Ambrosia

Chapter 10
by Maj Victor Ruble

The small, unmanned quadcopter raced through the clouds of smoke and chaff that were being hurled its way from the ground. Aidan felt a bead of sweat roll from inside his helmet and down the bridge of his nose as he pulled the UAV's control stick to-and-fro, attempting to keep yet another of his Little Birds from being destroyed.

"Come on, come on," Aidan said to himself as he pitched and pulled the UAV through the surface-to-air assault. "I can't lose another one! These things are too expensive!"

Compared to all of the new equipment being fielded over the past decade, the cost for equipping the Corps with organic ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) assets was fairly benign. But when juxtaposed with the steady stream of defense budget cuts and increased domestic spending on disaster relief and resource shortages, there were no guarantees that lost gear—even combat losses—meant an automatic replacement. So to be potentially shorthanded on a critical ISR tool, such as a Little Bird, was a big deal. Regardless, the cost of the UAVs paled in comparison to their application on the battlefield. Aidan knew firsthand what it was like to "go blind" in the middle of the fight, so he was doing everything he could to ensure that didn't happen again.

Luckily for the Little Bird, through all of his experiences through this deployment thus far, Aidan had become quite an armchair pilot, and he was putting the full array of his newfound talents on display trying to get his UAV to successfully RTB (return to base). But the surface barrage was intensifying as the ground forces Aidan had uncovered were becoming less and less concerned about maintaining the secrecy of their current position and more so with de-

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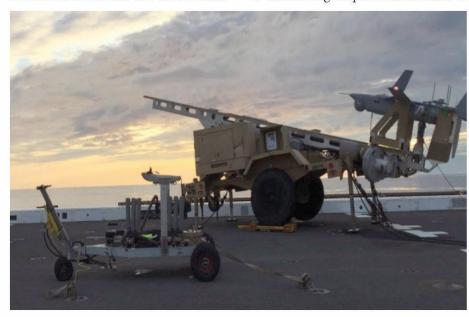
stroying the very device that usurped their well-planned ambush.

"Son of a—," Aidan yelled as a quick jolt knocked his video feed blank, leaving his screen filled with audio-visual snow. "I barely had the d ... thing for couple of weeks." Thinking back to the Little Bird he lost taking the AST position on Qeshm Island, he sunk in his jump seat, allowing himself a few seconds of grief before reengaging on the fight at hand. Suddenly, the video feed came back to life as the Little Bird shot through the cloud of smoke and debris, racing back toward the safety of Aidan's ACV. Aidan popped his head out his TC hatch and gleefully watched as it coasted overhead. His look of relief

slowly turned to confusion, however, as the Little Bird continued past its rally point and flew to the rear of the amphibious vehicle, landing safely back in its storage unit atop the ACV.

Grimacing, Aidan dropped back down into his hatch and grabbed the control stick. "What do you think you're doing?!" he said aloud, speaking to the Little Bird as if he were having a conversation with the machine. "Oh no. Who said you were done? I still need eyes on, so you gotta get back out there." After a few cycles through the UAV's diagnostic and start up functions, it was back in the air—begrudgingly, it seemed. This time, Aidan made sure to keep it in an aerial OP (observation post/point) well away from the small arms fire of the newly discovered enemy ground troops.

"Sir, I'm calling center beach," SSgt Washington informed Aidan over the intercom.

Center beach is an important concept in conducting amphibious assaults. It

UAV employment helped Aidan discover enemy ground forces. (Photo by Cpl Brianna Gaudi.)

helps determine everything from the size of the boat lane—the area where amphibious vehicles will transition from water to land—to assault formations to fire support coordination. It essentially tells the landing force where they need to be so that they can mass forces on the beach as quickly as possible. What Aidan's vehicle commander was trying to do was two-fold: one, determine what formation she needed to be in when they make their flanking movement and assault the beach; and two, to make sure Aidan was still tracking their maneuver and had situation awareness of their movement before the platoon completely overshot the enemy position.

"Good to go. You've still got the con. I'm sending the updated overlays to the rest of the company so we don't get into a game of whack-a-mole with these guys," he said, referring to the enemy opposition and the potential for them to near endlessly displace from one position to the next during the course of the company's landing.

