

Ambrosia

Chapter 12

by Maj Victor Ruble

“**W**e can’t just let those guys dig in on that ridge-line! If they fortify that position, they can stall us until we run out of ammo, surge forces from Bandar Abbas, and push us right back into the drink!” Capt Prophet screamed over Aidan’s platoon net.

Normally, company commanders reserve their radio transmissions for the company net, mainly because it becomes burdensome and time consuming to repeat broadcasts in the heat of battle; but also because, generally speaking, instructions from the company commander need to be heard by all of the company’s leadership. In this case, Mack and Aidan were very much in a “you-to-me” conversation, and some of their less formal interaction was not something that needed to be broadcast to anyone in the company who happened to be monitoring their frequency.

“Well, that’s obviously not the desired end state here, Sir! But maybe if you guys had unscrewed yourselves getting off the beach a little quicker than you did, I would have a company’s worth of Marines in the HAMMER-HEAD rather than what’s left of my platoon!”

Aidan knew the vitriol that was coming through on the other end would most definitely have consequences later, but in his current predicament, anything that would happen after this would mean that there would be an “after this”—he would gladly take whatever was coming his way over the alternative.

And his point was germane.

Although the intention was never for this maneuver to have the appearance of something that was fully coordinated—the enemy jamming equipment running rough shot with their

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communications equipment saw to that—he did believe that it was common knowledge that if you can achieve overwhelming fire power on an enemy, that some sort of maneuver, no matter how rudimentary, to a position of advantage was assumed. But the main body had not only been scattered across the beach as an effect of the well-placed and effectively-employed A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) weapons systems, and Capt Prophet and the Marines with him were having a heck of time trying to find a high speed avenue of approach through the cliffs. Thus, the “Hammerhead” that he was referring to—an offensive flanking maneuver designed to exploit an enemy’s weakest side with one element in support-by-fire and two elements forward in the assault—was being conducted by what was left of his platoon vice the entirety of the company task force. More importantly, the enemy force, comprised primarily of autonomous robotic soldiers combined with their human “controllers,” was proving to be more formidable than expected.

Aidan thought that the combined might of the artillery barrage and the company’s main body making its landing would have been enough to send whoever was left on the objective running back to Bandar Abbas. But the resolve of these fighters had both Aidan and Mack against the ropes, and now they were up against the clock as any further delay in taking the objective only increased the chances that forces from Bandar Abbas would be able to reinforce the beach defenders. This in-

creased force would not only be able to deny the Marines any hopes of establishing a lodgment but would then have a sizeable force that could counterattack and push Apache 6 and his boys right back into the Persian Gulf. The biggest challenge Aidan was facing, other than the majority of the company’s combat power was essential out of the fight, was that “the bots” were quick and highly durable. Although the ACV main gun was effective at suppressing the enemy’s human combatants, the bots could sustain significant damage and, unless the ACV gunners scored a direct hit, would remain in the fight. With the complex network of trenches they had established, keeping rounds “in the black” was proving to be very difficult. Still, Aidan had a plan.

With four of his ACVs maintaining their support-by-fire positions oriented to the direct front of the enemy defense, Aidan had achieved overwhelming firepower, but having put himself with his dismounted two squads, he wasn’t quite ready to throw either his Marines or himself into the fray of the entrenched enemy without a little something extra.

As he lay in the sand of the Iranian southern shoreline with his 20-plus Marines, he reached down into his right side and pulled out a long, silver cylinder. Moving carefully and deliberately so that no erratic movements would give away the location of the assault force, Aidan pulled the primer cap off of the hand-held pyrotechnic signal flare and attached it to the bottom of the tube. Regardless of the suppressive fires being unleashed by the support-by-fire position, he slowly stood to take a knee, not wanting his actions to reveal their hidden position on the eastern flank of the enemy force. Gripping the flare and holding it out in front of himself at an angle so that the munition could achieve

its maximum elevation as quickly as possible, he reached back with his other hand and slapped the bottom of the tube, sending the pyrotechnic round into the sky above the enemy position with a loud “ffffsssszzzzttttt.” As the munition launched into the sky, Aidan quickly stood and began running toward the enemy position.

When the flare reached its maximum altitude it burst open like a firework, illuminating the bright blue sky with an explosion of bright green sparks. Some of the enemy combatants, thinking this display were something more lethal than a signal flare, dropped into the trench seeking cover. Others, unsure of what the munition was, looked skyward to see the flare unfold above them. Regardless of their reaction, the enemy now knew that Aidan and his Marines had “set up shop” on their flank, and the Iranian nationalist hardliners were quickly displacing to prepared alternate positions to cover the Marines’ exploitation of the weak side of their defense. What the enemy was not prepared for was what the signal signified.

