

"This is a right we have as victims," she says. "It is not something that is unethical or unlawful. They wanted to make it look like somebody [me] was trying to take advantage of the situation. It was monstrous."

And it broke her heart. "It was so unexpected and cruel. It felt like I was shot down with snipers."

Today, she lives mostly out of her suitcase, visiting her children in America and

her mother, sister and nephews in France. However, after spending the day at Bondi Beach recently, she feels that one day this might be a place she could call home. "I would love Bondi Beach and I have thought that, later on, yes, I could [live there]."

I ask her, finally, as we bid each other farewell, how she would describe herself after all she's been through. She looks at me with her sad, beautiful brown eyes and replies, "A free woman". ■

Even Silence Has An End: My Six Years Of Captivity In The Colombian Jungle, by Ingrid Betancourt, is published by Virago Press, \$24.99.

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