

Safe Harbor

A fictional narrative of MARSOC SSR

by Mr. August Cole & Mr. P.W. Singer

As part of the 2021 Cognitive Raider Symposium and the MARSOC Education series, Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) hosted authors August Cole and P.W. Singer to conduct a writing seminar for Raiders across the command. Cole and Singer are the authors of many books to include *Ghost Fleet* and *Burn In*. The seminar instructed a group of MARSOC Marines on using the writing style of fictional intelligence to best describe new concepts or ideas. Cole and Singer provided an example of fictional intelligence title “Safe Harbor” to describe a fictional narrative of the MARSOC Operating Concept Strategic Shaping and Reconnaissance (SSR).

>Mr. Cole is an author exploring the future of conflict through fiction and other forms of “FICINT” [Fictional Intelligence] storytelling. With Peter W. Singer, he is the co-author of the best-seller *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War (2015)* and *Burn In: A Novel of the Real Robotic Revolution (2020)*. Singer and Cole collaborate on narrative futures projects and training through *Useful Fiction*. He is also a non-resident fellow at the *Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Creativity at Marine Corps University* and a non-resident senior fellow at the *Scowcroft Center on Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council*.

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MARSOC SSR WORKSHOP VIGNETTE DEVELOPMENT SCENE SETTER

A six-member Raider team deployed to Cape Verde off Western Africa is working on a State Department counter-narcotics maritime interdiction training program, part of the team’s “revolver” deployment through various West African countries’ civilian-military engagements that occur over six-week periods every few months. In 2032, Cape Verde is ground zero for a strategic contest over this deep-water maritime foothold, pitting Chinese government investors and spies, Russian drug smugglers, and the US Defense and State Department against one another.

When a Russian military intervention into Belarus puts NATO on high alert, their mission changes as their local partners tell them about a secretly deployed Russian S-800 CONEX system being set up by Russian gangsters and mercenaries at the Mindelo deep-water port. Quickly coordinating with SOCOM, CIA, and the US Embassy country team, the Raiders are tasked with conducting a close-in cyber attack to plant a backdoor onto the Russian air-defense network to render the weapons inactive.

The Raiders use prepositioned technical equipment, but not weapons, and a local CIA asset to conduct the nighttime operation. The operation is nearly foiled when a local waterside gang discovers them and thinks they are there to raid their contraband warehouse. The team is able to bribe their way out of the situation and helps recruit the gang to create a local and international (including Chinese audiences) online/augmented-reality messaging campaign exposing the Russian missiles hidden in shipping containers. All the while, the crisis heats up in Europe and the small team of deployed Raiders begin to prepare in case Russia or China take advantage of it in Cape Verde.














“Fictional Intelligence” is a writing technique that can effectively describe future operating concepts like Strategic Shaping and Reconnaissance (SSR). (Photo provided by MARSOC.)

The Marine Corps Raider missions of the next decade will have continuity with, but also be very different from, operations of the recent past. They will be more dependent on technology yet increasingly human-centric. Central to this future is the Cognitive Raider paradigm, where Raider teams exploit uncertainty through initiative and savvy while wielding cyber and information warfare capabilities just as expertly as close-combat skills. The Strategic Shaping and Reconnaissance (SSR) operating concept reflects these dualities as Raiders will operate in novel ways that blend lessons learned from 21st-century operations in Central Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere with the legacy of Pacific warfare during World War II. As much as individual Marines will evolve in terms of selection and training for these missions, so, too, will the Marine Special Operations Command be transformed as an organization.

The following “useful fiction” narrative provides a brief snapshot vision of what this new future of SSR operations might look like, drawn from real-world plans, trends, and technologies:

- Raider teams will require increasingly varied technical skill sets for cyber, electronic warfare, and information operations, reflecting the criticality of those Marines being able to offer non-kinetic options to accomplish a mission.

The competing great power intelligence services each tried to stay on top of the strategically vital deep-water port ...

- Close-in reconnaissance missions will blend new technical means with autonomous and remote systems but still require skills in sensing and sense making of the human domain while requiring on-the-ground leaders to take the initiative for fusing information that creates temporal situational awareness.
- A host of strategic maritime areas of fresh interest to great powers—deep-water ports, littoral cities, and choke-points, for example—also cross with a



MARSOC elements approach a non-standard vessel while operating in the littorals. (Photo provided by MARSOC.)

diverse set of nonstate actors engaged in hybrid warfare. Operating in and around them will require investing in local and U.S. intergovernmental relationships to create a wider network of information sources and reliable partners during a crisis.

