

The Future Fight

Communicating to the Lance Corporal

by Capt Taylor D. Hershberger

This work of fiction is intended to accomplish three goals. First, the story is intended to give the average junior Marine and NCO an understanding of what the future fight might look like to the Marine on the ground. Secondly, the story gives junior Marines and NCOs something that would explain some of the nuances of *Force Design 2030* and the expeditionary advanced base operations construct outside of formal documents. Finally, this work of fiction is intended to highlight some of the questions that still exist regarding the problems of operating in the weapons engagement zone. Some of these questions may have classified answers of which I am not aware. This story reflects the unclassified operating environment as I understand it today. At the end of the story, I have added a large list of the sources I used. My hope is that the story and the sources provided will drive junior Marines and NCOs to develop new ideas for the tactical implementation of the Corps' newest doctrine.

Prologue

In 2030, the People's Republic of China (PRC) faced a crisis. The global economy was stuttering under the continued weight of Chinese national debt. Confidence in major world powers was low. Internal dissension was accelerating in China due to worldwide economic stagnation and the rise of India as a rival to China as an exporter of cheap goods and labor around the world. In 2032, a massive cyberattack ripped through Guangzhou, causing billions in infrastructure damage. Riots and general dissension spread across the country as the people protested the economic conditions and the PRC's inability to stop the cyberattack. The leadership of the PRC, feeling pres-

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sured and looking to create an opportunity to foster unity in the country, cut off all shipping into the Taiwan Strait—forcing all world trade to flow east of the island.

Taiwan responded by issuing public releases condemning the PRC and threatening to fire on Chinese ships that violate Taiwan's territorial waters. To counter the rising threat, the commander of INDOPACOM increased Marine presence throughout the area and sent several joint units to conduct training on islands throughout the South China Sea. Three months later China surprised the world and escalated tensions by restricting ships within the contested 9-Dash Line, boarding and searching ships in and around the South China Sea. The United States developed a multi-national coalition built around the 7th Fleet. The 7th Fleet was shadowed as it moved throughout INDOPACOM by the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N). To complicate targeting in the event of a conflict, the commander of INDOPACOM ordered the 7th Fleet to disaggregate. Ripper is a small company-sized, task-organized unit under Task Force Peleliu training in the South Pacific in preparation for expeditionary advanced base operations.

The Story

Sergeant Esteban Ruiz laid completely still and looked through the advanced combat optical gunsight (ACOG) on the top of his rifle. The aiming reticule inside was a brilliant flaming red as the

illumination collector picked up the light beating down from the midday sun.

Too bright, he thought. *Can't pick out any detail.*

He reached forward to the daypack supporting the barrel of his rifle, unzipped a small side pouch, and removed a roll of electrical tape. Working quickly, he stripped off a piece about an inch long and placed it over about half of the collector. Peering back through the sight, Ruiz saw the target with much greater clarity.

"Ripper 6, Ripper 2-3," he murmured into the short microphone connected to his mobile objective user system-enabled (MUOS) radio.

Several miles away, and partially covered in a Mylar blanket and a tarp, Major John Jackson lay prone, wishing for the first time in his life that his 6ft 3in, 225-pound frame were smaller. He reached for the radio switch while continuing to watch the air above his Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV). The JLTV was sitting partly covered by camouflage netting at the edge of the tree line. From 300 meters, Jackson had a good view of his vehicle and the air above it. A small black object about the size of a laptop floated 100 feet above the JLTV. Jackson keyed his microphone without taking his eyes off the black object.

"2-3 this is 6, send it."

"Eyes on Objective Charlie. No movement," came the muffled reply from Ruiz.

Jackson, still focused on the small black object, quietly responded, "Execute, when ready."

Ruiz acknowledged the reply and reached over to switch the radio net to speak to the rest of his assault team.

"Ripper 2-3, execute," said Ruiz into his radio.

Ruiz looked back through his ACOG and shifted slightly to get a better view of the target. Sitting nearly 500 meters away, a squat and perfectly square, single-story, cinder block building sat nestled tightly into a small group of trees. There was no movement in or around the building. Through his ACOG, he could see the waves of heat rising from the ground as the sun beat down. The humid air was oppressive and absolutely still, and he did his best to ignore the sweat dripping down around his eyes. He was always amazed at the course his life had taken. Just seven years ago, he had been on the streets of Oakland. His life had been headed in the wrong direction, with the

Suddenly the sharp thump of 7.62mm rounds split the air. Immediately off to his left and about 200 meters away, a pair of M240L machineguns began firing in short staccato bursts. They were timing their bursts to alternate and keep the target under constant suppressive fire. Wiping the sweat from his eyes and peering back through his ACOG, he watched as a squad of Marines burst out of a small group of trees about 200 meters from the target building. The tactical radio net buzzed to life as Marines called in updates. As the squad closed on the building the machineguns suddenly went silent and were immediately replaced with the higher pitched pop of 5.56mm rounds as the maneuver

positions around the building. He had a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was the same feeling he used to get when the streets suddenly went quiet back home. Something wasn't right.

Ruiz keyed the mic on his radio. "Ripper 6, Ripper 2-3, Objective secured."

