

Ambrosia

Chapter One

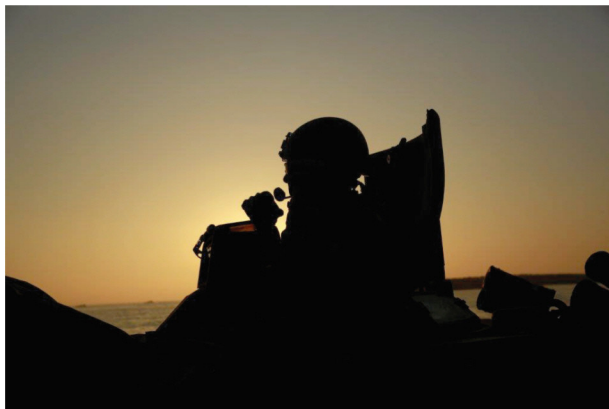
by Maj Victor M. Ruble

As the platoon of 21 amphibious combat vehicles version 3.0, or ACV-3 for short, sped across the Strait of Hormuz on their high water speed sleds, 1stLt Aidan Rosado couldn't help but reflect on the irony of the situation ... people on an island, literally surrounded by water, killing one another just to get a drink. It seemed as if the polytheistic gods who reigned over these lands thousands of years ago, sitting in whatever halls fallen gods may reside, were laughing mockingly at the tragic plight of their once devout worshippers.

Traveling the 60 nautical miles from the coast of the Omani Musandam Peninsula to the Iranian island of Jazireh ye Qeshm was a long trek, even at a speed of 25 knots. Normally, the Strait of Hormuz experiences sea states anywhere from a bathtub to a decent day surfing Trestles at San Onofre, but today, Aidan and 200 of his closest friends were in for a real stomach churner. Not only is the summer generally a rough time of the year to be in the waters of the Gulf, but the continuous aftershocks from the 7.4-magnitude earthquake the previous week were quickly turning this trip into a real puke fest. So to keep from focusing on his pre-op meal, Aidan focused on his pre-op brief.

There were four stations in the ACV in addition to the troop compartment in the rear of the vehicle: the driver, gunner, vehicle commander (VC), and the troop commander (TC). The TC was the only "hatch" not manned by an "amtracker," and was designed specifically for the senior infantryman assigned to that vehicle. As with everything in an ACV, space was at a premium, but the TC station was a bit more spacious, as most of a grunt's individual command and control (C²) gear was not organic to the vehicle like

>Maj Ruble is an Amphibious Assault Vehicle Officer and wrote this article while assigned as the AAV Capabilities Integration Officer to the Capabilities Development Directorate, Combat Development and Integration.



The TC hatch was used by the senior infantryman. (Photo by Sgt James Gulliver.)

with the other stations. It was all "plug and play," so that no matter who was manning the hatch, he could configure the suite to the mission set with his own personal touches. Aidan had this particular ACV fine-tuned to his preferences from the last mission, so he didn't have to play Twister to figure out where things were. As he reached down and pressed the screen of the TC's digital control box, or "Charlie box," a large, flat panel folded out in front of him, projecting multiple animated holographic images. It took his eyes a few minutes to adjust to the light being emitted from the 3D projections, giving him time to chuckle to himself at the thought of calling it a "Charlie

box." Charlie box was a term used for the control box that dated back even before his dad was a young amtracker. But here they were, still using an old term for new stuff. It seems that this very juxtaposition between the modern and the traditional is what makes the Corps great, or at the very least ... unique. Take these amtrackers, for example. The name is derived from the World War II era, where Marines who crewed amphibious tractors, or amtracks, would deliver troops and supplies from the bellies of naval ships directly to the beach in thin metal boxes that had the unique ability to propel themselves in the water with the movement of the track, which had enlarged grousers extending from

the track blocks to rapidly “paddle” the water. Today, crews operate an advanced 8-wheeled amphibious personnel carrier that bears zero resemblance to its tracked predecessor. The Corps hasn’t operated with a tracked vehicle in almost 20 years, but we still call the ACV crew “trackers.” They probably do it so they can keep YAT YAS painted everywhere, assuming they changed the “T” from “tracks” to “tires.”

