

IDEAS & ISSUES (FUTURE CONFLICT)

Ambrosia

Chapter 5

by Maj Victor Ruble

Covered in sweat and dirt, 1stLt Aidan Rosado took his helmet off and let it fall to the ground. Being free of the pressure on his scalp and temples, he ran his hand through his “low reg” haircut, inadvertently pushing more sweat and dirt down onto his face. Although he was all in when it came to his love for the Corps, one aspect of his former life in Hollywood that he could never quite let go of was his hair. Normally, the stinging in his eyes from the sweat would have made him instantly regret his longing for “top cover,” but after the events that just unfolded, he could have cared less. Following his helmet, he dropped to his butt and instantly felt the need for some sort of respite. Remembering his agreement with Gunny Birchill, he reached into one of his ammo pouches and pulled out a pack of Dunhills. As he fidgeted for a cigarette, he laughed to himself at the irony of the action.

In a former life, he was so anti-tobacco that he became one of many celebrity spokespersons for a smoking cessation campaign. At this point in medical technology and information, it would be silly to think anyone was totally oblivious to the harmful and detrimental effects of smoking on the body. The people who still held onto their love for nicotine were in the vast minority, but still, he hated how it smelled, and the campaign paid a butt load of money. So like many other celebrities out there, this was his version of a “charitable contribution” to society.

But what really made him laugh was the fact the Birch—a hardcore Irishman—smoked British cigarettes. Well, at least “used to” smoke cigarettes. In their time together, Aidan would give Birch all kinds of grief over the fact that he smoked. After many failed attempts,

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Birch was finally making a concerted effort to quit. But they had an agreement—if the Gunny ever really needed a “break,” Aidan would hold onto a pack in reserve (every good commander had a reserve) and “generously” provide him a single cigarette to “calm the nerves.” For anyone who’s ever had to deal with an angry platoon sergeant, this was a much better alternative than for Birch to be going “cold turkey.”

The cigarettes these days were a combination of the older vapor cigarettes and tobacco. Putting the cigarette to his

lips, he inhaled deeply. The cherry at the end lit without the use of a lighter, and he felt the nicotine begin to course through his lungs. After a few puffs, he watched the thick mix of smoke and water vapor bellow from his mouth and he began to feel the effects of the drug. He now fully understood why it was so hard for his father to kick the habit after the Second War for Afghan Freedom. Those were “real” cigarettes back then, so he could only imagine how much more satisfying those were.

Making vain attempts to produce smoke rings to cope for his growing hysteria over what just transpired, he scanned his surrounds and began to take stock of the destruction that he and his Marines bought to bear on the Advanced Science Technologies (AST) compound. Commotion from the casu-



Directed energy weapons were going through a period of experimentation during 2016. (Photo by Air Force Research Laboratory Directed Energy Directorate Public Affairs, Kirtland AFB.)

alty collection point drew his attention as a steady stream of casualties—both Marine and AST contracted security—were loaded onto the medevac birds. The MV-22D Ospreys, which were the Marine Corps' variant of Bell's V-280 initiative, were launched from the "big deck" of the two ships ARG that comprised his MEU, and he only wondered how much more quickly the response time would have been had both of these "boats" not been capital ships. The need for a quick response naval vessel that carried a reinforced company's worth of infantry Marines had been identified since the cataclysmic chaos that ensued after the Arab Spring of the early 2010s, but the U.S. Navy's insistence on making the funding of its aircraft carrier groups a priority, combined with increased defense spending cuts, left the Navy's surface warfare inventory in short supply of actual innovation. It didn't seem to matter that an overwhelming majority of the real-world operations—like this very operation he was on—were being conducted by "amphibs" that could barely leave dry dock in full operational capacity.