Several miles away, Jackson, still under the Mylar blanket and watching the small black object above his JLTv, acknowledged the call. He also looked confused as he tried to ponder the news he had just received from Sgt Ruiz. Their intel had been solid. The small building had been highlighted as a command node for the enemy. There should have been enemy and communications equipment in the building. What had just happened?

A high-pitched scream split the sky as a pair of F/A-18Ds thundered over in a low pass. Jackson instinctively winced. Apparently, they did not have air superiority after all.

Fifty meters away a Marine wearing a small reflective vest stood up waved his arm over his head and yelled, "ENDEX ENDEX!"

Jackson rose to his feet and shrugged off the Mylar blanket and tarp and walked over to the Marine with the reflective vest. "What happened, Master Sergeant?"

The master sergeant smiled grimly, "You were effectively targeted and killed by that airstrike. Your entire command team is dead, and your assault force has just been hit by a simulated HIMARs strike."

A couple hours later, Jackson stood with Ruiz and several other Marines from Ripper in a large domed hanger. At one end of the hanger sat a pair of F-35B Lightning II strike fighters under protective coverings. At the other end were a bunch of whiteboards, chairs, and television screens on stands used for debriefings. The occasional screech of fighter jets could be heard overhead and muffled loudspeaker announcements filtered through the open door of the hanger. Jackson and the Marines were huddled around one of the whiteboards discussing their performance with MSgt Vang who had been their evaluator for the exercise.

The operations order had said that the building was defended by a squad of infantry, but he had not seen anything move ...

wrong people, doing the wrong things. Then one day at a local car show he saw a Marine recruiting table. First, he had laughed at the recruiter with his short hair and immaculate uniform. But then the recruiter pointed at him and said, "It's all good, you wouldn't have made it anyway." And that was it. Ruiz set out to prove to the recruiter, and to himself, that he could.

He reached forward into his pack and pulled out a small computer tablet. Tapping the screen, he linked into the video feed from the Stalker drone that was lazily circling the target. Even at this distance, the Stalker sounded like a lawnmower flying above the objective. He tried to adjust the camera angle to get a better look at the objective. In its current position, high above the target, the drone was unable to see much of the target because of the tree cover over the building.

No help there, he thought. The operations order had said that the building was defended by a squad of infantry, but he had not seen anything move during a long, hot, miserable hour of close attention. He was going to let the assault go anyway.

squad began buddy rushing and providing their own fire. Ruiz watched with a critical eye as his Marines bounded across the open terrain. Sweat poured from the squad's faces and added to the thick layer of grime and camouflage paint that covered their uniforms as the Marines called out instructions to each other. One of the Marines, now just a few dozen meters from the building, tossed a smoke grenade to cover the final yards of the assault. As the yellow smoke billowed around the squad, there was still no response from the building. The first Marine to reach the building slammed into the front wall and the rest of his fireteam quickly stacked up behind him. Still trying to catch his breath, the first Marine kicked the door open while the second bounced a grenade inside. The Marines leaned away from the door as a flash of light and then a muffled thump emanated from the opening. The Marines poured into the building. Ruiz held his breath, but there was no further sound of gunfire from the building. About ten seconds later, he heard the all clear signal given over the radio. His brow furrowed as he watched the squad set up defensive

“I just don’t understand,” Maj Jackson murmured. “I thought we covered our signatures pretty well. I kept the command team under the Mylar blankets to mitigate our body heat, we set up our command post a couple hundred meters away from the JLTVs so that even when we were spotted by the Red Force drones we were still able to command and control, and we stayed decentralized overall. We kept groups as small as possible while still being able to seize the objective.”

Vang nodded. “Yes sir. You and Ripper did a great job on all those points. Additionally, your team even used the available Stalker well. Clearly, you had trained using it as a support for the overall scheme of maneuver.”

“Then how did we get hit?” mumbled Sgt Ruiz.

Vang looked over the group. “Anyone have a guess?”

All the Marines looked at the ground, shuffled their feet, and became suddenly interested in their notebooks. Vang looked down at his own notes.

“It was the radio transmissions. Ripper used a normal radio transmission protocol. You made calls throughout the operation to achieve a normal level of command and control during the assault on the target. The Red Force knew what the potential targets were and vacated your targeted building before you arrived. Being Marines themselves, they knew how you would fight. The Red Force signal intelligence team was looking for those bursts of radio calls and baited you into striking an empty building.”

“Wait a minute, Master Sergeant,” said Ruiz. “You’re telling me that the Red Force was able to listen in and hear our radio transmissions?”

“No,” replied Vang, “But because they knew the target, your general direction of attack, and the Marine way of fighting, they were able to angle their signals collection assets correctly. And when they saw spikes on the radio frequencies roughly corresponding to what we normally see prior to an attack, they knew it was Ripper. Then they triangulated frequency locations and, coupled with their drone footage, called in the air and HIMARs strikes.”

Low groans and sounds of frustration rose from the Marines standing around the whiteboards. Ruiz spoke again,

“But Master Sergeant, we did accomplish the mission. We captured the building. Granted there was no enemy there, but we won.”