Now sufficiently sidetracked mentally, Aidan refocused on the images being projected from the tablet folded over his lap. At first it seemed like a jumbled mash up of chaotic events, but after pressing a few buttons on the PDA (personal digital assistant) attached to his forearm, they synchronized chronologically to help better align the segments. If this intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) was telling a story, then the clips from various news outlets and social media sites showing the harsh conditions of the Iranian famine and drought followed by the mass protests in Tehran served as the introduction. Essentially, with the developed world having largely stepped away from fossil fuels in the early part of the 2020s, Middle Eastern regimes found themselves losing a lot of global influence and revenue. Iran, with its continual pursuit of nuclear energy, didn’t suffer as much as many of its neighbors domestically and was able to garner a fair amount of regional power because of it. But as the changing climate made natural resources more and more scarce—especially potable water—power became less important to the population. Drought, famine, and massive migrations into rapidly expanding megacities took its toll on the precarious Persian infrastructure, and the central government lost its ability to provide essential services to the masses, choosing the social and political elites over the commoner, which led to open dissent, eventually turning into revolt and to the eventual overthrow of the Ayatollah and the crumbling of the Iranian theocracy. As with most events of this kind, there was no clear succession of power, and throughout the 2030s, as former military leaders, political factions, and war lords jockeyed



Amphibious combat vehicle variants had changed since AAV days. (Artist concept drawing. Fire and Maneuver Integration Division, CD&I)

for control, the inability of Tehran to provide essential services to its people led to outright civil war in 2042. The U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to intervene and end the hostilities, and a “coalition of the willing,” made up of 40 or so countries—along with the support of multiple mega corporations—pledged its willingness to provide support to stabilize the country.

Unfortunately, some were a little too willing.

It became evident early on that of the major contributors, especially within the “Big 5,” two of them were driven to intervene solely for their own gain and one did not have the public support at home to curb the ambitions of the other two. After only achieving marginal success in preventing the violence from escalating beyond retaliatory actions and “settling old scores,” a cease-fire agreement was reached, but having been brokered mainly by Russia and China, the alliances that formed seemed to reflect an occupation rather than reconstruction. In the aftermath, both Russia and China began to become more obvious in picking sides to the point of overtly pitting rivals against each other as leverage to achieve their goals. Each supported factions and leaders whom they felt they had the most control in order to push their agendas. For Russia, Iran was a traditional ally

in the region, and their intervention was seen as a direct effort at obtaining increased influence in the Caspian Sea and solidifying their monopoly on westward bound energy exports. China, on the other hand, had become addicted to its global expansion, and just couldn’t pass up the chance to ensure that the future powerbrokers of Iran, regardless of what the political landscape looked like, were pro-China. And at the center of it, both wanted control of the Strait. The U.S., still hesitant to fully commit to international affairs after having been drawn into another long war in Syria and Iraq in the previous decade, was more than willing to stand by and watch.

After three years, this vacuum still exists today ... with a new wrinkle.

Prior to 2045, the only real issue facing the Iranian people was trying to provide for their families in an environment fraught with chaos and diminishing resources. Simple, right? Well, now throw in a 7.4-magnitude earthquake in the port city of Bandar Abbas, a once sleepy town in the southern portion of Iran now turned combination megacity and urban sprawl. As conditions in the north worsened due to drought and famine, the warring factions continued to use dwindling resources as leverage for everything from power to influence to extortion. This forced a massive mi-

gration south, and the population of Bandar Abbas grew from approximately half a million in the early 2020s to over 20 million today. As the city struggled to accommodate this mass exodus from the north, civil engineering and essential services suffered. Planned power outages, water rationing, and the lack of skilled engineers willing to work for pennies all led to a disgruntled population that was continuing to grow. Plus, since Bandar Abbas is the largest city in southern Iran and is the major port on the Iranian side of the Strait, both China and Russia were constantly pulling at the strings of the power brokers in order to be the ones who had a chair once the music stopped. It was a veritable powder keg waiting for a spark. The Southern Avaj Fault Line provided a 7.4 Richter Scale flamethrower.