With their size, inventory, and, most importantly, the international perception of occupation, these two ships had to maintain their positions off of the Indian Ocean side of Oman. Given the situation in Iran, as the task force approached the Gulf, these two ships were not even allowed to make a routine pass through the Strait in order to make berth in a standard port call like Dubai based on the fear of the combat power they could bring to bear on the region. With the ever-changing and tumultuous situation in Iran, none of the power players wanted to see the United States come in heavy and begin "saber rattling." It didn't matter that this MEU—and the previous years of MEU rotations for that matter—had been reduced to less than 50 percent of their total strength compared to those that had gone out a decade ago. The simple fact that these were large Navy warships that delivered Marines to contested shores made them *navibus non grata*, and no one was willing to let the United States get a foothold and

begin asserting her influence. Most countries were skeptical of America's pseudo-isolationist "agenda" anyway.

But if these ships had been newer, smaller, and maybe more versatile, perhaps his Marines wouldn't be facing the bad side of their "golden hour" right now.

Sufficiently irritated again, he shoved what remained of his cigarette into the sand of the former AST compound and reached for another. He attempted to clear his head and try to at least regain some internal composure, if for nothing else so he could log his after-action report into the BCS (battlefield commander system). Pulling another cancer stick from the box decorated solely with a large "Jolly Roger" (skull and crossbones), he reflected on what had just transpired.

6 hours ago...

"You want us to do what?!" Aidan shouted over the company net.

Even with all of the noise cancelling modifications made to the ACV-3, there was no real way to silence that 30mm chain gun. And with the Box just a few meters away, lacing a steady stream of hate and discontent into the AST fortifications, there was no real way to deafen the violence raging outside of his vehicle. In this case, however, it wasn't the challenges of hearing the transmission from company commander that sparked his ire, but the content.

"You heard me Hollywood, d....t!" Mack shouted back with equal fervor. "Now displace and start your movement! And take two of Evinger's weapon platoon tracks with you. I have a feeling you're gonna need 'em."

Profane thoughts raced through Aidan's mind.

"Roger that. We're 'oscar mike' in 5," Aidan begrudgingly responded.

"Evinger!" Capt Prophet barked. "Get your heavy guns guys and have them roll with Hollywood." After a short pause, Mack continued.

"Actually, send your energy weapons team as well."

"On it, sir," 1stLt Evinger, the company's senior lieutenant and Weapons Platoon Commander responded.

The energy weapons squad was a new initiative for the Marine rifle company. Although still very much an experiment, the concept had been fully integrated into Mack's company to see how it would work, but he was provided very little guidance as to what their mission set was, or what the capabilities of their weapons were, or even what he was supposed to do with them for that matter. They were a hybrid of the old OGDs (obstacle clearing detachments) that used to roll with the AAV MK-154s (line charge variants). But with the weight of the line charge kit exceeding the swim capacity of the ACV, these engineers just sort of ran out of job once the AAVs were fully divested from the Fleet. In the successes of DEW (direct energy weapons) systems, they found new life. Most DEWs were large, bulky, and were primarily used for anti-material versus anti-personnel missions—the perfect fit for combat engineers.

Mack needed a breach and although not fully certain these "skirmishers" were the exact solution—necessity being the mother of invention—Alpha Company was going to see what these weirdos could do.

"Careful as you displace," SSgt Washington instructed as she directed her three ACVs out of their platoon firing positions. "We've still got boots on the ground."

What the SSgt was referring to was the commotion surrounding Sgt Xu's track. His track, positioned right next to Aidan's track, had taken a full "face shor" from some sort of recoilless rifle hidden amongst the AST battlements as it attempted to find any sort of cover and concealment amid the sparse micro-terrain. Although the heavy armor and engine compartment had absorbed the bulk of the blast, there was no APS (active protection system) to the direct front of the ACV (given the constraints of the location of the bow plane and to save weight), so there was nothing to mitigate the effects of the enemy barrage. Although it was "just" a mobility kill, a good portion of the Marines inside were in bad shape. No deaths reported as of yet, but newly promoted MSgt Nussbaum—the Company Gunnery—and whatever Marines he could

muster, were furiously trying to pull Marines from the smoking hull in order to triage the casualties. Normally, this would be done by the company first sergeant, but his track had fared even worse by an enemy ATGM (anti-tank guided missile), so Nussbaum had his hands full trying to establish a hasty casualty collection point and get these Marines the care they needed.

