IDEAS & ISSUES (FUTURE CONFLICT)

Ambrosia

Chapter 9
by Maj Victor Ruble

1stLt Rosado popped open his troop commander's (TC's) hatch and stood as his ACV became fully submerged and began to propel itself forward with its organic propulsion system, better known as "water jets." Even though Aidan didn't really suffer from sea sickness, the influx of the cool ocean air on his face and into his hatch was always welcome, and he definitely didn't mind that they were going to be in displacement mode for the entirety of this maneuver. The distance between Jazireh ye Qeshm and mainland Iran was too close to necessitate a high water speed (HWS) movement, which would have required that everyone stayed "buttoned up" due to the speed of the sleds. Being that they wouldn't exceed 10 knots for this movement, however Aidan wanted to take full advantage of the opportunity to get some fresh air.

Standing waist high in his TC compartment—a technique that he knew was a doctrinal "no-no"—he quickly scanned his vehicle's "six" to see how the rest of his platoon was fairing. The plan was for each of Capt Prophet's platoons to splash at different intervals so that, should they hit stiff resistance at the beach, all of Company A wouldn't be in the drink at the same time. Aidan's platoon had the distinct honor—or misfortune, depending on how you looked at it—of being the first in the water. As the vanguard, it was his job to not only recon the landing site but to find a lane through any obstacles that might have been erected and to fix in place any enemy forces opposing their landing in order to allow the rest of the company to go "feet dry," or land on the beach.

Jazireh ye Qeshm, or Qeshm Island, sat a mere mile from its closest point to the mainland. But from where they debarked to where they were going—the vicinity of Bandar Abbas—the distance

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was about 14 miles in total, so Aidan had a little over an hour to mull over the scheme of maneuver. With the short distance between the island and Iran proper, combined with the interval between "sticks"—the platoons' various displacement times—Aidan's platoon could very well run into the teeth of the enemy's defenses before Company A's final platoon even got "feet wet."

Which was sort of the point.

No sense in throwing the main effort of the GCE into a meat grinder when there was plenty of safe beach right there in the "green zone." Now granted—despite what doctrine would say about weighing the main effort—Razorback 6 gave Aidan plenty to bring to the fight, including priority on the

MLRS (multiple launch rocket system) back at the FOB; on-call fixed-wing and rotary CAS; and the Box (being towed on a static, high water speed sled by the heavy guns section's track). If they had to mix it up, the enemy was going to earn their pay as it were, but it was still a bit unsettling that they could be in the middle of a dog fight before a good portion of their company had even finished their PCCs (pre-combat checks) and PCIs (pre-combat inspections).

About half way through their movement, Aidan heard 2ndLt Englehart, the 2nd Platoon commander, come over the company net.

"Razorback 6, this is White 6. Feet wet. I say again, feet wet."

There were a few reasons why this transmission came over the company TAC. First and foremost, Capt Prophet was the company commander. If you wanted to talk to him, you use his net. Egos aside, however, all phase lines and triggers could be received by the entire company, and in maneuver warfare—

Rotary-wing CAS was available during Aidan's movement toward the objective. (Photo by LCpl Brooke Deiters.)

especially in this era of advanced technology proliferation—having everyone on the same sheet of music was a good thing. In effect, what 2d Platoon was conveying was that the lead element of the company's main body was in the water and beginning their movement. They weren't necessarily "over the Rubicon," but it was now essential that the vanguard relay any and all information updates regarding enemy location, movements, or obstacles—natural or man-made—that could impede the company's landing. This also reassured Aidan that the company was sticking to the plan as briefed – for now.

And should they hit a well defended beach, someone had his back.

Enshallah.

White 6's transmission officially ended the tax-free boating tour through the Clarence Strait. Aidan dropped down into his TC hatch and turned on his heads up display (HUD). The holographic imagery from each of his three sections' vehicle cameras illuminated his hatch. Aidan reached up and, with two swipes of his hand, shrunk the video feeds down and brought the Box's operating system into the forefront. With a few pokes of the finger, he ran through the Box's PCCs and PCIs—essential diagnostics and start up procedures for the fire support robot. Being that his platoon's role was so fluid—based on the enemy situation—no mission parameters were pre-programmed, so it took some time for Aidan to load the mission set: BREACH. But once he had what constituted its ROE (rules of engagement) locked in, a large "confirm" icon appeared in front of him. For whatever reason, Aidan just had a strange feeling. His mom regularly said that he was very intuitive, but he had considered it "mom talk" and never really put much validity in it. Now he thought there might be some credence in his mom's words, because for some reason, he just wasn't comfortable giving this armored automaton free reign to seek and destroy at will on a beach that could very well have as many civilians as it would hostiles.

Grabbing hold of the holographic icon, he dropped it into his PDA and popped his head out of the hatch to get a different perspective, one that wasn't digitally enhanced. On the horizon, the silhouette of the Iranian mainland was clearly visible. The skyline of the Bandar Abbas metropolis sat at Aidan's two o'clock, erected on the Iranian southern coastline like a monument to the gods. In the distance, Iran's most populous southern city and main port seemed to still be fairly unharmed by the recent string of natural disasters. Aidan knew

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that a closer view would reveal that the seemingly never ending migration of displaced persons and battles for ownership of a southern city and port had left this once thriving metropolitan area nothing more than a dilapidated and war-torn haven for gangs, warlords, and violent extremists.

