

Left to right: Mike Eastham, Simon Edwards, Jake Hamby, Alex Manne and Wayne Mitchell

# SURVIVING THE DARIÉN GAP

*Diehard military careers prepared four veterans to take on a historic motorcycle expedition through one of the most dangerous places on earth, but the jungle had other plans*

BY SCOTT YORKO PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX MANNE

"If you perish in the jungle, what would you like us to do with your remains?"

The question comes from Simon Edwards, whom I met three minutes ago. "The rest of us already talked about it," he goes on, "and we're just going to leave any bodies in there." I tell him I need an hour or two to think about it. He shrugs and launches into a rundown of his "trauma bag": sutures and staples; four eye patches; combat gauze with a hemostatic agent for quicker blood clotting; six liters of IV fluid; intravenous steroids, antihistamines and antibiotics; scalpels; and a chest seal for stabblings that puncture a lung. The bright-eyed 54-year-old veteran and physician's assistant, who has sutured at least four scrotums in his career, spent 20 years in the Special Forces as a medic in more than 10 countries, and apparently he can't help getting excited at the prospect of using all this stuff again.

We're standing in the backyard of a Panama City hostel called Casa Nativa, where shirtless European backpackers sway in nearby hammocks, smoking cigarettes and watching, perplexed, as these middle-aged Americans in flip-flops prepare for some kind of war. On a picnic bench behind Edwards, 43-year-old Wayne Mitchell, the expedition's hawk-faced leader, discusses logistics with our French fixer, who is describing the dead bodies of undocumented migrants he's seen on the trail in the past year.

Mitchell is also a 20-year Army veteran, having served as a platoon leader in Iraq and an urban combat advisor in Mongolia. He, Edwards and two other vets—Mike Eastham, a 50-year-old bearded and tattooed curmudgeon who was twice deployed to Iraq and served as an advisor in Mongolia with Mitchell, and 59-year-old Rich Doering, a retired satellite-systems engineer and Army airborne officer—are two months into the first-ever continuous motorcycle journey from Deadhorse in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska to Ushuaia, Argentina. Their route includes the roadless, lawless jungle known as the Darién Gap, the only break in the 19,000-mile Pan-American Highway system. Driving this course in its entirety is the holy grail of overland motorist expeditions, but almost everyone settles for a Caribbean boat ride that circumvents the 80-mile snarl of jungle. Only a handful of motorists have ever made it through the Gap, and none has completed the whole Alaska-to-Argentina journey in one straight shot.

Becoming the first group to do this is their mission—and the premise of their largely self-funded documentary,

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT YORKO



Top: Entering the Darién Gap. Bottom: Pizarro and Mitchell in Yaviza, Panama.

*Where the Road Ends*, which is being filmed by 24-year-old Iraq veteran and combat cameraman Jake Hamby.

Mitchell has been going crazy at his National Park Service office job “like a border collie in an apartment,” he says. Edwards is on the run from a broken heart back home in Colorado, and the other guys just seem to have the time. Below the surface, however, there’s a sense that these men are out to redefine the image of the modern-day veteran. “I don’t want the pinnacle of my life to be my early military career,” Edwards later says from the passenger seat of their 22-foot support van. “I can’t stand going into the VFW with soggy old guys sucking down 75-cent beers, talking about the war days.” He’s not a fan of charities like Wounded Warrior Project, which helps reintegrate veterans into society and provides a range of support programs. “If you’re waiting around for the government or whoever to take you on a fishing trip and make you feel better, it’s not gonna happen,” he says.

The team rejects the common notion that all veterans are screwed-up, dysfunctional

victims incapable of living happy postwar lives. “Among the veteran community there’s this idea that if you don’t have severe PTSD, then you didn’t serve hard enough,” says Hamby. But they also want to distance themselves from the growing crop of tatted blowhards hamming it up for their YouTube channels—toting guns in their living rooms, scarfing MREs and dissing liberals while flanked by women in American-flag bikinis.

Somewhere between these extremes are four men about to enter one of the most dangerous patches on the planet.

...  
The Darién region is a haven for drug smugglers, banditos, paramilitary forces and undocumented migrants on desperate and often fatal passages to the United States. Not far from the Colombian village of Cristales, a backpacker was shot execution-style in 2013. A journalist and two backpackers crossing through the Arquia area were kidnapped for 10 days in 2003. And a few years before that, a local farmer in the riverside village of Bijao was decapitated in a violent operation of mass displacement; his paramilitary killers played soccer with his head.

And those are just the human dangers. In the mountainous ravines—smothered with dank vegetation and under a canopy of trees so dense it’s hard to see more than a few feet beyond your machete—poisonous spiders,

frogs, scorpions, plants and snakes share one of the wettest climates on earth.

