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HARD AS IT IS TO BELIEVE THREE TEENAGERS COULD BAND TOGETHER TO FORM ONE OF THE DEADLIEST HIT SQUADS IN THE MEXICAN DRUG WARS, THE TRUTH IS STRANGER STILL—THEY WERE AMERICANS. IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, THE GROUP'S FOUNDER, GABRIEL CARDONA, REVEALS HOW THEY GOT THEIR START. BY JESSE HYDE
PHOTOGRAPH BY KATY GRANNAN

EVIL EYES: "I'm not going to say I haven't killed people," says Gabriel Cardona, flashing his eyelid tattoos. "But a lot of the stuff they say, it isn't true."



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THE BOY SITS IN A RUN-DOWN MOTEL ROOM IN LAREDO, TEXAS, WAITING FOR the phone to ring. His name is Gabriel Cardona, and he is 18 years old, handsome, and serious. His lips are full, and his dark, brooding eyes give him the sad look of an old Catholic saint, the type that line the walls of his mother's home in fading lithographs. When the phone rings, the boy answers it. He listens and hangs up. He gets in his red Jetta and drives to an abandoned house to pick up the man he was directed to meet. Together they head out of town, toward the warehouse district.

It is the summer of 2005, and the Mexican drug cartels are at war over the lucrative I-35 corridor, which stretches from the border town of Laredo north to Dallas and on to Chicago. Day after day, members of rival cartels kill one another for control of the entrance to the highway and the narcotics that flow along it. Day after day, police are murdered. In Nuevo Laredo, the sister city just south of the border, people profit or perish at an astonishing clip. *Plata o plomo*, as the Mexican saying goes: silver or lead. Bodies turn up in 55-gallon drums, or on top of smoldering tires, charred to a crisp. Severed heads are found in the desert, cooling in iceboxes. Ranchers stumble across decapitated bodies in the brush, and their dogs find hacked-off legs wrapped

in black garbage bags. Nobody on the U.S. side seems to care.

It has been this way for as long as the kid can remember. On the outskirts of town, Cardona and his new associate meet up with some of Cardona's friends. They stop in an industrial park, where they watch as a man leaves an office building. Bruno Orozco, a former Mexican cop who is now tied to Nuevo Laredo's criminal underworld, has been under surveillance for days. Cardona knows where he lives, where he works, where he stops for lunch. When Orozco gets into his Nissan Altima and begins to drive, Cardona, his friends, and the associate follow. The associate flips on a set of fake police lights and Orozco pulls over. The associate asks Orozco to step out of his vehicle. As the man slaps a cuff on Orozco's wrist, Orozco realizes that something isn't right and begins to struggle. He calls for help, but it's too late. Cardona's gang tosses Orozco onto his back and one of them unloads a clip from an AR-15 into his body. As Orozco thrashes in the grass, gasping and dying, a horrific new era of the drug war is born: Not only has a Mexican cartel brazenly staged a hit on the U.S. side of the border, but for the first time a cartel has used a squad of American teenagers to do its killing.

Up close four years later, Cardona, now 22 years old, looks more like a child than an assassin. His wrists are thin, his shoulders barely fill out his prison whites, and with his smooth, unblemished face—and those sad, saintly eyes—he has the delicate look of an altar boy. Like his mother, he was named after the angel Gabriel, the biblical messenger who foretold the birth of a son of God who would die to cleanse the world of sin. Blood and sin. This much of his Catholic religion Cardona understands. For \$500 a week, he and his team of teenage hit men would hang in abandoned safe houses or motel rooms, smoking pot, playing Xbox, waiting for the call to come—the order for a murder that could pay as much as \$10,000 and two kilos of coke. “Along the border, this is all there is,” Cardona tells me. “You're either a cop, a federal agent, or a drug trafficker. For kids like me, there's only one path.”



PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT: SSPF/POLICIA FEDERAL; TEXAS DEPT. OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE.

Reta killed for the first time at 13. “I shot him four times in the chest and

We are in the visitation room of the maximum-security Telford Unit in East Texas. Not far from where we sit, inmates are working in the fields, making 10 cents a day. For the rest of his life, barring some kind of miracle, this will be Cardona's home. “Prison is hard. It's not what I thought,” he says. A sadness settles on him; he lowers his head and slowly blinks. Tattooed on his eyelids, in crude ink, is another set of eyeballs. They are lifeless and wide, and devoid of emotion. When he sleeps, or when his mind drifts to the killing he has seen and done, to the bodies he has burned and buried and hacked to pieces, these eyes look out on the world.