That was all SSgt Washington needed to move, and Aidan was pulled into his jump seat by the G-forces of his ACV as it made a hard right flanking movement and began to assault the beach. The battle speed brevity code went out over the net, and Aidan smiled as he was tempted to jump on SSgt Washington's third attempt to call the amphibious assault rallying cry. Allowing the staff sergeant her moment, Aidan reached out and collapsed the overlays hovering in front of his workstation before migrating them to his wrist-mounted PDA. He saw the download indication light turn from red to green—signifying that the files had been successfully transferred—and then reached up to close his TC hatch. This procedure of "buttoning up," or closing all hatches, was SOP for amtrackers since the first design of a fully enclosed armored amphibian. This technique was adopted universally as a step to negating the challenges of maintaining the positive buoyancy levels of a 20- to 30-ton armored vehicle traversing a surf zone and the attempt to keep as much water on the outside of the vehicle as possible. But it also ensured that the main advantage of a fully encased armored platform—direct

and indirect fire protection—was not being negated by someone leaving their hatch open so they could take in the fine ocean air. Due to the hydrography of the southern Iranian coastline and the Strait, the only surf was wind and ship generated, so the "surf zone" was fairly benign. Aidan had actual considered being "that guy" and leave his hatch open, since there was no real threat of water coming in through the opening, but mainly so he could get full 360 situation awareness without having to rely on the ACV's proximity cameras. He decided now was not the time to get cocky, however. Although they currently had the initiative, it was waning ever since Aidan's Little Bird was discovered. Locking the hatch down and bringing up the feed from his ACV's external cameras on his HUD (heads up display), he knew although fortune favored the bold, the best approach was to plan for the worst and hope for the best.

The six ACVs of Aidan's mechanized platoon simultaneously pivoted in the water, immediately putting them into an on-line formation, maximizing fire power to the front. Even though the newly discovered enemy was frantically attempting to prepare a hasty defense in anticipation of the impending mechanized assault from the sea, Aidan's platoon's seamless transition from movement to assault completely seized the initiative from the scrambling enemy infantry, and their approach to the high water mark went almost completely unchallenged. A few of the enemy combatants didn't even bother attempting to prepare fighting positions in their assembly area and just made straight for the beach in an effort to hold whatever key terrain they could occupy before the mechanized platoon made its landing. From the camera feeds Aidan was observing as his platoon negotiated the surf zone, he was taken aback by the speed and distance the enemy personnel were able to cover. A normal human—an important distinction in this era of robotics and performance-enhancement technology—with "full kit" would have challenges covering the approximate one kilometer distance between the enemy assault position and the ACV's

new landing zone. And given the composition of the sandy terrain, even the most physically fit soldier would be near their culmination point once they hit the beach. But these "guys" took well established hasty positions as if they had just "come off the bench." A few were even able to take well-aimed shots at the approaching mechanized force. As a small caliber round deflected off of Aidan's ACV, he was glad he stuck to the SOP and buttoned up for the landing. But this also furthered his suspicion that there was more to this force than what he was able to glean from inside his TC compartment.

"Listen up, folks," Aidan started over the platoon net. "I think we're looking at more bots out there. Not sure if they're AI or just autonomous, but either way, I need all 40mm grenades switched over from HE to chaff. And machine gunners, I need you to switch out your ball ammo with API (armor piercing, incendiary)."

"And when would you like for this to happen, sir?" Aidan's grizzled platoon sergeant questioned almost immediately over the net. "No offense to ya, but we're in the freakin assault. Should we take a time out?" Burch continued, imitating a conversation between the Marines and the enemy. "Oh, so sorry. Yeah, we didn't realize you guys were so tough. Mind if we take a few minutes to switch out our ammo so we can better destroy you? Won't be but a minute or two. Cheers."

"I hear ya, Guns." Aidan responded, trying to counter Burchill's surly demeanor with a calm tone. "But unless you want to get out there and tickle fight these guys, I suggest we stop talking about it and just get it done. Like you said, we're in the assault."

"You heard 'em, lads! Get off you're good sides and switch out that ammo. Time's not on your side, and neither will I be if a single one of you bounces a HE round off one of those things!"

Aidan could tell by all of the rustling around in the "dungeon" behind him that Gunny Burchill's word was law. And no matter the tight confines of the ACV's troop compartment, those Marines were going make that ammo switch even if they had to become circus

sideshow contortionists to do it. Luckily for them, payload and internal ammo storage was a primary concern of the teams who first starting developing the ACV series of combat amphibians, so even though the ammo wasn't easy to get hold of, it was at least there.