Vang nodded his head. “Yes Sergeant, you did accomplish the mission. But what about the next mission? Your command and control node has been destroyed and your assault force took heavy casualties. In the next fight, you will be expected to operate in a highly decentralized environment. In that environment, if you get hit like you did today, your commander will find it difficult to reconnect with you until you or someone in the unit can reestablish that command-and-control connection. Until then, you are cut off from the communication web that links you to all the other friendly fighters in the area and your firepower cannot be used effectively.”

Jackson looked up from the notes he had been taking. “So, what should we have done Master Sergeant? What would have worked better?”

Vang nodded again. “Good question, sir. Ripper needs to learn to work with a minimum of radio transmissions. Mission-type orders need to be refined so that subordinate units, in this case, the assault squad, can fight with very little oversight. Radios, especially those that reach beyond the line of sight, are usually high-powered and easy to detect. Long transmissions from radios are also easy to detect as I mentioned earlier.”

Ruiz watched as Jackson’s face grew grim. He was clearly frustrated with his own performance from the exercise, and the holes the exercise had exposed in his training plan.

Vang continued, “I also recommend a shift towards using chat programs that produce a much smaller signature that is more difficult to detect than a voice transmission. The individual squads need to learn to be less reliant on their radios and to watch their tablets a little more closely. Finally, sir, officers and staff non-commissioned officers are going to have to get a little more comfortable with less control on the battle-

field. We are going to have to trust our Marines to accomplish their mission with creativity and effectiveness and then find a way to subtly communicate that back to the command-and-control nodes. As Ripper learned today, we are too easily targeted otherwise.”

Jackson finished taking his notes and was about to reply when a door behind the whiteboards swung open and slammed against the hangar wall. A young lance corporal, slightly out of breath, ran up to Jackson.

“Sir, you are needed in the Combat Operations Center (COC) Something is happening.”

Jackson walked into the COC and took a second to acclimate to the new environment. Marines sat hunched over computers, furiously typing on keyboards while a few junior Marines hustled throughout the room. Several groups of officers stood around whiteboards in different corners of the room diagramming and gesturing over some portion of a planning product. Every few minutes, a grizzled prior-service first lieutenant would call for attention and read some update off a yellow piece of paper. Jackson looked closely and could see a hefty stack of those yellow papers next to the lieutenant’s desk. Jackson scanned the faces of the Marines and could see the strain and pressure that permeated the room. Every few seconds the room’s attention would focus on the large set of screens near the front of the watch floor. Drone footage from some type of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platform was being broadcast on the screens. Clearly depicted on the screens were three cargo container ships steaming at full power. Jackson could see the containers stacked on the decks of the ship and could even occasionally make out the names of the ships themselves as the drone circled the trio. Every 30 seconds or so the screen would flicker, and a different image would swim into view showing four ships flying the bright red flag and gold star of the PLA-N moving at full speed on what appeared to be an intercept course. Every couple of minutes the watch officer, in between his other updates, would call out the estimated time to intercept. Jackson looked to

the back of the room and could see a small group of senior officers huddled in a corner watching grimly as the ships inched closer on the screens. Jackson caught the eye of the operations chief for TF-Peleliu, Master Gunnery Sergeant Whitehouse who was walking toward him.

“Master Guns, what’s going on?” asked Jackson.

Whitehouse, only about five-feet-five-inches tall, but heavily muscled and nearly as wide as he was tall, frowned.

“Sir, looks like the Chinese PLA-N is making a play to completely cut off Taiwan. PLA-N ships have been stopping, boarding, and turning around all ships heading into the eastern coast of Taiwan. With the western coast already sealed off, Taiwan is effectively blockaded.”

Jackson nodded. “Any word from the boss,” he said gesturing with his head toward the group of senior officers in the corner.

Whitehouse nodded his head. “Yes sir, right before you walked in they put Ripper on alert. They mentioned an island named Lubang in the Philippine archipelago.”

“Well, that’s good enough to start. I’ll begin getting the Marines spun up and ready,” answered Jackson.

Suddenly loud exclamations and curses rose from the watch room floor. The ISR feed was closely monitoring the Chinese ships as before, except now, one had a huge, smoking, black hole near the water line and Jackson could see flames flickering around the ship. The other ships in the Chinese formation were rapidly spreading out away from the crippled ship.

The watch officer called over to the group of senior officers who were also now fixated on the image of the burning ship.

Sir, Taiwan is shooting.”

The following 24 hours were a hectic frenzy of activity for Ripper. Jackson had run out of the command post and collected Ripper’s SNCOs and officers in the hangar. He had briefed them on the situation and told them to prepare the Marines for expeditionary advanced base operations in which Ripper would be operating as a stand-in force. The

Marines had begun packing while officers and SNCOs received their briefings and mission updates. Ripper was to deploy to the island of Lubang. About eight miles long and five miles wide, the island sits on the western side of the Philippine archipelago. The island has a wide variety of terrain including flat open spaces on the northern edge rising to heavily forested mountains in the center and sloping back down to several small towns on the eastern and southern edges. Ripper had been ordered to the island and was instructed to monitor developments in the South China Sea.