But lost in all of the international intrigue, power struggles, and political subversion was the island of Jazireh ye-Qeshm. "Qeshm Island," although having also been victim to the exponential population increase from the southern migration, was able to avoid most of the international jockeying of power from both state and non-state actors alike. This was also in keeping with the proclamation in the early 1990s that Qeshm Island was to be considered a trade-free zone and thus was granted considerable leeway to set its own policies independent of the Iranian theocratic central government. This served to their advantage when their population was manageable and resources were readily available. What they weren't able to avoid was the lack of infrastructure for a population explosion that went from just under a quarter of a million to over three million in less than two decades.

The earthquake and ensuing aftershocks ravaged the island, destroying what little infrastructure they were able to maintain during the population boom, but most importantly, decimating their port cities and harbors, making any sort of maritime aid nearly impossible. This, coupled with their isolation from the mainland, left them ignored by the coalition and major power brokers. No one was willing to commit to a strictly humanitarian mission while

the struggle for control over the central government was so precarious and the campaign of the foreign and regional powers was being drawn out longer than the international community had anticipated.

Aidan continued to mull over this very conundrum that he and his Marines were entering into as he scrolled through the various holographic images. Grabbing each of the 3D animations with his hands, he could physically manipulate each of them. Through the various movements of his hands over the flat panel projector over his lap, he could freeze the video images, expand them to see finite details, or minimize them by collapsing his fist over the pictures to make more room in his queue. Even

... lost in all of the international intrigue, power struggles, and political subversion was the island of Jazireh ye-Qeshm.

with a good portion of the long water movement still ahead of him, this was all very tedious. The genesis of the Iranian conflict spanned decades, dating back to the latter parts of the 20th century and the rise of the Shia theocracy. He very well could have skipped the "history lesson" and gone directly to the mission brief and just focused on the IPB, but he wanted to make sure he was fully aware of the cultural landscape before reviewing the mission overlays. Being the eldest son of a multicultural family and with his father having served in a similar capacity as a Marine throughout his 20-year career, Aidan understood the utility in having a firm grasp of the dynamics of the people and the motivations behind their collective plight. But really, he could have summed it up in one word ... water.

Reaching both hands over the tablet, he collapsed the entire portfolio of projections in a single downward motion,

leaving a blank screen. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as his eyes adjusted back to the darkness. Quietly, as if in a library, he muttered "show mission brief" into the microphone attached to his comm helmet, and within an instant, the space above his lap was once again illuminated with imagery. A geospatial map of an overhead image of the Strait displayed an icon moving at a high rate of speed toward the Jazireh ye-Qeshm. Doing some basic speed/distance conversions in his head, he figured they were still about 30 minutes from the waterborne assembly area. With a few swipes of his arm, a holographic image of his company commander, Capt Mack Prophet, stood in front of him. Not to scale obviously, as his CO stood at around 6 foot 3 inches, 215 pounds, and the space above Aidan's lap could only accommodate a miniature 24-inch version. But as he watched the recorded video of Capt Prophet giving his operation order, he turned up the volume to his comm helmet to make sure he heard every word and fully understood his commander's operational vision. There was something about this mission that just wasn't sitting right, and even though no issues were brought up during his confirmation brief, Aidan wanted to make sure that he wasn't missing anything.