Today, his real eyes exude weariness, which is what you might expect in a kid who triggered one of the largest investigations into Mexican drug-related violence the United States has ever conducted. In a span of 10 months, Cardona and two other American teens killed at least seven people in Texas and Mexico. The one who began killing at 13 would eventually confess to 30 murders. Criminal cases against their co-conspirators are now winding their way through the federal courts. They offer the first look inside the operations of Los Zetas.

A secretive band of bounty hunters, the Zetas were founded in part by a group of soldiers who defected from the Mexican army in the late 1990s and joined the Gulf Cartel, one of three major drug-trafficking syndicates in Mexico. They also may have received training from the

DEATH'S DISCIPLES: A gun and grenades seized from Zetas are a grim testimony to the carnage in Nuevo Laredo (below). Before they turned to murder, Jesse Gonzalez, Rosalio Reta, and Gabriel Cardona (opposite, left) played football together in Texas. Reta (opposite, right) showed the most promise as a hit man.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SSPF/POLICIA FEDERAL(3); AP PHOTO.

U.S. military, the DEA, and the FBI. In time, the Zetas changed the way drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico use violence. Intimidation turned into terror. Like Colombia before it, Mexico has become a place where government is powerless. Kidnappings, carjackings, and assassinations of elected officials are regular occurrences. Thanks largely to the Zetas, whose tactics have been mimicked by other organized-crime syndicates, Mexico stands on the brink of chaos. And kids have become assassins for hire. “I'm not going to say I haven't killed people, because I have,” Cardona says. “But a lot of the stuff they say, it isn't true. They consider me the leader and the organizer, but really, only I know the truth.”

THE BOY GREW UP IN LA AZTECA, A BARRIO ON THE BORDER IN DOWNTOWN Laredo where the crumbling streets are so narrow that most are one-way and where many of the houses are built of sandstone. It is a neighborhood of grinding poverty. Laundry dries on fence lines, thick oaks and saplings cast long shadows, and lookouts, known in the Mexican underworld as “hawks,” watch strangers pass in the night from rooms illuminated by candlelight. “We didn't have anything,” Cardona says. “My father, he would beat my mother, and he would beat me and my brother. We grew up with strict rules, and if we did something wrong, my mother would beat us too.” “We spanked him all the time,” she admits, “when he was a little boy.”

When Cardona was 11 his father left for Mexico and never came back. In high school, the boy met a girl who introduced him to prescription pills. As Cardona puts it, his mind started “malfunctioning.” He ran



five times in the head,” he says. “I felt like Superman. I felt like James Bond.”

As the two teens bled to death, Cardona took cups of their blood and toasted



away from home. When he crashed his mother's car, he says, he was told she never wanted to see him again. He dropped out of school, slipped in and out of juvenile detention. Just as no one seemed to give a damn about the growing violence of the drug cartels, no one seemed to care about him, except, maybe, for his older brother. Under his wing, Cardona began hanging out at nightclubs in Nuevo Laredo, and at 16 he started working for the Zetas.

Around this time, according to investigators, Cardona recruited two close friends into the organization: Jesus "Jesse" Gonzalez and Rosalio Reta. Both came from Siete Viejo, a neighborhood about a mile north of the Cardonas' home. The three boys had grown up together, playing soccer and football in the streets of Laredo, not far from the Rio Grande. Strikingly handsome, with a strong Roman nose and dark brown eyes, the 17-year-old Gonzalez had left home at an early age. Reta, 13, was the youngest of the gang. Known as Bart, he was the second of 10 children raised on a street where it was not uncommon to see kids playing barefoot in the dirt. A juvenile-justice investigator who later visited his house noted the rotting wood. The family was crammed into three bedrooms and often fell asleep watching television in the front room. Still, outside of a domestic-violence charge against Rosalio Reta Sr., the family did not seem troubled. Like the Cardonas, they regularly attended Mass in the Spanish-style cathedral that towers over the two neighborhoods.

Cardona killed for the first time when he was 16, at a bar in Nuevo Laredo. "I didn't feel bad about it," he says. "I didn't feel like I had done anything wrong. Bart was the same way: He didn't care about anything." Reta killed for the first time at 13. According to statements he made to investigators, he was at a safe house in Nuevo Laredo when a Zetas bigwig named Miguel Treviño challenged him to kill a man who was tied up and kneeling before him. Reta asked for Treviño's gun, which was decorated with diamonds along the handle that spelled out Treviño's nickname, El Cuarenta (40).