The problem was getting Ripper out to the island. With the PLA-N already conducting operations in and around the area, Ripper would need to mask its movements as best as possible. After several discussions with the senior officers of TF-Peleliu, Jackson settled on mul-

as possible, Ripper would wear the Marine Corps’ jungle uniform to maintain legality within international law. However, Ripper would use locally sourced vehicles, communications, and supplies as much as possible to help lower their overall signature.

Seventy-two hours later, Ripper was in position and spread across the island of Lubang. There had been issues of course. The ferry captain insisted he be paid extra to allow American military vehicles onto his boat. And the group riding with the fishermen and led by Ruiz had been dropped off five miles away from the agreed point when the fishing boat captains had seen PLA-N drones flying nearby. This meant a long day for him and his team as they made a foot march of nearly eight miles to their operating area while carrying all their gear. But, all things considered, Jackson was pleased with the conduct

Although tasked with blending in with the local population ... Ripper would wear the Marine Corps’ jungle uniform to maintain legality within international law.

iple avenues of approach to the island. Around 40 of the Marines would fly in on regular civilian air flights to the island. They would not take any weapons with them but would be able to bring their personal gear. Another group of about 50 Marines would take the local ferry across to the island carrying all the weapons for Ripper and a couple of JLTVs and MTRVs. Finally, a third group consisting of around 60 Marines, along with their weapons and their gear, would be taken to the southeastern side of the island and dropped off by local fishermen who were more than willing to become part-time contractors. As a whole, Ripper would need 48 hours to get to the island and another 24 to link up once they had arrived. This also meant that several of Ripper’s sections would need to conduct long foot marches across the island to reach their respective operating locations around the island. Although tasked with blending in with the local population as much

of Ripper while getting into position. Now Ripper just needed to survive.

Jackson had received periodic updates via email and TAC-Chat regarding the situation. The government of Taiwan had seen the encroaching PLA-N ships and their tightening stranglehold as an act of war and had fired on the ships severely damaging several. China had used this escalation as an opportunity to increase its navy’s presence throughout the South China Sea. The PLA-N did pull their ships back from Taiwan but increased their presence throughout the 9-Dash Line area stopping and boarding ships heading into the South China Sea and severely damaging trade around the world. The United States vowed to respond, and Ripper would undoubtedly be involved in that response.

Twenty-four hours later, Ruiz and his Marines were clustered at the end of an open field around a motley assortment of vehicles that Ripper had

acquired. Ruiz could see old pickup trucks, cars, and even some ancient military gear. Ripper had traded, bought, and borrowed the gear from the local population. The vehicles all looked rough, but they blended in with the local traffic and they all worked. At least for now. Ruiz checked his watch again for the fifth time in five minutes. The time seemed to be dragging by. Ripper had been on this island for 72 hours, but it felt much longer. He had led his group on a hellish eight-mile road march with all their gear to reach the rendezvous point. Ripper had been living off the water and food they had brought with them, and now he and the Marines with him were waiting for their resupply.

He checked his watch again and then checked the sky. He hated waiting like this. It was the worst part of the profession. He remembered his first experience with the concept of hurry up and wait at boot camp. He had worked hard throughout high school and a couple of years after to develop something of a reputation around his neighborhood of Oakland. But when he got to San Diego, no one cared. The first few weeks of boot camp were life-altering. Not only was he not respected, but the drill instructors also seemed to target him. No matter how he excelled at an event, it was never good enough. Ruiz remembered long hours on fire watch waiting for his chance to get some sleep. Without a doubt, waiting for time to pass was the worst part of the profession.

A Marine nearby pointed up and off in the distance to the east. "Sergeant, I see something."

Ruiz looked off in the distance and could see two black specks on the horizon.

"I think that's them," he replied.

Ripper had been instructed to make no radio transmissions unless absolutely necessary. Jackson had received the time and place of the resupply via Tactical Chat (TacChat) early that morning, but there had been no further coordinating instructions. Someone must have been talking with the airport in Lubang, however, because the sky had been clear of any flights for the past fifteen minutes.

The specks grew larger and were now clearly definable as C-130J cargo planes. Ruiz switched on his radio and shifted to the correct net in case the pilots needed some kind of terminal guidance. The radio stayed silent. The C-130Js came straight in but did not seem to slow down. As the first C-130J was about 100 feet off the deck and approached the beginning of the rough field, parachutes billowed out of the cargo bay. The C-130J ripped over the airfield and did not slow down as the parachutes yanked several pallets of supplies out of the cargo bay half gliding, half falling to the ground. The pallets thudded to the ground and came to a rapid stop. The second C-130J flew over the supplies to the midpoint of the field and repeated the operation. Both C-130Js then climbed into the bright sky and disappeared.

"Alright let's go!" yelled Ruiz. The Marines swarmed the pallets left on the runway, quickly broke them down, and then loaded them into the back of their vehicles. Minutes later the trucks had disappeared, and the field was left desolate. *And just like that*, thought Ruiz, *Ripper is resupplied*.

Several hours later and about six miles away, Jackson was looking over a map of Lubang Island hanging on the wall of a tiny police station when he heard the vehicles arrive. Stepping outside and crossing his arms he watched as three rusted pickup trucks pulled up and the Marines, led by Ruiz, stepped out.