"Staff Sergeant, can you give me a distance to the LZ?" Aidan asked his vehicle commander, SSgt Washington.

"Roger, sir. Stand by." She replied. The ACV had state of the art laser and satellite distance acquisition systems, all of which were readily accessible to Aidan as the troop commander, but he felt using his override capability sort of undermined her authority as vehicle commander.

"Five clicks." She confirmed.

"Tango." Aidan replied.

Five kilometers, or 2.6 nautical miles (essentially 3 miles). Swimming at 10 knots, they had about 15 minutes before they hit the beach. Well within an enemy's area denial weapons systems threat ring, Aidan was still wrestling with his intuition. At this range, if there were an enemy ready to deny them the beach, they would have been in a hail storm by now. At the same time, just because you couldn't see an enemy didn't mean that they weren't out there. Every cliché he ever heard raced through his mind.

"Plan for the worst, hope for the best."

"Fortune favors the bold."

"Come big or don't come at all."

Violence of action, speed, and decisiveness were what won battles, especially when assaulting a contested shore. His attack on the AST compound was evidence of that. But where was the "contested" part of their LZ? He couldn't shake the feeling that with their LZ (landing zone) being so close to a massive urban area, that it didn't seem right giving a heavy weapons robot a "license to kill." And there was an eerie quality to the fact that their approach to the mainland had gone unnoticed this long. Bringing up the Box's operating system on his PDA, he switched the operating parameter to SUPPRESS.

And then, as if it were lifted right off of the pages of Aidan's show script, air burst munitions started exploding around them.

Beating him to the punch this time, SSgt Washington blared, "Battle Speed! Battle Speed! Battle Speed!" over the platoon TAC. As he reached up to close his hatch, he took a quick glimpse to his left and right to ensure that all of the other vehicles had received his vehicle commander's order and were executing their platoon SOPs. In those few moments, Aidan was able to see that the effects of the enemy fire were random and erratic. At this range, A2/AD (anti-access, area denial) weapons systems were so precise and accurate that he should have lost a quarter of his platoon in the first volley. Leaving his hatch open, he dropped back down into his hatch. Activating his HUD again, he quickly scrolled to the Little Bird's prompt and hit "Deploy."

"Sir, what are you doing?! We're in the assault!", SSgt barked into the intercom as the small, unmanned drone took flight from its compartment and hovered into the sky.

"I need you to belay that last order."

"Come again, sir?"

"We need to stop the assault. This isn't our beach. Or at least, this isn't our enemy."

"Did anyone pass them that memo?" she said, somewhat belligerent by her confusion.

"This is a diversion. It's too easy. We should be in the teeth of their defense right now, instead of being treated to a firework show. Someone is trying to set us up for the 'okey-doke.'"

SSgt Washington stood to look through the vision blocks of her vehicle commander's station. Seeing air bursts ineptly explode in a manner that could barely be described as harassing fire, she had to agree that the lieutenant may have a point. Finally seeing an uncharged round splash into the water, she conceded.

"Ok, sir. What do we do? We can't very well turn around."

"Just throttle the platoon back and don't worry about the beach. I've got that covered." Aidan hurriedly replied as he punched away at his holographic screen. "But I need more eyes in the air. Get the other Little Birds up. I'm taking mine for a ride."

"Roger sir. Stand by."

"Oh, and staff sergeant, I'm going to be a little busy, so feed all imagery to you. You've got the 'com.'" Having essentially given the ACV section leader control of the maneuver—a technique rarely seen in the long and illustrious grunt-amtracker marriage—explained the silence that filled the ACV's caverns. Chuckling at the awkwardness of it all, Aidan finally heard the standard acknowledgment of "Roger" come from his vehicle commander.

Having split his screen, Aidan turned his attention to the dual feeds coming from his UAV and the Box. The ordnance from the shore's A2/AD defenses steadily increased in volume as they continued to make their way toward the beach. Still wildly inaccurate, Aidan assessed that they were still well away from seeing the real threat, but even a blind archer can hit the target once, so he knew they're luck would run out eventually. And so did his VC (vehicle commander).

"Anytime you're ready sir! It's getting kind of gnarly!

The Black Hornet UAS was a predecessor to Little Bird being used by Aidan to scout the beach for possible enemy forces. (Photo by LCpl Julien Rodarte.)

After a few moments of furiously typing away at the Box's operating system, an icon that read "CONFIRM" hovered in front of Aidan. Tapping it, it was then replaced by a text box that stated, "NONLETHAL BREACH CONFIRMED." Almost immediately, a prompt appeared stating "NONLE-THAL BREACH OPERATIONS FALL OUTSIDE THE NORMAL OPERATING PARAMETERS. DO YOU WISH TO PROCEED?"