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The two white Toyota SUVs nosed carefully into the evening’s slow-moving beach traffic on Ave Marginal. It was low tide, and a cool, briny breeze from

impact he and his team had wherever they deployed was undeniable. Reflecting the real-world implementation of MARSOC’s Cognitive Raider concept, his team audaciously drew upon skills, tools, and partners that the prior generation of Raiders couldn’t readily access. *There may be a little less bang and boom these days, Timber thought, but a lot more strategic effect.*

“I got it,” replied Staff Sergeant Jason “JP” Poole, the driver and team sniper. Poole gently braked to let the tipsy elderly man wearing oversized flip-flops and an FC Bayern Munich T-shirt stumble by—oblivious to the fact that he had almost just spilled his beer on a vehicle filled with Marine Raiders.

This was a far different threat than they had dodged during the team’s last mission—extremists using commercial drones turned into aerial IEDs. Here, the only swarms were tourists from the two cruise ships that had arrived that morning and were tied up in the deep-water port facility that had been “gifted” to the local government by China earlier that year.

It was into that crowd they would all blend, both the six Marine Raiders split between the two rental car agency SUVs and the partner force commander they were on their way to meet. The competing great power intelligence services

the north began to bring relief from the day’s heat.

“Incoming on your right,” warned Master Sergeant Will “Timber” Dale, sitting in the passenger seat of the second vehicle. Flecks of gray in his long mustache hinted at the eighteen years of experience that allowed him to predict a danger before it hit. This mission was nothing like the operations that Timber cut his teeth on in Afghanistan and Syria during the early years of his career in special operations. Yet, the

each tried to stay on top of the strategically vital deepwater port off Africa's west coast. But no matter how much tech the Services threw at the problem, the tide-like action of tens of thousands of people and goods moving in and out of the port every day made it extremely difficult. In a world where everything from spy satellites to social media to your smart shoes trying to track your every move, sometimes it was just best to hide in plain sight.¹

Timber felt the haptic buzz of an incoming message pulse on his wrist band and flipped open a screen on his AR glasses to check it. ² "Captain Antunes is already at the Coast Guard Pier," he muttered. He turned to talk to the Raider in the SUV's back seat, "Puck, make sure the Brute's linked to our MARSAT cubes.³ I don't want to have to wait for it to get a signal and spool up."

SSgt Carol "Puck" Schott, the team's communications and shaping specialist, was in the middle of shaking a gummy stim from a tube. The team joke was that she was addicted more to the strawberry flavor than the pep-me-up of the buzz itself.

"On it," she said, connecting the system to the team's own small satellite swarm, some 600 kilometers above them. She tapped her watch a few times. Inside her backpack, the "Brute"—the portable edge-AI mission-management system used by small Raider teams—began to offload data.⁴

Within a few minutes, the team's SUVs pulled inside a low waterside warehouse where the Americans and the local coast guard had been running maritime interdiction training. The Raiders had been set to leave at the end of the week, to head to their next stop in a six-nation "revolver" training and partner capacity-building deployment. The Raiders were a littoral capability development team assessing maritime partner forces for enduring security cooperation and competition activities.

But everything changed the night before when the local coast guard commander, CAPT Rui Antunes, shared some local news from a source working in the newly constructed section of the port. Antunes had come to trust

the Marines he trained alongside. His revelation had sent a shockwave that had traveled everywhere from Quantico and the National Capital Region to Brussels. Their small unit training exercise had rapidly transformed into a key moment in a larger geopolitical strategic competition.

They headed inside to a long interior conference room while two Raiders stood guard outside. Puck set her well-traveled black backpack on a long aluminum table and checked to see if the Brute was reporting any unusual EM spectrum activity, the sign that someone might be listening in.

"We're secure," she said.

Timber looked around the room at CAPT Antunes, the Raiders on his team, and Ella, the U.S. Embassy's liaison with American special operations forces in the area. She was introduced to CAPT Antunes six months ago by the Legal Attaché, the head FBI agent, at the Embassy. Since then, Ella deliberately developed the relationship once she saw that nothing happened in the port without CAPT Antunes being aware of it.