It didn't make things any easier that the Box had squeezed in to replace Xu's track on the firing line. Aidan heard the boom from the 80mm cannon, and then peering through his vision block, saw one of the smaller sangars erupt in fire and smoke, with a cascade of sand falling around the supporting reinforced HESCO structure. Although some of the incoming fire on Mack's rifle company had subsided after that latest volley, they still had no way into the compound. They needed a lane and, unfortunately, trading blows with AST didn't seem like the right answer. The hasty company support by fire (SBF) position they were currently occupying seemed to be the exact action that AST had planned for.

Backing out of their "fighting holes," the ACVs formed up on the move and in a tactical column, raced toward their launch point. The view from his vision blocks and the sight of the chaos projected from his vehicle's organic near-sight camera system just reinforced Aidan's feeling that this was a bad idea.

"Sir, just want to reiterate, for the record, that this is a bad idea. You're losing combat power exponentially now, and you need my guns to take out those positions."

"Noted Lieutenant! Now get your butt down there and destroy that base! They've got all day to do this—they're in fixed positions. I've got a few hours and then we're WINCHESTER (brevity code for 'out of ammo'). You want to help me out? Get me a breach lane so we can stop tickling these guys and actually get in there to do some work!"

Although their displacement route was well out of range of the AST threat ring because of the size of their defensive wall, he could still see how it was oriented. Forming a semi-circle around the infrastructure of the base,

the wall touched both the eastern and the western shores of the inlet between Iran and Qeshm Island. There was a single ECP (entry control point) supported by a draw bridge-style structure, which had been effectively lifted up on anticipation of the Marines' arrival. On the inland side of the wall was a large tank trench, effectively preventing any armored vehicle from creating a lane into the compound, even if the wall could be breached, which Company A was finding to be increasingly difficult. The SBF position Mack's company—initial casualties aside—had mostly suppressed the enemy defensive direct fire systems, with its indirect fire assets, mainly mortar tubes employed by smaller robots similar to that of the Box, were still engaging. From what he could tell, these robots were only programmed to fire on-call targets, because two of the four had now begun to send smoke and obscurity on the SBF position, which Aidan surmised

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was because the rest of the company must no longer be in the beaten zone of the AST pre-programmed grids.

As Aidan's mechanized platoon approached the island's northern shoreline, he no longer had direct visual of the ongoing battle. Sporadic radio transmissions between Mack, Pac-man and the Marines duking it out with AST's private security gave him some indication as to what was going on, but as he turned to look back through his rear vision block in time to see tracer fire precede a large plume of smoke and sand burst from the vicinity of his previous location, he couldn't help but fear the worst. Turning back to face his TC station, he regained his focus. Whether this was good plan or not, it was the plan. There was no time to continue

to complain about it while his fellow Marines—his friends—were sitting in the "teeth" of the AST defense.

Bringing up the video imagery of his ACV's front cameras, Aidan expanded his hands, widening the screen so that he could get a detailed view of what was in front of them.

"So, I take it we're not going to do a SUROB? (surf observation report)" he quipped with his vehicle commander of the ACV's intercom.

"Negative, sir. We're splashing," SSgt Washington replied bluntly.

"Alright, Devil. It's your show now ... get us wet."

"Tango." "Tango" being a weird military slang term for 'thank you,' usually resigned for those Marines who probably spent entirely too much time on the radio responding to higher headquarters' RFIs (requests for information) versus doing their actual jobs. You won't find it in any operational terms and graphics pub or communications SOP, but it had become the vernacular—and a term that Aidan used frequently—so he didn't bat an eye at the SSgt's response.

Maintaining their tactical column, the five ACVs poured back into the waters of the Gulf, maintaining their dispersion. With no surf zone on this side of the island, the transition from land to water was nearly seamless. As all of the vehicles went "feet wet," meaning they were all in the water and had their water propulsion systems engaged, the point vehicle made a sharp 90-degree turn to the southwest, to which the remaining ACVs followed suit. Aidan's communications signifying that the lead vehicle, and subsequently the last vehicle, had successfully "splashed" were met with only silence.

We're fine. Mack's just dealing with a lot right now. Aidan thought, attempting to reassure himself and ignore the dire significance of the lack of radio transmissions from his normally boisterous company commander.

We're fine.