The Darién Gap has been regarded as cursed ever since the Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez de Balboa first set foot on the Isthmus of Panama in 1513. Early explorers were beheaded by subordinates, killed by mysterious diseases and driven to delirious starvation after 49 days of wandering in circles. Motorcyclists attempting to cross the Gap have faced mechanical snafus, suffered severe infections and broken bones or been turned around by Senafront, Panama’s border police force.

Just as ubiquitous as these catastrophes is a collective obsession that keeps these fools coming back for more.

...  
The Darién Gap doesn’t feel like such a scary place when, after driving from Panama City to Yaviza and then traveling two days by river deep into the jungle, we nose our dugout canoes (called *piraguas*) up to the banks of the brown Paya River and are greeted by two dozen boys in rubber boots and soccer jerseys. These young, genial Guna Indians, all of them short, with close-cropped hair and wearing gold chains, wave and cheer like a fan club. As the riders prepare to unload their 2017 Kawasaki KLR 650s, they realize that this gaggle of youngsters is the team of porters our Paya-born Guna guide, Isaac Pizarro, has hired for us.

We drag the bikes ashore and into a wall of sugarcane, the stalks towering 10 feet overhead. The sky disappears above us. We begin our slide down the throat of the jungle.

The riders are on their bikes by 7:17 A.M., motoring through the sugarcane where the porters have begun to machete a narrow path. The unassisted riding lasts about 200 yards before we’re stopped at the foot of a steep, muddy hill. “Five more minutes, then all *tranquilo*,” says

## THERE’S A SENSE THAT THESE MEN ARE OUT TO REDEFINE THE MODERN-DAY VETERAN.

Pizarro, making a downhill motion with his hand and a quick, emphatic *whoosh* sound. He barely finishes this sentence when rain begins to pour through the trees.

Drenched within minutes, Mitchell tries to gun it up the hill in first gear, revving hard and almost toppling over before jumping off to the bike’s side. He keeps giving it gas while pushing the handlebars, spinning the rear tire and kicking up mud as six boys run over to help push and pull the bike uphill. “*Allez! Allez!*” they yell, cheering and clapping when he tops out. Edwards goes next and does the same, followed by Eastham, who leans hard on the throttle without getting off the bike, then Doering, who stalls immediately, dismounts and lets the boys push it up the rest of the hill.

As the slowest and most timid rider, Doering has struggled to keep up with the group since Alaska. Now, with no road to speak of, he can barely get over a root without stalling. “Rich, I know it’s hard, man, but you’ve gotta keep forward momentum,” says Mitchell with the patience of a father of two. Under his breath he adds, “We should have reconned further yesterday. It just keeps going *up*.”

After a few more hills, our hired help disappears. We figure some are up ahead stashing the food and backpacks at a lunch spot, but as I hike past the bikes and crest the next plateau, I see 12 of them helping themselves to our bag of Panamanian hard candy.

To catch the Darién Gap’s short dry season,

from January to February, the *Where the Road Ends* crew left their starting position in Alaska on November 11—an extremely cold and blustery time to be driving from Prudhoe Bay. But just our luck, the Darién region will receive five times more rainfall the week of the expedition than the previous two years combined. It has been pouring every night for seven days, and the jungle floor is an endless puddle of thick, sloppy mud. The tire knobs are caked slick, and the space between the rear wheel and the swing arm of each bike is fully packed with debris. With this added resistance, the riders redline the rpms while feathering the clutch to get some traction. They stop every 15 minutes to clean mud and leaves out of the wheel wells with sticks.

We’re only two hours in when Doering burns out his clutch. Edwards and Eastham spend an hour taking the transmission apart to find the clutch fibers worn down to nothing. Farther ahead, Mitchell is rallying the other three bikes up a series of longer, steeper hills. The heat coming off each motorcycle is scorching as the engine temperatures push 240 degrees Fahrenheit; they usually don’t exceed 190.

The porters stop working at four P.M. on the dot and begin hacking out a clearing for camp. We string up hammocks while they make beds out of banana leaves and suspend mosquito netting. They prepare a vat of salty white rice and sardines while the team discusses the fate of Doering and his bike.

“It really boils down to mission success,” says Doering. “I don’t want to keep going if I’m just going to take up space and resources without contributing.” The other guys protest, but everyone, including Doering, seems relieved that this is the end of the road for him. There’s no time to worry about retrieving his lifeless motorcycle from the jungle, though the locals seem eager to strip it for parts and souvenirs.

The next morning, Doering says a short good-bye and makes his way back to Panama City. Some of the porters head home too, having lost interest in the job. Eastham starts his bike at the bottom of a short incline and spends a few minutes struggling to get over some slick roots. Despite having more aptitude and less timidity than Doering, he got his motorcycle license only two weeks before the trip and may now be the weakest link, throttling heavily and spraying mud into the porters’ faces. Out of breath and softly telling the others to go ahead, he stops to rest his head in his hands.