As soon as the miniature Capt Prophet concluded the "situation" paragraph of his operations order, the image paused, making Aidan think there was something wrong with the feed, but as it reached off screen to get a drink of water, he remembered that this portion of Capt Prophet's brief was unnecessarily long. Moving again, the image reaches outside of the camera lens, making the holographic avatar's arm briefly disappear, only to reappear holding a canteen, from which the 3D caricature takes an obnoxiously long time drinking. Aidan shakes his head to himself at the ridiculousness of the scene. He chuckled when it originally happened as well, but now being removed from the intensity that normally accompanies receiving a real world order and watching it on playback, he could see how unnecessarily long this swig was taking ... and from a canteen!? Where did he even get that

thing? Capt Prophet was big into war antiques and loved to show them off to the young lieutenants as if he were some crusty, timeless war vet, removed from some forgotten era of heroes and villains. But Mack was only a few years older than him, so Aidan wasn't buying it. Now granted, Aidan joined later than his fellow platoon commanders, making him a little "longer in the tooth" than your average, fresh-out-of-Infantry Officer Course platoon commander, and having been an actor prior to joining the Corps gave him a finely tuned and fully functional sanity check meter.

After graduating from the University of San Diego, Aidan stumbled on an unexpected career and quickly found a decent amount of celebrity as the star of a network drama series about the Marine Corps, called the *Eagle, Globe, and Anchor*, a pretty cheesy, safe-for-TV but edgy-enough-for-late-night kind of show where everyone was abnormally beautiful for the roles and situations they were supposed to be in. But he got to be on TV, he didn't have to work too hard, and it paid offensively well. And his old man seemed to get a kick out of it, so it was great. He even got his dad to come on as a technical advisor for a few episodes. Of course, no one paid attention to his dad and his special brand of sarcasm and wit, but the old guy loved the craft services table, so he was more than willing to hang out and be ignored as long as the on-call chefs were taking orders.

They had a lot of great times, so it only made sense that he would volunteer and do the real thing after his father unexpectedly passed away. Playing a Marine after the passing of his dad, who to him was the greatest Marine to ever be passed over for promotion four times, just seemed to be bad form, so Aidan decided to go and do the real thing. Despite the daunting Puerto Rican guilt laid on by his mother, he went to the Officer Selection Officer a week later and within a year, was a full on, card carrying member of America's global 9-1-1 force. Initially, he was taken aback by how poorly this idea went over. His mom's resistance to this new plan was to be expected. As proud of his dad as she was, his passing left her with one



Twenty-one assault combat vehicles made up the platoon. (Artist concept drawing. Google Images DAMEN Shipyards Group.)

son and two younger twin daughters, so the news of her only son voluntarily stepping onto the VIP car of the global express train to hell right on the heels of her husband dying took some time to set in. But it was the pure vitriol he got from Hollywood that surprised him the most. Granted, the days of the flag waving, bumper sticker, "let me buy you a beer" patriotism was all but a distant memory, but he was not prepared for how angry those around him became. His talent representation and management went after him legally, his girlfriend broke up with him, saying that she couldn't "focus on the show and on worrying about him at the same time," and the entertainment media had a field day. He lost friends, had a renowned "celebrity psychologist" try to hold an intervention—on camera, of course—and the social network ... oh, the social network.

Really, he shouldn't have been surprised. America's love affair with its military had fizzled out years ago, as was evident in his show's weekly ratings, and the once seemingly omnipotent American military of the early 21st century had become a mere shell of itself over the past two decades. Serving as more of a deterrent to global conflict than an international influence, the American people had lost the appetite for intervention, seeing its military being forward deployed as masking a colo-

nist agenda, and the American people were no longer in support of putting her troops in harm's way unless it was absolutely evident that they were protecting American interests. This newly adopted, pseudo-isolationist policy was a natural reaction to the domestic issues Americans now faced, with issues of overpopulation and diminishing resources, especially water shortages, affecting the homeland nearly as significantly as it was internationally. Thus, the U.S. military had been relegated to mainly focusing on crisis response and coalition building.

But the Marine Corps always seemed to have a mission, and at the end of the day, regardless of how many of Aidan's "strap hangers" felt they were losing out on their investment in him, he knew becoming a Marine was the right thing to do. It was always the right thing to do; it was just too bad that he didn't see that earlier. Maybe then, he and the old man could have tossed one, or ten, back at Tun Tavern.

Aidan reached up to the projection and began moving his finger slowly from left to right just underneath the holographic image. This made the animation speed up, allowing him to scan through the brief without having to go through the whole thing in its entirety.