"How'd it go, Ruiz?" asked Jackson with a wry smile.

"All good sir," replied Ruiz as he lowered the tailgate on his truck and began pulling gear out of the truck bed. "The C-130s were a little late, but we didn't have to break radio silence and we collected all the gear without any problems. The other sections have been resupplied across the island."

"That's good to hear," said Jackson. "Did they give us what we asked for?"

"Yes sir," Ruiz gestured to the Marines unloading the trucks behind him. "And they pushed us a Lightweight Water Purification System with the enhanced production module. We will have all the clean water we need now."

Jackson nodded. "That's a great start. Let's move that gear inside the station."

Jackson, Ruiz, and several of the Marines carried components of the purification system inside the police station. As they walked past the map on the wall, Jackson stopped Ruiz.

"Ruiz, I am interested in your take on something."

Ruiz nodded.

"As you know," Jackson continued pointing to locations around the map, "Ripper is spread around the island to lower our signature and make us much more difficult to find. That makes our job more difficult, especially when it comes to keeping the Marines supplied with what they need. I've been thinking about those resource shortfalls. Because we are inside the PLA-N weapons engagement zone I have directed all the sections to conduct survivability moves every day and to remain radio silent unless they hit one of my commander's critical information requirements. I want to get creative on some ways to extend our current resources. Now that we can purify water, conserving MREs and refueling our trucks are both high on my priority list. Do you have any thoughts on how we can keep the Marines well-fed and moving around the island?"

Ruiz thought for a second and then replied, "Well sir, we could work with the locals. We drove past a small port on our way up here. The locals were doing a lot of fishing and there are a couple of small stores around the island. We should be able to purchase or trade for some food to substitute for one or two MREs a day. Because we now have the Lightweight Water Purification System and can purify more water than Ripper will need, we might be able to use some of the extra to bargain with. We also have the parachutes that the supplies came in on and could use those to bargain with as well."

Jackson nodded. "We should also continue to rely on our civilian trucks and vehicles. That will allow us to hold on to our JP-8 fuel supplies for when we really need the JLTVs and 7-Tons."

Ruiz paused for a second, carefully weighing his next statement, and then

continued, “We will have to be careful though sir, the economy here is fragile and we could easily buy or sell our way into a lot of trouble with the locals if we try to do too much. I grew up in a rough section of Oakland and sometimes church groups or non-profits would come through with good intentions and a lot of money and cause some pretty serious problems in my community. We will also need to be careful about what we eat. I know some of the Marines are talking about fishing and even hunting for food for themselves. There is plenty of wildlife on this island. But that’s a quick way for us to lose combat effectiveness when they start to go down with stomach viruses and food poisoning. I suggest that you weigh the benefits and the risks there, sir.”

Jackson looked thoughtful and then nodded slowly. “That’s all true. As I circulate around to the sections, I will work with the section leaders to incorporate what you just mentioned. We need to make sure that we are fully utilizing everything we can to extend our capabilities here on the island. Thanks for your help.”

Ruiz watched as Jackson jumped in the bed of a pickup truck and sped down the road. He got in the passenger seat of his own truck and drove off in the opposite direction.

Four days later, Ruiz was playing soccer with three young children on a dirt patch outside of a school. Across the street three elderly women were washing clothes and smiling as they watched Ruiz juggle the ball and pass it to the children, his rifle slung across his back. They spoke softly to one another, and then one slowly got to her feet and shuffled toward Ruiz. As she approached, the children respectfully grew still and silent. The old woman began speaking in Tagalog. Ruiz watched carefully, and one of the children, who had learned some English at the local school, began translating.

The young girl watched the elderly woman closely as she spoke quickly and gestured rapidly to the North. The young girl then spoke in halting English.

“She says that others have come to the island. She says they are that way,”

pointing again to the North. “She says you should know.”

Concern spread across Ruiz’s face as he listened. “Can she tell us anything else? Like what did the men look like?”

The young girl relayed the question to the elderly woman, and she answered in short rapid-fire syllables. The young girl turned back to Ruiz.

“She says they have guns but no uniforms. She also says they speak the same language as the Chinese dock workers. That is all.”

Ruiz nodded and turning to the elderly woman, took her hand gently and smiled, expressing his thanks. She smiled back sadly and walked to her house. Ruiz ran to his pickup truck sitting on the edge of the dirt lot. He grabbed a disposable cell phone, acquired by trading away two MREs and four gallons of fresh water, and tapped out a text message and hit send. He knew that somewhere on the island in a couple of hours, Jackson would turn on his own locally acquired and disposable cell phone and get the brief message. By using locally procured cell phones at random intervals, Ripper had been able to communicate at a reduced capacity by hiding their communications in the vast array of cell calls and text messages naturally occurring on the island. In doing this, Ripper forced the PLA-N to sort through thousands of communications sent on the island. These other signals made Ripper’s communications difficult to identify. Further, Ripper did not send anything in English but rather used pre-established Tagalog code words. This meant that any PLA-N cyber teams would not simply be able to sort collected text messages by English words. The communications were nearly impossible to pick out of the background noise and would have seemingly no connection to Ripper for anyone who intercepted them. Ruiz finished the text message using the code word for a meetup, jumped in the truck, and began driving to the meetup location. He would have to wait a few hours, but either Jackson or someone he sent would show up sooner or later. Then Ruiz could pass on the intel.