Edwards’s and Mitchell’s bikes quickly overheat too. As they cool down, Edwards checks his odometer: They’re only 1.2 miles from the river where they unloaded.

The farther we get from the Paya, the thicker the jungle becomes. Small snakes slither away from our commotion. Scorpions have taken a liking to crawling inside our backpacks. Ravines cut by the rainy season’s heavy flooding are getting deeper and steeper, the banks too challenging to walk up, let alone push a motorcycle over. “Let’s stop frying the bikes and use some mechanical advantage,” Eastham suggests. They rig a 50-meter steel cable above the ravine with a three-quarter-ton hand crank, hoist the bikes up one at a time, then zip-line them across to the other side. It’s time-consuming but a welcome break from the slog.

After one and a half days of dragging, pushing, pulling, hoisting and zipping bikes across brutal terrain, Pizarro tells us the boys have had their fill. They give us a few high fives before vanishing into the bush with a handwritten note to Doering detailing our mechanical predicament—that all three remaining bikes have burned-out clutches and will need to be dragged the rest of the way. Supposedly some new porters are coming over from Colombia tomorrow.

After hiking ahead to the next plateau, we make camp under a *cuipo* tree that’s 12 feet in diameter. Mitchell rummages through the pile of white trash bags containing our supplies, but he can’t find any of the sardines, bananas, candy or pasta. Only a few cans of Spam are left, along with a couple bags of



Wounaan porters dish up a midday meal.

rice, lentils and salt. As the others prepare to hack through the thick curtain of vines to clear some hammock space, they realize all but one of their machetes is gone, along with three pairs of riding gloves, several cans of bug spray, matches, a spool of 550 cord and a pair of boots. The Guna Indians practice communal living with hardly any possessions, which is beautiful in its own way but doesn't instill in them much concept of personal property. "We should have brought a lockbox," says Mitchell.

Low on supplies and lugging lifeless bikes is not how the team envisioned their great quest playing out, but by now we all know that nothing goes as planned in the Darién Gap. We have no idea where we are or how much farther it is to Colombia, and Pizarro's estimates turn on themselves every time we ask.

To me, nobody seems as worried as he should be. Why hadn't they thought to replace the clutch plates after riding 10,000 miles, including 400 on Alaska's wind-hammered Dalton Highway, before attempting to ride through the untamed jungle? How about a jumper pack or some spare parts? I

thought one of the first rules of military survival is to take care of your feet, yet Mitchell has agonizing blisters from a sockless recon mission in wet rubber boots the day before we left Paya. These guys have operated in wild places with comparably horrific environmental conditions, but without the organizational structure, hierarchical chain of command and robust resources of the military, are they capable of pulling off a mission of this magnitude?

I'm reminded once again that they are walking rejections of vet clichés. Still, they could at least keep better track of their essential equipment. When I look down at my pack's hip belt, I realize my only knife is gone.

...

On our third day in the jungle, it pours rain for hours before daybreak, making the mud even deeper and slipperier. Mosquitoes taking shelter from the rain feast on our flesh through the underside of our hammocks, where there's no bug netting. The 27 new Colombian porters show up two hours late and promptly commence an hour-long breakfast production of rice, plantains and charred

river turtle. Mostly members of the Wounaan tribe, they look older, stronger and more serious than the Gunas. One has a Latin Kings gang tattoo on his neck. Another has a vicious scar on his face and a white, blind eyeball.

When we approach an Africanized "killer" bees' nest the size of an oil drum wrapped around a tree, the Wounaan bull-rush through the swarm, yelling, "¡Vay! ¡Vamos a Colombia!" Eastham hangs back, having developed a bee allergy during jungle-warfare training in this area 25 years ago. Mitchell seizes the opportunity to call Eastham a pussy; Eastham retorts with a comment about Mitchell's intolerance for iodine water treatment. The guys are never too worn down to trade casually emasculating jabs, the kind shared only by close friends who have been through hell together. They also commiserate over the tedious bureaucracies of military administration and swap stories about the tangles of family life—of missing births while on deployment and coming home after nine months to a newly spouseless house.

The following day, we reach a sunny hilltop clearing where a white stone obelisk—Palo de las Letras—marks the Panamanian-Colombian border. The air smells sweeter here; then again, we've barely seen the sky in three days. It's a rare moment of triumph for the team to reach this landmark and finally have a sense of measurable distance. The Wounaan celebrate by using leaves to funnel our Gatorade powder into their bottles of river water. Senafront soldiers emerge from the bush to congratulate us and pose for group photos—but also to remind us that we're on our own once we cross into Colombia.