... will seize to control the town of Qeshm in order to allow for the es-

establishment of an International Red Cross and USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] relief center to begin providing relief to the people of the island.

Aidan fast forwarded the brief with another motion of his finger.

My intent is to provide a safe and secure location from which relief agencies and non-governmental organizations can consolidate to begin to provide relief and essential services to the people of Qeshm Island. The end state will be the establishment of the IRC's potable water distribution center and the...

Aidan stopped his finger, effectively pausing the animation.

"This is a bigger deal than everyone is making it out to be," Aidan thought to himself. He pushed his outstretched hands in a downward motion, and the Capt Prophet hologram disappeared.

He whispered into his comm helmet, "bring up BBC report thirty two tack two five," and a window appeared before him, displaying a BBC news report from a few months ago.

This year's World Technology Expo, which is the premier convention bringing together humanitarian based organizations and technological innovations, has displayed some truly amazing advancements toward curbing climate change and aiding disaster relief. But the most groundbreaking news came from Applied Science Technologies, the massive defense contracting conglomerate known primarily for its innovations in military applications and weapons development, now attempting to make a name for itself in aid research by completely throwing off its mantle as a war machine by unveiling its revolutionary water desalination technology.

(Video cuts to an interview segment with the chief engineer.)

This is a huge advancement in being able to finally address one of the world's primary concerns. And that is having potable water available whenever, wherever, people need it.

(Video cuts back to the correspondent.)

Not everyone is quite so optimistic, however. The web has exploded with people weighing in on this issue

since the announcement. Skeptics of this kind of technology coming from a major defense consortium believe that the cost of such a device will make it available only to the world's elites and the very governments that continue to deny resources to those who oppose their regimes. Others warn that since this technology requires massive amounts of power to run, they will become a huge drain on the electrical architecture, creating two crises instead of solving one. A small but very vocal minority of conspiracy based blogs believe that this is a power play by Applied Science Technologies—that they have created this desalination technology to further divide society over potable water rather than unite it, thus increasing the need for the very weapons and machinations that serve as the cornerstone of AST's portfolio.

Aidan clapped his hands together over the tablet, collapsing all of the three dimensional windows. He then held his hands over the projector. The tablet—reading the signal that he was finished—powered down and retracted back into the empty slot in front of him. With the pad no longer extended over his lap, he took a few moments to stretch out as much as the confined space of the TC's station would allow. As he twisted in his restrictive energy absorbing seat, he pondered the final point brought up in the BBC's coverage.

"What if that were the case?" he thought. "I'm no fan of the megacorporations, but that would be pretty messed up, even for them. But it would explain the rumors I heard that they were suing DARPA [Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] over the licensing of the very transportable, low energy desalination plant we're delivering. And why this op has continued to be delayed, even though the major quake hit Bandar Abbas 4 weeks ago."

As he entertained the possibility that there may have been some validity to the conspiracy argument, the ACV's proximity alarm started blaring into the audio speakers of his comm helmet, shaking him from the cynical chain of thoughts going through his head.

"Good thing," he thought to himself. "I've got plenty of time to let the world

make me a true skeptic." Considering his most intense combat experience to date was the mechanized assault course on Camp Darwin, he figured he'd go ahead and stay idealistic as long as possible.

"Sir, looks like we've got a couple of unknown bogeys approaching from nine o'clock at a high rate of speed," SSgt Washington informed Lt Rosado from her vehicle commander's station, which was opposite Aidan's TC hatch on the port side of the vehicle.

"Roger," Aidan replied as he tapped the screen of the tablet in front of him, bringing it back to life. Displayed on the touch screen were four small windows, each showing a different camera angle from the ACV. He tapped the window titled "turret" and it enlarged to fit the entire screen. "Staff Sergeant, can you slew the gun so we can get a better look at our welcoming party?" As the remote weapons station, armed with a 30mm chain gun and 7.62 caliber coaxial medium machine gun, traversed to face the oncoming boats, Aidan got a panoramic view of the outside of the vehicle. The horizon was engulfed by the island of Jazireh ye-Qeshm to the front of their formation. They were close enough to see the skyscrapers of Qeshm City, meaning they were just a few nautical miles from their assault position. Being that this was a humanitarian op, resistance was not expected, but the presence of fast moving craft this far away from the island meant that these were not fishermen just coming out to catch a glimpse of their water baller.