Two hours, and ten miles later, Ruiz and the two lance corporals he

had taken with him arrived at a nondescript road intersection. Ruiz grabbed his disposable cell phone and sent the code word to let Jackson know he had arrived at the rendezvous location. The sky above was gloomy and gray, and the clouds rolled past in unending succession. Large and scattered raindrops splashed onto the hood of Ruiz’s truck creating streaks in the mud coating the chipped white paint around the exterior. The terrain immediately around Ruiz could best be described as jungle. Heavy wet leaves and dense foliage hung over the unimproved road and made visibility down either of the road branches nearly impossible beyond a few meters. Ruiz and the two lance corporals jumped out of the truck and pushed a few meters into the tree line. The trio moved to positions where they could see as far as possible down both branches of the road. Then all three covered themselves with tarps. Ruiz lay behind his rifle and listened to the sound of the rain on the leaves nearby. The sounds made him think of his time at the Marine Corps Jungle Warfare Training Center. After boot camp and the School of Infantry, Ruiz had quickly filled a spot as a fireteam leader as a lance corporal, and then a squad leader as a corporal. He had excelled relatively easily. But then his unit had been sent to the Jungle Warfare Training Center and the courses there had proven to be some of the most difficult he had ever attended. Prior to joining the Corps, Ruiz had never been outside of Oakland, much less deep in the jungle. The environment was so completely foreign that he had struggled to adjust. But while he would never truly love the jungle, over time he had come to appreciate and work within the difficult environment. Now with Ripper tasked to Lubang, he was leaning heavily on the knowledge he learned. He would never, however, get used to being wet all day long.

Ruiz’s cell phone vibrated. Looking down he recognized the code word for the pending arrival of Jackson. Ruiz called out to the two lance corporals to let them know. Ruiz could hear the truck long before he could see it through the dense vegetation. Jackson’s

truck bounced around a corner in the trail slinging mud, leaves, and sticks before sliding to a mud-spattered stop in the small clearing of the trail intersection.

Jackson climbed out of the passenger seat and sank into mud up to his ankles.

“Awesome,” said Jackson dryly as Ruiz slogged his way over.

“Yeah, it’s pretty great,” Ruiz replied sarcastically.

“So, what’s going on Ruiz,” asked Jackson as he lifted one boot out of the mud making a loud sucking sound.

“Sir, a couple hours ago I was down in the village in my sector and some of the civilians reported that they had seen Mandarin-speaking men moving around carrying weapons and wearing civilian clothes. My first thoughts jumped to the PLA-N Maritime Militia or maybe some kind of high-speed recon unit. Regardless, I thought you should know, and I didn’t want to risk it on comms.”

Jackson looked grave. “How well do you trust your source in the village?”

Ruiz folded his arms and leaned on the side of the bed of the truck.

“Well, sir, I don’t really know. We have been operating in and around the village for a while now, and I have never seen anything suspicious. The family has been kind to me and the Marines, but I have no hard data either way.”

Jackson nodded. “Well, you did the right thing in letting me know and in keeping this off comms. The word I’m getting from Higher is that things are continuing to heat up. We will be getting some more gear in the next few days and some of it may be coming your way. In the meantime, I do have something for you to do.”

Ruiz nodded.

Jackson continued, “The unit is running low on cash, and I put in a request for some more. Higher doesn’t want to air-drop it to us because we have that gear shipment coming in a couple of days and they are trying to minimize attention in our direction. A MARSOC team is operating on a nearby island and has been tasked with dropping it off. The city of Agkawayan on the southeastern coast has a small cemetery. The money will be dead dropped in a freshly

dug hole on the northwestern side of the cemetery by 2300 tonight.”

Ruiz’s face registered mild surprise. “Really, sir? Seems pretty cloak and dagger.”

Jackson shrugged. “It’s several thousand dollars in cash. We couldn’t think of any other way to do it without risking exposing the team or the cash being carried off by one of the civilians. Grab the cash, and then get it to me please.”

“Roger that, sir,” replied Ruiz.

“If you hear anything else about those guys with the guns, be sure to pass it on,” said Jackson as he began unsticking his feet from the mud and climbing in his truck.

“Will do, sir,” called Ruiz over his shoulder as he also slogged back to his truck. Already he was thinking about the safest way to grab the cash.

At 2230, Ruiz and three of his Marines pulled into Agkawayan. The gloomy city was quiet and only a few scattered lights illuminated the small cluster of buildings lining the city’s three main streets. Ruiz and the other Marines parked along the dirt road next to the church building just outside of the cemetery and then began walking briskly up the short hill.

The cemetery consisted mostly of small stone buildings with the names and lifespans of the deceased carved or written above the entrances. Scattered throughout were graves and more traditional gravestones. Using mostly obscured red light flashlights, the Marines quickly moved to the northwestern side of the cemetery and saw, just outside of the cemetery grounds, a mound of freshly dug earth. Ruiz bent over the faintly illuminated mound and then gave a low chuckle. A stick was jabbed into the ground holding up a piece of green field notebook paper making an impromptu “headstone”.