From the support-by-fire position, SSgt Washington saw the green star cluster burst above the objective. Having planned this with her infantry platoon commander prior to their assault, she knew that this meant that her ACVs needed to replace their armor piercing incendiary rounds with chaff rounds—munitions that, when detonated, would litter the area with pieces of metallic debris like tin foil confetti.

“All victors, all victors! Switch to chaff rounds, now!” she screamed over the platoon net.

The four ACVs, having prepared their “ready boxes”—ammunition storage containers—for this planned course of action, quickly made the shift in 30mm main gun munitions and began sending volley after volley of chaff toward the enemy in seconds. Meanwhile, though momentarily stunned by their platoon commander’s bold—yet arguably suicidal—solo rush of the enemy defense, the Marines finally began to displace the concealed flanking position and joined Aidan in the assault. A few of the enemy combatants had managed to occupy their alternate positions

in defense of their flank and began to oppose Aidan’s run with heavy small arms fire. Aidan, with his Marines not far behind, was proving to be a hard target to hit as he undauntedly waded through the enemy fire.

Admittedly, he would be the first to admit that his “Medal of Honor” rush of the enemy position was ill-advised, but not knowing if his plan to disrupt the optical sensors of the enemy automatons with chaff would work, he did not want to order his Marines into a full assault of a fixed enemy position if it didn’t. But as chaff round bursts began to blanket the objective, Aidan could see that his desired result was being achieved. The metalized chaff clusters created a cloud above the objective, disrupting and overloading the highly-sensitive optical sensors of the humanoid machines. As he continued

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to close the distance between himself and the enemy defensive trench line, he could see that the disorientation of the now blind enemy robots combined with the confusion and panic of their human counterparts was creating the exact condition that Aidan was hoping to exploit. Now, with his Marines hot on his heels, he knew the day would be theirs.

As the enemy chaotically scrambled to gain its bearings amidst the metallic confetti that blanketed the air, the once heavy machine gun fire that had opposed the Marines’ assault had lifted. Being that he was the first to displace, he likewise assumed that he would be the first one in as well, but a stubborn grenade pin slowed his advance. As Marines raced passed him toward the enemy, he hurled the now armed explosive into the midst of the disrupted enemy, and as if rehearsed, the grenade exploded launching dirt, fire, and metal appendages into the air just moments

before his Marines jumped into the fray. With this breach, Aidan and his troops poured into the enemy trench line like the Devil Dogs of Belleau Wood.

Even though this was an era of advanced technological proliferation, with equipment used by both sides being the most modern and advanced imaginable, the scene looked as out-of-place as if it were taken from a reel-to-reel camera circa 1918. This was trench warfare. Regardless of whether it was Marines, autonomous robots, or Iranian insurgents, anyone inside the trench was literally fighting for their lives. Using anything and everything as a weapon, combatants from both sides threw themselves at each other with the ferocity and raw animal instinct that betrayed this epoch of digital gratification, comfort, and civility. Even though the smoke and dust from his grenade had not fully settled, Aidan could tell by the sheer size of the individual’s silhouette that the Marine at the front of the “pain train” was none other than Cpl “Pain Train” Hurtz. Hurtz got his call sign due to the fact that he not only worked on the railroads in Pennsylvania before joining the Marine Corps, but also because he was nearly as big as one of the locomotives that he worked on. So, with his former occupation coupled with the fact that his last name was Hurtz—literally pronounced “hurts”—“Pain Train” was an obvious, but apropos, choice. As he buried his M27 automatic rifle into the head of an enemy robot like some sort of battle ax, he very much looked the part as well.

Everything was happening so fast, yet Aidan’s comprehension of it all was so slow. As the chaos unfolded before him, his brain was only allowing him to absorb it all in increments, thus it all appeared to him to be moving in slow motion. The detail in his platoon sergeant’s face as he grabbed one Marine and pushed him into the skirmish while simultaneously yelling at others to reinforce the line is an image that he was certain he would never forget because of the immense detail by which he was able to observe it. But the cracking of the Kord 12.7mm machine gun rounds brought everything back to real time.

The heavy machine gun rounds cut through his squad with the brutal efficiency of its design, and Aidan—still outside of the trenches—looked around to find the source and location of the counterattack. Although the dust from the donnybrook in front of him was limiting his vision to just a few meters, he could see tracer fire erupting from the far side of the trench line. Clearly some of the enemy had been able to shield themselves from the effects of the chaff. Either that or these combatants were solely of the human variant. Seeing his Marines huddled in a corner of the trench hurriedly trying to find cover among the bodies and debris from the large caliber rounds being delivered in their direction at the cyclic rate, Aidan knew that on the other end of that machine gun fire was a regrouping enemy ready to retake their position. He needed to react, and he needed to do it now.