"I shot him four times in the chest and five in the head," Reta says in a videotaped confession, smiling.

"How did you feel?" an investigator asks.

"I felt like Superman. I felt like James Bond."

Gonzalez didn't have the same stomach for killing, and while

Cardona did, it was in the youngest of the three boys that the Zetas saw the most promise. When he was 15 or 16, Zeta mercenaries picked Reta up in Laredo, put a hood over his head, and drove him to a remote ranch in the interior of Mexico for six months of training in weapons, hand-to-hand combat, and surveillance. If it resembled the boot camp described by other Zetas, he awoke at 6 A.M., dressed in military fatigues, and completed exercises such as swimming while toting a backpack and an assault rifle. By the time he finished, he had become one of the most prized recruits in the organization.

WITH THE HIT SQUAD IN PLACE, CARDONA AND HIS CREW BEGAN KILLING.

Though the group moved freely back and forth across the border, Cardona liked to work in Mexico, because he didn't have to worry about getting caught there. Police officers paid by the cartel would sometimes escort him into a bar where a target was drinking, wait for him to finish the execution, and then escort him out. The cops sometimes even disposed of the bodies, Cardona told investigators.

In Mexico, the Zetas traveled in caravans of armored SUVs with blacked-out windows, armed with gold-plated AK-47s and AR-15 assault rifles. They showed up in broad daylight at the homes of their enemies, dragged them outside, and stuffed them into their vehicles for torture and execution elsewhere. On June 8, 2005, the same day Cardona's crew killed Bruno Orozco, the police chief of Nuevo Laredo was executed less than nine hours after taking office.

In the midst of this streak of gore, the teenage assassins were living it up. With the kilos of cocaine the Zetas paid for successful executions, each could set up a little drug ring of his own. They were flush with cash they could flash around the bars and nightclubs of Nuevo Laredo. Most people were afraid to walk around the border town at night, but Cardona and his band had free reign. "I had money, and I liked that," Cardona says. "I had all the females I wanted. I would send people to buy whatever I needed. I felt like the world was mine."

In a phone call intercepted by Laredo police during this time, Cardona told Reta he had burned through nearly \$50,000 in a few weeks. "I gave \$1,000 to my little brother," he said. "I bought two kilos, that's \$10,000." He paid \$20,000 to a getaway driver, he explained, \$8,000 for new fog lights, rims, and other accessories for an AMG Mercedes Zeta com-

Santísima Muerte, a female Grim Reaper. "I blessed my holy death," he said.

LAYING DOWN THE LAW: On June 8, 2005, Alejandro Domínguez Coello (opposite) was sworn in as police chief of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Less than nine hours later, he was dead. The same day, Cardona and his pals killed ex-cop Bruno Orozco.

manders had given him for a successful hit.

"I've only got \$2,000 left," Cardona said.

"What do you need money for?" Reta asked. The Zetas were known to provide getaway cars, drivers, and guns, not to mention cell phones, groceries, girls, and condoms. "You know—" Cardona said, "in case I need to escape."

Six months after the Orozco murder, Zeta commanders ordered Reta, who was 16 at the time, to kill a man named Moises Garcia, who worked for the Mexican Mafia. He found Garcia at a Laredo taco shop called Torta Mex at around 3 P.M. As Garcia was leaving with his family in a white Lexus sedan, Reta's crew pulled in front of him, blocking his exit. Reta hopped out of his car, walked calmly to the driver's side of Garcia's car, and shot him multiple times in the face. "That was awesome," Reta reportedly remarked as they drove away. A month later, Cardona killed 28-year-old Noe Lopez, the stepbrother of another target, as he stood in the driveway of a Laredo home.

The killing reached its apex that spring, when Cardona ordered members of his cell to kidnap two American teenagers partying at a nightclub in Nuevo Laredo. He took them to a warehouse in Mexico, tortured them, and then, as they pleaded for their lives, gutted them with a broken beer bottle. One, Inez Villareal, was only 14. "He was crying like a little faggot," Cardona told Reta in an intercepted phone call. "He was like, 'I'm your friend.' I said, 'What friend, you son of a bitch?'" Cardona told Reta that as the two teens bled to death, he took one cup of blood and then another and toasted Santísima Muerte, the female Grim Reaper worshipped by drug traffickers and other criminals in Mexico. "I blessed my holy death," he said. He put the two boys in a 55-gallon drum and burned their bodies. Two days later, on a two-lane strip of blacktop, Cardona and his crew took out Jesus Maria Resendez, the biggest marijuana trafficker in Laredo, and his 15-year-old nephew, in a hail of bullets. "We had never seen anything like it," Detective Robert Garcia of the Laredo Police Department tells me. "There's always been violence, but you have to understand, it doesn't spill over. We're talking about a town where there are typically 10 murders a year."