On the paper was written, “Chesty Puller 1898-1971 S/F.”

Ruiz scraped away the dirt to reveal a trash bag containing a backpack. A quick check inside confirmed the contents. Smiling again, Ruiz stuffed the makeshift “headstone” in his pocket, filled in the hole, and began moving back to the truck.

Three days later, Ruiz sat on the tailgate of his truck watching the boat traf-

fic at the local, small fishing port. Every third day a civilian ferry came across from the mainland, and today’s ferry would be bringing some more capabilities for Ripper. Ruiz shielded his eyes from the glare of the morning sun reflecting on the green water and assaulting his eyes making it difficult to see out into the bay. Ruiz could just barely see the outline of the civilian ferry as it inched its way toward Lubang. Ruiz watched as five barefooted children kicked a soccer ball around puddles of mud along the side of the road. They were laughing and joking, totally oblivious of him. He watched the children. They didn’t care about the 9-Dash Line, the weapons engagement zone, or PLA-N encroachment in the South China Sea. They didn’t care about command and control, amphibious landings, or sea control and sea denial. For them, all that mattered was keeping an old ball out of the mud. The ferry chugged to a halt and bumped lightly into the dock, shaking him from his reverie. Ruiz watched as the ferry’s forward ramp slowly winched down and made contact with the dock. A JLTV towing a trailer gingerly crept over the ramp and onto the dock. On the back of the trailer was a large rectangular panel. Ruiz jumped down from the tailgate and flagged down the driver of the JLTV towing the newest capability delivered to Ripper. An AN/TPS-80 Ground/Air Task-Oriented Radar would provide the capability for the Ripper to source and contribute to the kill web. However, Ripper would need to keep the radar off until it was needed. Like many of the tools delivered to Ripper, the radar provided a powerful capability that substantially increased the lethality and viability of the task force on Lubang, but each capability meant more logistical requirements and more Marines for the PLA-N to target. Additionally, a capability like the radar would light up the electromagnetic spectrum and was easy to track. Ripper would have to be extremely selective about how and when it was used.

Ruiz walked to the driver’s side of the JLTV and showed the corporal in the driver’s seat the route to the covered position on the northwestern coast of

Lubang that had been prepared. He then hopped in his truck and led the way up the winding road away from the port. Behind him, the children continued to play in the street, never even pausing to look up.

The next two days were busy for Ripper. Ruiz had been called to Major Jackson's roving COC, operated out of the back of two trucks, on several occasions to coordinate troop movements across the island. Ripper had been instructed to use the Ground/Air Task-Oriented

PLA-N ships in the nearby waters. They were a significant asset and the fact that they and the Marines required to use them had been delivered to Ripper were clearly an indication that the situation with the PLA-N continued to escalate.

Ruiz watched as the JLTVs moved off the airstrip and down the road and came to a halt in front of Maj Jackson and a squad of Marines. The two Marines in the lead vehicle jumped out. Ruiz jogged away from the airstrip as the sound of the C-130J engines in-

creased in pitch and behind him the two planes lifted into the air. Ruiz arrived at the JLTVs just in time to see Jackson spread a map across the hood of the lead vehicle.

Jackson jabbed his finger at a point on the map indicating a spot on the northern edge of the island. "Here's where you are going to set up to start," Jackson nodded toward Ruiz. "You are going to fall under Sergeant Ruiz. He's going to be on-site with you. I will run command and control from a different location here on the island. We can't have the C2 and the launch vehicles in the same location. Launch authority remains with me. I will coordinate all fires with the Navy. If we have to shoot, and we shoot the Naval Strike Missiles by themselves we will not have much effect on the enemy ships. The PLA-N has solid anti-ship defenses, and our attack will be shot down before it reaches the ship. We are going to need their help if we are going to be effective against PLA-N ship defense systems. What do you guys know about Composite Warfare Doctrine?"

complex the more you study it. But the simple summary is that a group of ships will have billets inside that group assigned to different areas of responsibility. Someone will oversee defending against air attacks for the whole fleet, someone will be responsible for offensive attacks, someone will be responsible for watching out for enemy submarines, and so on. The weird part for us is that those people are not always the ship's captain. So, the naval officer in charge of fires may be on one ship and call across to three other ships and give them the order on when and where to fire their weapons. It gets confusing quickly, but the point for us to understand is that our fires capability, the Naval Strike Missiles, will fall under the command of a fires officer on one of the American destroyers nearby. When they tell us to push the button to fire, we push the button to fire."

The Marines in the group nodded slowly, still looking confused. Jackson went on, "For now, I will act as the fire control on the island. If we get the call to use our missiles it will come to me, and I will pass the coordinates and timing on to you. That way all you have to worry about is survivability. Any questions?"

Ruiz spoke up.

"Sir, what if we can't get in touch with you? Command and control is spotty at best across the island. If the PLA-N jams our nets or conducts some other kind of action that degrades our ability to communicate, you may not have the ability to reach out to us in a timely manner. Are we able to use the missiles to defend ourselves?"