The ground is firmer on the Colombian side, and the mud quickly dries in the spokes of each bike. We start to see piles of discarded boots and sweatshirts, presumably from migrants trying to shed weight from their already meager belongings. Two emaciated dogs with open wounds on their faces have been following us, and they suddenly take off barking into the woods. "Jaguars," says one of the Wounaan.

After another day and a half of relentless uphill and downhill schlepping between 11 river crossings, we're getting close to the confluence with the Cacarica River, where we'll load up the bikes and begin our jungle departure through fast-moving rapids in tiny, overloaded *piraguas*. Despite having miles of river and ocean and an entire continent left to cross, the team glows with pride at having tackled the bulk of the Darién Gap with motorcycles, a historic feat even if they did end up dragging



Edwards and Mitchell navigate a rare section of jungle where riding with minimal assistance is possible.

## WE HAVE NOWHERE TO STAY, NO MORE FOOD AND A STORM MASSING AT THE SKYLINE.

the bikes most of the way. Stoic as they all are, the men give off a glow of camaraderie and a sense of team accomplishment—something they've known for most of their adult lives in the military. Facing a death-defying task, relying on one another to execute it and acting like it was just another day on the job are the things so many veterans struggle to replicate in the workplace, with family and in the rest of their daily civilian lives.

But in the Gap, as in war, as soon as you think things are looking up, the fates decide they're not quite ready to stop fucking with you.

...

We pull into the river village of Cristales, where locals shepherd us into an open-air hut and immediately start arguing with Pizarro. Squealing naked children play soccer and hopscotch in the dirt, but adults keep their distance and stare from the dark doorways of unlit shacks, visibly uncomfortable with the presence of six American gringos in their village. We hear the 20-horsepower motor of a *piragua* taking five men downriver to inform the local paramilitaries of our arrival. "Very dangerous. Very bad," Pizarro whispers in Spanish. He cocks his arms as if holding a large gun and jerks it upward to mimic the powerful kickback. "Boom! Boom! Paramilitaries maybe 30 minutes from here. I want to go right now."

As we wait to see how the paramilitary authority will receive our unexpected arrival on their turf, the veterans hide their military IDs in their shoes and discuss a plan of action in the event that things get spicy. "I'll trade 'em two pulleys and a punch in the mouth for a boat ride out of here," says Eastham.

Just then, we get an inReach text from Doering saying he has Kawasaki in the U.S. overnighting three new clutch packs to Panama, which he'll deliver to us in Colombia.

Now we just have to make it out of here. Word from the paramilitary arrives: They will allow us to stay the night as long as we're gone by dawn, but we still have to float downriver through several of their jungle outposts.

The next morning, our attention turns to the narrow waterway's transition into a dark swamp. The riverbanks are gone, replaced with thick mangroves in murky water that gets too shallow for our cargo load. On guard for freshwater stingrays, we wade knee-deep as black palm needles work their way into our boots. The Wounaan lift, push and pull the boats over fallen logs, and a barefoot teenager spends 30 minutes with a Stihl MS 660 chain saw, going to work on a mass of trees blocking our path. So of course we think we're home free seven hours later when the swamp opens up to the larger Atrato River, which is hundreds of yards wide and has large ships pattering up and down it. We just have to abandon our fleet of three *piraguas* for an 18-foot skiff to carry the three motorcycles, all our gear, our six guys plus Pizarro and five more local helpers who all smell like booze.

The sun sets on us as we make a run for the port city of Turbo, where the team hopes to get the bikes running again and reunite with their support van before continuing on the journey south. We stop for gas in a floating pirate village where two Colombian military boats are parked, loaded to the gills with ammunition and 50-caliber gunners. The commander is refusing to let us cross the ocean bay to get to Turbo at night, but we have nowhere to stay, no more food and a storm massing at the



Top: Senafront soldiers, Wounaan people and the team pose at Palo de las Letras. Bottom: Mitchell and Edwards work their way down the Cacarica River.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAKE HENRY

skyline. After much of our pleading and pestering in bad Spanish, a younger military official scrawls something on a scrap of paper, presumably absolving them of all liability. We have no idea what it actually says, but we sign it anyway and take off.

Under a Cheshire cat moon and advancing clouds, we crash through open water. The boat lurches as we grip the motorcycles to keep them from tipping over. Everyone is silent. Eight days have passed since we entered the jungle. They may have made history, surviving the Darién Gap at its worst, but at this moment everyone is focused on staying out of the dark, violent water. There are more rivers, more mountains to come. I can't help feeling this is a high-stakes covert military operation, only there's no backup and nobody has any idea where we are.

The fear and uncertainty are palpable. That's exactly what they came for.

*At press time, the Where the Road Ends crew was still on the road, headed south through Chile. Their film is slated to premiere in 2019.*