DETECTIVE GARCIA WAS CLOSING IN ON THE GANG. AN UNASSUMING MAN

who wears glasses and has a thin mustache, he was born in South Texas. During his 15 years in Laredo, he had built a network of sources that allowed him to infiltrate the border's criminal underworld without being corrupted by it. Garcia investigated the murders of Moises Garcia and Noe Flores. Using fingerprints pulled from a cigarette box left in a getaway car, he identified Reta as a member of the crew that killed them. In January 2006, about seven months after the murder of Bruno Orozco, Garcia left his business card at a tattoo shop the boys were known to frequent and told the owner to give him a call if he spotted the gang. The next day, his cell phone rang. "This is Bart," a voice on the other end said. "I heard you were looking for me." The detective was not surprised. "Yeah, I am looking for you." The boy laughed. "Look, you need to quit these investigations," Reta said. "Or I'm going to kill you and your family. You do not know who you are

messing with. Do you understand?" Reta hung up. Garcia reported the threat to his supervisors, but he did not quit the investigation. "I think they were so used to killing on the other side, where the police actually helped them, that they thought it would work the same way here," Garcia tells me. "But obviously they were wrong."

On April 11, 2006, nine days after Cardona's last contract killing, police and federal agents swarmed the safe house in Laredo where he was hiding out. Within two months, he had confessed to his part in seven killings, implicating Reta and Gonzalez as well as Miguel Treviño. Reta and Gonzalez went on the run to Mexico. A month after Cardona's arrest, disobeying a direct order from a superior, Reta traveled to the resort town of Monterrey to fulfill a contract killing. He botched the hit, allegedly killing four and wounding 25 when he opened fire and tossed a grenade into a crowded bar called El Punto. To make matters worse, he missed his target. The Zetas wanted him dead.

According to Reta's statements to investigators, two Zeta hit-squad members kidnapped him and took him to an abandoned safe house in Monterrey, where he was tortured. Realizing execution was imminent, he overpowered his captors and killed them. He ran to a nearby house and called the Monterrey police, knowing that as long as he was on the streets the Zetas would hunt him. He called Garcia's cell phone from jail. He knew too much about the inner workings of the Zetas, he told Garcia, and as long as he was in a Mexican jail, his days were numbered. Once in U.S. custody, Reta, like Cardona, confessed to his crimes. To Garcia's shock, he said he had killed 30 people.

With Cardona and Reta behind bars, the police and the DEA continued to work the case. Trials related to the subsequent investigation, called Operation Prophecy, are expected to get under way this fall. Last year, a jury convicted Reta for one killing, and in March he pleaded guilty to another. He will not be up for parole until 2039. Also in March, Mexican officials arrested Jesse Gonzalez and put him in a Nuevo Laredo jail. His family placed several calls to U.S. officials, frantically begging for extradition. Within days, he was stabbed to death. "These guys were seduced by the lure of easy money, but in the end they were used," says Laredo assistant district attorney Uriel Druker. "When they were being sentenced, where were the Zetas to support them? Nobody showed up. They were alone."

Indeed, Cardona tells me his mother has yet to visit him in jail, and his girlfriend writes only sporadically. He's stopped believing in God, he says. Instead, he's given his life to Santísima Muerte. In tribute, he had an image of her tattooed on his back. As for the tattoos on his eyelids, he says, "When I close my eyes, that's who I really am. I'm a sad person. Sad knowing I don't have anyone out there, sad knowing I don't have any kids, sad knowing I'm alone."

Today, the Gulf Cartel controls Nuevo Laredo and the entrance to the lucrative I-35 corridor. Its rivals have moved on, but they will be back. That's the way it is along the border. Police and federal authorities are still hunting Treviño, who is reportedly now the cartel's No. 2 man. Threatened with additional charges, Cardona accepted a deal this spring from the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Southern District of Texas. He was sentenced to life in prison. "The judge said that I didn't show any remorse, but what does she want me to do, be crying, just begging for my life?" he says. "I don't feel anything about anything." He closes his eyes, leaving behind that wide, cold stare. ■