

IDEAS & ISSUES (FUTURE CONFLICT)

Ambrosia

Chapter 8

by Maj Victor Ruble

“As you can see, these guys weren’t here two days ago,” said the intelligence officer, pointing to the 3D holographic image floating in the middle of the SCIF (sensitive compartmentalized information facility). “We don’t know where they came from or how they got here, but we are certain that they aren’t supposed to be there.”

“And with the kind of ordnance that they’ve brought with them, regardless of who they’re aligned with right now, it would be safe to say that they’re not looking to launch confetti and streamers to welcome our arrival into the AO (area of operations). These would be the ‘bad guys,’ gents, and they’re looking to do bad things. Especially to us.”

Aidan looked around the room at the mix of dejected and exhausted looks on the faces of the other platoon commanders. Like him, they all fully expected to be underway to some tropical libo port. Being briefed that not only were they being extended on the shores of the Iranian Conflict, but that they would be going into it was the proverbial “gut shot.”

“Bring up graphic 2-12,” the S-2 said as he once again walked through the hologram as he reached for his coffee. “As you can see by the ...”

Aidan wondered at the fact that this was definitely not his “dad’s intelligence operations center.” Although still sheltered in a type of expeditionary tent, the composition of it was completely different. The material that made up the shelter was made of an amalgamated aluminum, copper, and Kevlar weaving that was coated in Mylar, so that the tent served to not only conceal the fact that it was a heavy data center from both aerial and satellite surveillance but also provided a decent amount of

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protection from shrapnel and air burst munitions. This one was an older version, as it didn’t have the “chameleon skin”—or the active environmental adaptive camouflage, as it was formally known—which was an upgrade to the exterior of the tent that used tiny cameras to take imagery from the surrounding environment and project them onto the tent making it indistinguishable from the rest of the terrain beyond 300m. Personally, Aidan felt like there were some mirrors in there as well, but he wasn’t really sure. He just knew that the Army had a butt load of them, and he still hadn’t heard of a Marine unit

fielding them yet. Though the outside appearance still resembled the exterior of previous expeditionary operations centers, it was the inside that was a complete paradigm shift from those used in the past.

Whereas the exterior of the SCIF was, for the most part, still the same, it was the inside that was revolutionary. Historically, the expeditious nature of forces on the move necessitated that the technological infrastructure remained fairly arcane. The Marine Corps in particular was always willing to trade flexibility and mobility for intricate networks. In Aidan’s dad’s time, a few radios and laptop—maybe a projector or two—were all that were used to quickly establish a hub for information flow. It was the human aspect that made these centers “intelligent” not the gear. It was the technical knowledge, the MOS proficiency, and the “boots on the ground”



The Marine Corps hadn’t procured any of the advanced environmental adaptive camouflage “chameleon skin” for either the intelligence operations center or the COC. (Photo by LCpl Austin Mealy.)

experience that made collection, assimilation, and dissemination more art than science. Well, now, it was the science that was truly a work of art.

Inside was a vast array of three-dimensional imagery being projected from a wide range of screens and monitors that literally surrounded the interior of the SCIF. These images ranged in size from the extremely large projection that the “Deuce” was using for his brief to the smaller projections that seemed to hover over the data collectors’ and analysts’ work stations smattered throughout the tent. The intelligence officer continued to pace as he briefed, going through the various weather and terrain analysis overlays as they migrated onto the holographic projection, changing the coloring of the imagery each time. As he talked, the Marines of the MEU’s intelligence cell—analysts, clerks, and data collectors—all punched away on the floating display screens hovering in front of them in their workstations positioned around the main holographic projector in the center of the tent, forming a ring around it. Some of them would grab whatever they were working on—literally snatch it out of the air with their hand—and move it over to a tablet before walking over to another work station to either discuss it with one of the other Marines or grab it from their tablet and move it onto the screen of that workstation, joining it with whatever product was being produced. Even though the intelligence officer had command of the room and everyone in attendance was fixated on his brief, the room still had a rhythm—a pulse—and it continued to move and churn like some sort of high-tech bee hive.

And then there were the robots. Like something out of the *Star Wars*’ Mos Eisley Cantina, five tall and skinny humanoid robots moved through the intelligence center as seamlessly as any Marine would. Although the Marines Corps was the most reluctant to adopt and adapt “synthetics”—the common term used for autonomous robots possessing varying levels of artificial intelligence—into their forces, the one area that the Marine Corps was more than willing to integrate these robots was in



Marines continued to monitor the situation as “the Deuce” conducted his brief. (Photo by Cpl Paul Peterson.)

the operations and intelligence centers. And unlike “the Box,” these were all next-generation automatons with near sentient artificial intelligence.