Aidan thought to order SSgt Washington and her support-by-fire position to change their ammunition back to API (armor piercing incendiary) and reengage, but he figured the “juice wasn’t worth the squeeze” considering the time it would take and the danger close proximity of his Marines. Cobbling the remaining Marines who had likewise not made it into the trench yet into a reinforced squad, he and these dozen or so Marines began racing down the outside exterior of the enemy position.

“I need you to shut that machine gun down now!” Aidan yelled to four of the Marines standing next to him. “We need that thing either suppressed or destroyed—we’re not losing any more of our brothers today!”

“Yes sir!” one of them replied as they began unloading rifle and M203 rounds into the vicinity of the oncoming enemy fire.

“You guys come with me,” he said with a smirk to the rest of the Marines with him. The effects from the newly-established support-by-fire position seemed to be working as the enemy fire was momentarily lifted, allowing Birch to begin to evacuate the casualties inside the trench and affording Aidan and his “squad” the opportunity to make their

run along the top of the enemy defensive channel toward the remaining enemy opposition. Unencumbered by the serpentine and tight confines of the trench, the Marines quickly closed the distance between themselves and the gathering enemy forces. The Marines who were once pinned down by the enemy machine gun fire had regrouped and had combined their fire with that of the support-by-fire position, fixing the enemy in its place, not allowing them to either advance on Aidan’s maneuver or retreat further into the cavernous network. Seeing that the maneuver from above the trench was nearing the enemy position, Gunny Burchill shouted “Cease fire! Cease fire!” to the Marines around him so that the advancing Marines could continue to close on the enemy without risk of fratricide.

Before the enemy could react to the brief respite from the overwhelming suppressive fire, Aidan and his squad were on top of them. Unable to respond, the squad of Jaysh al Shanameh fighters could do nothing as the Marines stood above them from the high ground above the trench, unloading the contents of their rifle’s magazines into the trapped enemy combatants. Within seconds, the fight was over.

“Cease fire! Cease fire!” Aidan yelled while simultaneously waiving his open palm in front of his face—which was the hand and arm signal for the same—so that those who could not hear his voice command over the violence would know to stop shooting. Although this threat was effectively neutralized, Aidan was still unsure how complex the trench network really was and if there weren’t more forces waiting for them at the end of it.

“Stand fast,” Aidan ordered the Marines around him as he jumped down into the trench where the enemy was once gathering. Still focused on the fact that there still may be enemy hidden within their position, Lt Rosado hadn’t stopped to realize the amount of carnage he and his Marines had just caused. The floor of the trench had filled with a mix of blood, bile, robotic hydraulic and coolant fluids, and dirt, and as he slipped and tripped over the dead and dying, the reality of

war nearly overcame him. Regaining his composure—and his constitution—he stepped lightly as he conducted a hasty reconnaissance of the remaining enemy defensive system. After creeping slowly for a few meters, the eerie silence was deafening, and he could feel the intense stares of his Marines as they watched their platoon commander move further into the unknown.

As Aidan reached the end of the trench line, a collective sigh went out as he gave the “All Clear” command. Aidan pulled up the platoon tactical communications net on his PDA to address his key leaders.

“The objective is clear. I say again, the objective is clear.” The relief in Aidan’s voice said more than his words ever could. “Birch, we need to get off this pos (position) ASAP in case they have it fixed with an on-call target. We also need a head and ammo count. Start reconsolidating what we have until the main body gets here. Get a casualty collection point up so we can start evacuating our wounded. SSgt Washington, I need those vics up here ASAP and tie in your sectors of fire with Birch. I’ll radio back to Apache 6 and give him the sitrep. Let’s make it happen, ‘cause I doubt we have a lot of time.”

Each of the leaders came back with the standard, “Roger. WILCO (will comply).” Aidan knew that his people already knew what to do in this situation—they had rehearsed their SOPs hundreds of times. Still, it was therapeutic to go through the mundane instructions of the consolidation and reorganization phase rather than focusing on the chaos that they had just been through. As Aidan climbed out of the trench and stood to look out over the horizon, with the skyline of Bandar Abbas clearly visible now, he knew that there was still plenty more chaos to be had.

Pulling up the company tactical communications net on his PDA, Aidan spoke simply.

“Apache 6, this is Hollywood. Objective Alpha is secure. Standing by for follow-on orders.”



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