"Captain Antunes, Ella told us she is really interested in what you've brought to her, and I'll let her lead the conversation."

The Raiders regularly hosted U.S. interagency representatives and foreign service officers for visits to their Camp Lejeune compound, which was where Timber had first met Ella two years back. She had been in country for about eight months and had patiently established a relationship with CAPT Antunes if exactly this kind of situation developed.

"Thank you, Captain Antunes," said Ella. "This is your town, your rules. I'm here to help as much as I can." Dressed in carefully distressed jeans and an oversized black t-shirt, the expensive steel dive watch she wore made her look like she had stepped off the deck of one of the nicer trans-Atlantic sailboats in the port.

"OK, Ella. It is good to have you all together here," CAPT Antunes said studying her

Timber motioned for everybody to put on their secure VR headsets and

connect to the mission-management system. Such planning was a largely silent affair now; much like dogfighting, AI handled the modeling and suggested courses of action. The mission plan was both new and old, in that it drew upon scenarios that had been previously modeled out in AI-fueled wargames that allowed elements to be played out and analyzed in a video-game-like setting.⁵

An hour later, they were done. Timber's Marines all drank long pulls of cold water. It was easy to forget to drink while wearing the rigs, and they would need to be fresh for tonight's operation.

"Your team's gear is in the next room, all good to go," said Ella. "I checked it myself to make sure it's charged up and no mice chewed through anything important."

"Thanks, appreciate it," said Timber. His team had stashes of essential gear prepositioned at each of their regular rotations: a mix of things that couldn't be quickly bought or bartered locally.

"I also brought a bag of stuff that goes boom from our private stash," Ella said. "I know you said you don't want it, but it's there if you need it. You've got the authorities for kinetics. I double-checked in case you needed somebody to make the case, given the target."

Timber looked at the rest of the team, paused for a moment. "No, we can handle it. This is just reconnaissance. 'Sensors Forward,' as they say."

"Way forward," added Puck.

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Timber looked across the darkened harbor waters, as their RHIB moved through a shadow thrown from a massive 1,100-foot-long cruise ship. Standing next to him and Puck at the console of the 30-foot RHIB, CAPT Antunes drove the boat, callsign "Slayer 1." Ella sat in the boat's aft seats, wearing the same full-color night-vision goggles as the Raiders.⁶ Trailing just off their wake, a mere 50 meters away, was a second RHIB, callsign "Slayer 2," filled with the team's other Raiders.

The plan was that they'd appear on any tracking system as just another nighttime maritime security patrol, which ensured none of the area's smugglers or occasional bandits felt too emboldened near the cruise ships. Only

tonight, their patrol route would just happen to take them near the recently built concrete pier and cargo facility. The site had already been a marker for them, being yet another infrastructure “gift” as part of the great power influence battles over the port.⁷ But it was what Antunes had heard about what was located there that had drawn their interest tonight.

“Launch ‘em,” ordered Timber.

As the RHIB passed by the pier, four thick, fabric-skinned palm-sized drones quietly lifted off from a box in Slayer 2’s aft section.⁸ While the RHIB slowly arced away from the cargo pier, the drones spread out to land atop four warehouses. The Brute system had identified them as the best locations to overlook a specific stack of CONEX containers on the pier.

Hopper flight is green, read a message on Timber’s wrist screen.

“Uplink with our MARSATs is good,” noted Puck.

The small drones used a multispectral sensor suite to scan the container stack, and then transmitted their data.

“Well, that is interesting,” Puck noted. “Nothing is showing up.”

“What makes that interesting?” asked Timber.

“When I said ‘nothing,’ I meant it. Nothing. No signature or transmission whatsoever.”

“Seems you were right, Captain,” said Ella. “You don’t put EM shielding on a CONEX unless you have something very important inside.”

“Put some Hoppers directly on the containers,” Timber said. “See if they can use acoustics.”

Puck exhaled loudly, “Sounds clumsy.”

“That’s the idea. Kick the nest and see what flies out.”

Puck tapped out a quick set of instructions; a moment later a drone lifted off and landed on a container.

“I’m starting to wish you had listened to me,” whispered Ella.

“Tell them to hold their position, I think I can handle this,” said CAPT Antunes, as he gunned Slayer 1 in a turn back towards the Marines being targeted.