Aidan tapped "YES" and thought, "What's next?! A terms of agreement?!," half joking to himself. At that moment, a statement of understanding illuminated the screen in front of him waiving the manufacturer of any responsibility should the Box not function in accordance with the mission set or should it malfunction in the execution of a mission that was outside of the manufacturer's recommending settings.

"YES!" Aidan screamed at the HUD. "Just do the thing that I told you to do!" The water jets that propelled the HWS sled came online and began to churn in the water. Once under its own power, the cable that connected the Box's HWS sled to its ACV came loose, and the Box and its chariot raced toward the shoreline. Aidan then turned to the Little Bird, and with a gradual pull on the control stick, launched the UAV toward a completely separate location just to the west of the landing zone.

As the Little Bird raced toward the shore, Aidan looked back to the Box's video feed. Being in breach-mode, the HWS continued to push through the surf zone at full throttle, oftentimes launching itself and its cargo into the air like some sort of robotic X-Games athlete. Continuing at its high rate of speed, it shot past the high water mark and skidded onto the beach, eventually stopping well inland as it mired itself in the coarse sand. Not missing a beat, the Box detached itself from its mooring cleats and, using the momentum from the sled, hurled itself into the beach's defensive front. Aidan could tell by the shaky video feed that the automaton was taking a fair amount of direct hits from the enemy's small arms munitions. Even with as poorly trained as these "soldiers" were, a few did have the ability to hit the broad side of barn, so the Box was taking "it in the running lights," but its armor was more than adequate against this small arms barrage to keep the fire support robot in the fight for quite some time. As Aidan anticipated, the sheer speed and audacity of the Box's assault took most of the enemy's combatants by surprise, sending a good portion of them fleeing from their fighting holes back to the sanctuary of Bandar Abbas.

But those who stayed were treated to the Box's special brand of non-lethal menu items.

Large panels that ran along the sides of the robot opened and began to omit a tremendously high pitched, high frequency sound, deafening all who were unfortunate to be within its extensive audio range. Aidan could see disoriented enemy combatants struggle and stumble to flee the auditory onslaught, only to see those now visual exposed become further victims to the Box's non-lethal direct fire munitions, namely bean bag and rubber bullets, being fired at sub-sonic speeds with uncanny accuracy from its medium and heavy machine guns. Those remaining enemy personnel who were either too steadfast or too disoriented to attempt to flee soon became victims of the Box's tear gas barrage, which it distributed with its 120mm mortars. Within moments, the landing zone was blanketed with compound 2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile, or CS, sending those who remained scurrying in all directions, tears and mucus flowing from nearly every orifice.

With the Box having effectively and efficiently suppressed the landing zone, Aidan turned his focus back to Little Bird. In the time that the Box took to neutralize the enemy defense, the small quad-copter made its way to the airspace above the shore. Using the UAV's camera to scan the beach, Aidan was having trouble finding what he was looking for in the time he was hoping it would take. Acre after acre of unoccupied beach and mangrove forest filled his screen, and he began to think maybe his intuition had led him astray.

"Staff Sergeant, you getting anything from the rest of the platoon's 'eyes'?"

"Well sir, if I knew what I was looking for I could probably answer that question better. But given that the Box literally covered the beach in CS, I've got nothing."

"You know staff sergeant," Aidan began to reply, sensing his vehicle commander's frustration at the brevity of his intent, "I like to treat amtrackers like mushrooms. Feed them s.... and keep 'em in the dark."

"Yes sir, I've seen *The Departed* too." Aidan could sense her eyes rolling at his

jibe. "But really, what are we trying to find, other than the snot rockets coming from these guys' faces?"

"Wait for it." Aidan replied, still hoping his suspicions were correct.

And then ... there they were.

An entire company of dismounted infantry staged just about a kilometer to the west of the landing zone in a perfectly concealed position from a ground-level vantage point. Especially when coming from the sea. Luckily, Aidan thought to get a bird's eye view.

"Got you!" Aidan yelled. "Staff Sergeant, this is our new LZ! Get us there now before they realize that we've got eyes on!"

Aidan crushed the holographic screen with his right hand and flung it in the direction of the vehicle commander's station as if SSgt Washington were sitting next to him.

"Got it sir." She said, confirming that she successfully uploaded his video feed.

"Wait one. I've got to radio back to Razorback 6 and let him know the LZ has changed."

Not wasting a moment, Aidan felt his ACV make a hard pivot in the water and begin to move in a westerly direction. Based on their movement, he knew SSgt Washington had control of the assault, so Aidan had little time to direct the main body onto center beach. With a few taps of his HUD, Aidan began to transmit over the company TAC.

"Razorback 6, this is Hollywood."

"Send it," Capt Prophet responded.

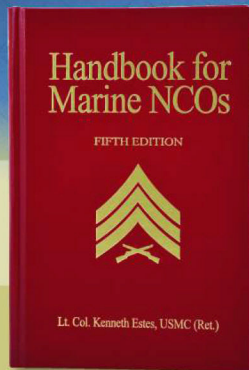"We've made contact with the enemy and we're making a few changes to the plan."

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