Aidan was never the most technologically savvy guy. Unlike his father, who would stare into a smart phone like it came from outer space, he had a functional understanding of how things worked and incorporated technology into his life fairly simply. Nonetheless,

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the sight of these synthetics moving about the SCIF continued to draw his attention. As the intelligence officer continued to brief the room, one of the synthetics handed him a tablet, probably some sort of update, and their interaction was so nonchalant, Aidan couldn’t help but let his mind wander as to the inner working of these

marvels. Like something out of a sci-fi novel, they were all programmed with an irreversible “do no harm to humans” primary directive, so they basically were employed as a CapSet (capability set) to the unit’s intelligence and operations centers. These robots provided the command and headquarters elements a complex set of capabilities that were highly mobile, extensively configurable, and extremely secure. Encased within their CPUs (computer power units) were not only the processors that gave them the ability to “learn and adapt,” but also a variety of adaptive firewalls and secure network capabilities. Essentially, for one of these things to be “hacked,” someone would have to physically “wire in” as breaking through remotely would only lead to frustration and a large energy drink bill.

Each of them simultaneously worked through extensive Internet and Intranet networks, and each were synchronized to the others, giving them a sort of “hive mind,” making each both indispensable and expendable at the same time. This gave the SCIF the flexibility to use any of them at any time without having to configure and reconfigure each, and it wasn’t critical if one of them should become compromised or destroyed.

In the past, in order to provide a COC with the type of essential capa-

bilities to function as an effective information and decision-making node with next-generation technology would have required multiple CONEX boxes being embarked and shipped thousands of miles over air or sea, requiring SOFAs (status of forces agreements), treaties, alliances, and friendly airspace and airfields to serve as secure ports of entry—all of which were in short supply given America's perceived neo-colonialism of the past few decades. With these synthetics, what would require a significant logistics footprint could be provided by 5 to 10 robots that required nothing more than solar power and a plane ticket.

Aidan looked down at his tablet and began scrolling through the various overlays that the intelligence officer had already gone over in his brief. Realizing that he was woefully behind on the IPB (intelligence preparation of the battlefield), Aidan renewed his focus on what the Deuce was saying.

"While we've been focusing on getting the 'drinking fountain' secured and running, forces not aligned with any friendlies up north took advantage of the opportunity to move short- and medium-range rockets and guns into our 'backyard' as it were." The intelligence officer continued as he reached up to the projection and expanded the imagery as his arms extended.

"As you can see by the presence of what looks like Weishi-style launchers, these guys are definitely not your run-of-the-mill s...heads. This kind of weaponry screams of forces backed by parties interested in gaining supremacy in the region. Now whether they're Chinese or Russian backed is still unknown. They could even be AST guys trying to get back on the island, being that the Weishi were originally developed by SCAIC in the 1990s. And SCIAIC was absorbed by AST in the 2020s, so who knows. I would say that's unlikely 'cause from what we can tell by their behavior, these guys don't act like mercs. And they 'posted up' well within the MLR (multiple rocket launcher) max effective range, which I take to mean they don't really know how to use the things, so I would say that's unlikely. But that's why we need



The U.S. had become the provider of potable water to the region. (Photo by Cpl Carson Gramley)

actual eyes on, cause from what we can tell from the imagery, it's not adding up."

"So what's the deal here, Deuce? Why would the Chinese and the Russians be so interested in our shutting down our little 'drinking fountain'?" Capt Prophet chimed in.

"Well sir, everything in this region is about leverage, influence. 'Wasta', if you will." The intelligence officer replied, continuing to answer the company commander's question as he addressed the room. "We're now providing one of the most sought after resources in the world—potable water—for free. We may not have the forces, and we may not own battlespace, but as soon as this 'drinking fountain' went online, regardless of the fact that this operation is NGO (non-governmental organization) run, we became the most influential faction in the AO."

The Deuce paused for effect.

"And in these days, for these guys, it's a zero sum game. Having the United States back in the game as a potential power broker does not constitute acceptable risk for those trying to gain supremacy here."

"So, why us? Why not recon?" Capt Prophet pressed. "If all you need is 'eyes on,' sending a mechanized company into hostile territory with an ambiguous ROE (rules of engagement) seems like

overkill at best. But reckless seems like a better word."

"Because Captain," the MEU commander interrupted from the shadows. Col James Bowersox was a grizzled combat veteran respected throughout the Corps. A rising star, he was Mack's battalion operations officer when he was a platoon commander and hand-selected Mack to be the infantry company commander for this deployment. He was not only used to Prophet's *je ne se quai* but, more importantly, how to handle it.

"The ROE isn't ambiguous. If it's what we suspect, then you're not only going to take them out but take some battlespace as well. I don't need to keep dealing with every upstart and foreign-backed faction that wants to either make a name for itself or do their master's bidding. You're going to land on that beach, kick those b... in the teeth, set up shop, and give us some d... stand-off. I'm tired of having to put on my body armor every time I go to take a dump." The room quietly chuckled as everyone there shared the same sentiment.

"All we're trying to do here is provide clean water to a people who desperately need it. So if they want to fight over water, then so be it. We'll fight over water!"