"I don't have eyes on from here, sir," SSgt Washington informed Aidan. "All I can see are their roster tails."

"What about Blue 3-3? He got positive ID?" Aidan responded, referring to the ACV on the furthest position to the unit's left flank.

"Wait one."

After a few moments, SSgt Washington's voice blared through Aidan's intercom.

"Yes sir, Blue 3-3's got PID [positive identification] and those are definitely not friendlies. I'm going to relay back to Pak-man, so I'll be off comms for a few."

Pak-man, otherwise known as 1stLt Andre Pak, was a good friend and TBS

classmate of Aidan's. Both were in the same platoon at TBS, and being that Andre's last name started with a "P" and Aidan's started with an "R," they were destined to be extremely familiar with one another after the six-month officer school. Pak-man had every intention of joining Aidan at Infantry Officer Course after graduation, but being from Hawaii, having a job that would allow him to "surf" 35-ton vehicles in the Marine Corps was just too good a prospect to pass up, so he went "am-tracks" instead. But the Marine Corps was small and it didn't take them long to link up again, only with the prospect of Revolutionary Guard rocket boats barreling down on them, he wished it was running into each other at the Whiskey Chuck at Camp Wilson rather than in the middle of the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Then Aidan remembered some of the wild nights with Pak-man in Georgetown and he thought to himself, "Maybe this isn't so bad."

"Good to go. Gonna fly the little bird to get a better look at our hosts."

"It's all yours, sir."

Aidan reached up again. Touching the tablet's screen, he minimized the turret camera's view so that all four of the vehicle views were displayed evenly in each of the four corners of the screen. Below the bottom two windows, stretched across the bottom of the screen was a menu tab with an icon of a quadcopter occupying the far right-hand corner. Aidan pressed it and a fifth window appeared in the middle of the tablet's screen. A quick double click simultaneously expanded the screen and engaged a control stick to Aidan's left. Pulling back on the stick, the blank screen was brought to life as a small, four propeller unmanned aerial system quadcopter lifted off from a protected compartment on top of the ACV. Each ACV platoon had in its table of equipment four unmanned aerial surveillance drones, and they were normally located

on the platoon commander's vehicle and on each of the three section leaders' vehicles as well. They were small enough to be handheld, so were easily stowed in armored protected boxes on top of the ACVs, and given their size, had a surprisingly large radius and time of flight. And to mitigate their light weight while traveling at high speeds during long distance water marches, the four propellers gave them vertical lift and take off, or VTOL, capability so they were not as affected by the wind brought on by the high rate of speed when mounted on the sleds. On his display screen, he saw his ACV section leave the top of the screen, so he knew that the "Little Bird" had leveled out and was now traveling under its own power. Aidan splayed the stick to the left in the cardinal direction of the gun boats, and once the roster tails were in clear view, he gunned the stick forward, sending the drone toward the unknown sea farsers.

"Apache 6, this is Blue 6, over." Aidan wanted to make sure his CO was getting a view of this feed as well, so he needed to patch him in.

"Send it, Hollywood," Capt Prophet replied using Aidan's personal callsign, which was given for obvious reasons. The deep bass in his company commander's voice forced Aidan to lower the volume on his comm helmet a few notches.

"I've got my Little Bird overhead and trying to get better eyes on the bogeys. Thought you might want a look as well." "Roger that. Patch me through."

With a few presses on his tablet, a text box confirming the link had transferred appeared.

"Okay, got it," Prophet acknowledged. "What do you think?"

Aidan zoomed in on the four approaching speed boats.

"Well sir, this is a surprise. I think we've got some new players in town."

The Commandant's PROFESSIONAL READING LIST

Available at

The MARINE Shop
Serving Marines Around the World
Operated by the Marine Corps Association

www.marineshop.net