The small arms impacts intensified as the ACVs seamlessly transitioned from water to land mode. Aidan could hear main gun cannon fire erupt from the ACVs to his right and left flank. From his vantage point via the ACV's external cameras, he could see tracer fire from the six 30mm cannons blanket the enemy position. Switching to the Little Bird's feed, he could see from overhead that ACV gunnery training was not just a formality. A number of the enemy infantry attempted to displace once the volume of fire from Aidan's platoon became too overwhelming and were almost immediately cut to pieces by the surgical precision of the ACV remote weapons station. After a few short bursts from his own "track," the regular "pings" on the sides of their ACV from the enemy harassment fire stopped. Aidan brought up the video feed from the gunner's station alongside that of the UAV and could see that the enemy hasty defensive position along the cliffs had been reduced to nothing but a hole in the ground engulfed in smoke and charred debris. SSgt Washington confirmed this with a simple, "All clear."

Ramps lowered and Marine infantry poured onto the beach.

"Get on-line and stay frosty!" Aidan commanded into his inter-squad radio (ISR), which was transmitted through the same PDA/comm helmet communications suite. "The 'trackers' did their thing, now it's time to do ours. Still not sure exactly what we're dealing with yet, so do this by the book and be prepared to mop up anything that was dumb enough to survive." Aidan leapt from his TC and joined his platoon on the ground.

Looking down the ranks of his platoon spread out along the beach in perfect dispersion, he caught the glimpse of Gunny Burchill on the opposite end of the formation, who returned his gaze with a nod. Nodding back,

Aidan jumped back on the ISR net and asked SSgt Washington, "You got us?"

With a simple, "A-firm" response, Aidan knew that that ACVs had set their base of fire and were covering their assault.

"1st squad, you're on it!" With that, the 11 Marines on his left immediately stood and began rushing toward the cliffs that bordered the shoreline. Once they were set, 2d and 3d squads, without needing prompting, likewise displaced and quickly made their way toward the smoldering enemy position. The platoon continued with its bounding over watch completely unencumbered as they covered the distance between the high water mark and the cliffs in the matter of minutes. Unsettled by the ease of their maneuver, Aidan continued to check the Little Bird video feed on his PDA to verify that what he was seeing on the ground was accurate. Before long, Aidan and his platoon were atop the cliffs. Sweaty, out of breath, but no worse for the wear, the Marines had taken Iranian territory and were arrayed to continue to take more. This fact was not lost on Aidan, so to say his pucker factor was "diamond producing" would have been an understatement. With his platoon now occupying the cliff, Aidan radioed back to the ACVs to have them displace and join them along their hasty defensive perimeter. Watching the wheeled amphibians relocate from the beach, Aidan looked back at the crater that was the enemy position.

The once voluminous smoke stream had dissipated, and he wanted to get a better look at what they had just encountered and get some BDA (battle damage assessment). Maybe these remains could help shed some light on what waited for them further inland. It wasn't long before his suspicions were confirmed. What would normally have been a gruesome scene like something out of horror movie looked more like something out of a high-tech junkyard. Robotic parts and limbs were strewn about the area, so much so that it was hard to differentiate exactly how many combatants were actually present here, let alone what type or model they were. Aidan wasn't as familiar with robotic

tech as he knew he needed to be. He was trying to get answers, and the extensive damage that the ACV main guns produced combined with his relative ignorance to the world of robotics was not making that easy. With the rest of his company minutes away from making their landing at the original LZ, he needed to know what it was that was assuredly reinforcing their position just a mere 1,000 meters away. Were these AI or just autonomous combatants? Was this next-gen tech or older stuff? Or were these surrogates? If so, where were the hosts? All of these questions could help shed light on the fundamental question at hand—who are they dealing with and what are their interests here?

Based on what he was able to decipher from the tech, Aidan suspected that he and his Marines had again crossed AST. Their interests in establishing themselves as the main supplier of arms and infrastructure in this region were too great. AST clearly thought they were going to "fly under the radar," set up shop, and make a pretty penny by managing the conflict. They clearly invested a lot of money and resources to this endeavor, so what they were currently dealing with was a mega defense contractor's attempt to retake what was once theirs. Careful to not burn himself, or trigger some kind of secondary explosion, Aidan reach down and grabbed the shattered remains of what looked like am arm. Lighter than he expected, he wasn't quite sure what he had hoped to learn from a severed robotic limb, but as he dusted away the dirt and carbon scoring, he noticed an insignia on the shoulder that not only shattered his suspicions but changed the paradigm for what he thought they were dealing with on this mission.

Immediately jumping on the company net, Aidan called back to the fire support coordinate center in a near panic.

"Overwatch, overwatch! This is Apache 1! Stand by for fire mission!"

USMC