As Antunes raced the boat toward the pier, the unarmed Raiders in the targeted RHIB drifted slowly backward, idling. They didn’t have much of a choice. Even at top speed, there was no way a RHIB could outrun or

... the Kalibr missiles hidden in a shipping container could launch a devastating strike hundreds of kilometers away on almost any target, including the MEU ...

“That worked, I’m getting some acoustic imagery—Oh crap,” she exclaimed.

The Raiders in Slayer 2 were now bathed in greenish-blue light. The beam tracked back to a window in a pierside warehouse.

“Brute is identifying that targeting laser as the kind used on a Red Arrow 14 rocket,” said Puck, referring to the next-generation shoulder-fired Chinese antitank weapon.⁹

outmaneuver the short-range guided missile.

Puck’s voice came across clearly in Timber’s headset: “I’m pushing intel on the CONEX containers, and it’s not good. Or it is, depending on which end of the missile you’re on. The acoustic shows an outline that matches the form of next-gen Club-Ks.¹⁰ Four per. I’m in the CONEX’s climate-control system, seeing if I can make the hop to the control systems themselves.”¹¹

Now I have to solve two problems simultaneously, Timber thought. Slayer 2 being lit up by the Red Arrow’s targeting laser was bad enough for his unit. But the Kalibr missiles hidden in a shipping container could launch a devastating strike hundreds of kilometers away on almost any target, including the MEU currently transiting the region over the horizon. *But whose missiles were they?*

Antunes squeezed Timber’s shoulder to get his attention. “Grab a line, please, so we can tie up at the warehouse here. I think we can sort this out with a conversation with the right person. I was not going to have you meet him, but my source on the missiles is inside.”

The warehouse was, without a doubt, the most dangerous place that Timber had ever been without an M-27 SOF MOD rifle in his hands.



MARSOC element maneuvers within littoral critical infrastructure. (Photo provided by MARSOC.)



Example of littoral key terrain. (Photo provided by MARSOC.)

Sitting to his left at the cheap plastic table was Antunes, gesticulating wildly with his hands. Ella sat to his right, leaning her folding chair back far enough that he was worried she was going to tip it over. Directly across from him was the man Antunes had identified as “Marco.” With a pair of black wrap-around sunglasses atop his bald pate, Marco wore a bright yellow polo shirt that had epaulets. It was an odd sartorial choice but given the dozen heavily armed smugglers standing guard just outside—not to mention the one behind the antitank weapon on the warehouse roof—it seemed befitting of Marco’s apparent rank as the head of the local harbor gang.

“Now that we have established that the U.S. government isn’t here to raid your warehouse,” Ella said, “let’s figure out a way to help each other, Marco. It looks like you have a good thing going here. Counterfeit bots, smuggled-in microchips. Toss in some grey market booze for the tourists?”

“It’s all registered and legal business,” said Marco with a sinister smile.

Antunes frowned, but Ella smiled back. “Sure it is. Everything on the up and up.”

“As a concerned local business owner,” Marco said, “I can assure you those containers are not from my organization. Our, um, tracking department shows that it has an origin in Vladivostok and is on its way to a security force working for a mining concern owned by a foreign oligarch.”¹²

“So, it appears that somebody has not shown you the proper respect,” said Timber. “They put a very dangerous set

of military hardware right next to your operations, which made people like us interested in people like you.”

“Let’s take that interest and make it work for all of us,” Ella said. “You can keep an eye on who’s coming and going as it relates to this particular group that has shown you such disrespect. Then you can let Captain Antunes know, and that will make it easier for us to continue to work with him. We all want to keep the port a ... safe and prosperous place for everybody.”

Timber leaned over to whisper in Ella’s ear. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged. “Go ahead,” she said to the Raider.

“We can’t leave those missiles operational,” Timber said. “If they ever get used, one of those missiles could kill my friends.”

“That I cannot do,” Marco said. “I’m not going to start a war with Russian mercenaries.”

“No, no. We would never ask that of you,” said Ella, holding up her hands to slow the conversation down so she could make her point. “But perhaps you would be willing to ensure Timber and some of his American partners an hour or two of privacy with one of the containers? While you, Captain Antunes, and I toast our new arrangement, I’m sure they can find something to keep themselves busy.”

Timber smiled, already thinking of all the cyber mayhem that Puck would be able to cause in the Russian missile systems’ guidance package.

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Notes

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