Jackson nodded, "That's a great question and one that we do not have a great answer for. First of all, you are always allowed to defend yourself. But remember, we are not currently at war with the PLA-N. Firing a Naval Strike Missile at a PLA-N ship is a significant act and one that could very well plunge our two nations into war. One of the reasons I am putting you on-site with this missile battery is that I think you have the capacity to grasp the whole picture. I truly hope the situation does not deteriorate to the point where you need to make that type of decision."

Composite Warfare Doctrine is the way the Navy fights. It's their philosophy, kind of like how our philosophy is maneuver warfare.

Radar to track PLA-N drones launched from a PLA-N ship off the coast. The drone mothership was supported by a PLA-N surface action group (SAG) consisting of several Type 052D Guided Missile Destroyers. The SAG had been inching closer and closer to Lubang over the course of several days and was now just a few miles beyond Philippine territorial waters. The Philippine Navy had deployed several ships in and around Lubang to counter the threat and were joined by two American destroyers.

Several flights had dropped off gear and Marines at the northern airfield over the past few days, and Ruiz now stood near two C-130Js sitting on the airstrip with their engines still running. The muggy, stifling propwash ripped past him as he watched the tailgates thump to the ground to reveal several JLTVs. The first JLTV, driven by a lance corporal, gingerly crept across the ramp and then down the wide runway toward the airfield buildings. One more followed, and then two others from the second C-130J. Ruiz did a double take as they rolled past him. None of the following vehicles had a driver. This was Ruiz's first time seeing the ROGUE NMESIS system although he had heard a lot about it. The system was loaded with the Naval Strike Missile and provided Ripper with the range and destructive firepower to affect

creased in pitch and behind him the two planes lifted into the air. Ruiz arrived at the JLTVs just in time to see Jackson spread a map across the hood of the lead vehicle.

Jackson jabbed his finger at a point on the map indicating a spot on the northern edge of the island. "Here's where you are going to set up to start," Jackson nodded toward Ruiz. "You are going to fall under Sergeant Ruiz. He's going to be on-site with you. I will run command and control from a different location here on the island. We can't have the C2 and the launch vehicles in the same location. Launch authority remains with me. I will coordinate all fires with the Navy. If we have to shoot, and we shoot the Naval Strike Missiles by themselves we will not have much effect on the enemy ships. The PLA-N has solid anti-ship defenses, and our attack will be shot down before it reaches the ship. We are going to need their help if we are going to be effective against PLA-N ship defense systems. What do you guys know about Composite Warfare Doctrine?"

All the Marines had blank looks.

Jackson continued, "Composite Warfare Doctrine is the way the Navy fights. It's their philosophy, kind of like how our philosophy is maneuver warfare. And just like maneuver warfare, it's simple on the surface and gets more

Jackson turned back to the group, “Sergeant Ruiz will be responsible for coordinating your survivability, logistical needs, and movements. Stay alert and stay smart. We need everyone thinking here.”

Jackson’s burner phone vibrated, and he glanced at the screen. “I have to go. Do you have any questions?”

The Marines shook their heads.

“Good luck,” he said as he folded his map and turned away.

Ruiz turned to the Marines. “We’ve already pre-staged most of the supplies we are going to need. Let’s get going. We’ve got a bumpy ride ahead of us.” He waved his arm over his head and two pickup trucks pulled around a corner and into view. The Marines quickly loaded into the truck beds. One of the trucks slid in front of the lead JLTV and the other fell in behind creating a five-vehicle convoy. Ruiz tossed a burner cell phone to the JLTV driver. “I’m speed dial number one.” Then he jumped into the lead truck, and the convoy began the slow drive to the northern edge of the island.

When Ruiz and the Marine convoy pulled up to their firing point dusk was already falling. The firing point was located on the northern edge of the island and gave Ruiz and his team a fantastic view of the coast. A few hundred meters behind them ran one of the main roads on the island. This, combined with Ripper’s use of civilian vehicles would complicate PLA-N targeting. Three other sites had been selected nearby along the coast with similar advantages creating something like a non-doctrinal positional area of artillery.

With night close at hand, Ruiz knew they could waste no time. The Marines began working around the site to set up the firing point. The ROGUE NMESIS vehicles were spaced around one hundred meters apart from each other to complicate targeting. The civilian trucks were placed even further away. A rough perimeter was constructed. The Marines also put camouflage netting which had been reinforced with light wire over their fighting positions. Ruiz ran a quick communications check with Major Jackson that consisted of a ping over TacChat, MUOS, and his

burner. He then confirmed transmission on all the nets including the fires net that tied this position into the fires network run by the Navy ships. Ruiz then walked the defensive lines. On his way to get some sleep, Ruiz stopped by the ROGUE NMESIS truck one last time. He noticed that the positions of the PLA-N ships had been passed over the chat. Apparently, they were only fifteen to twenty miles away from his position on the coast. Ruiz made a mental note to break out the binoculars once morning broke to see if he could see the ships. Once he was sure the defenses were in place, the watch had been established, and the ROGUE NMESIS trucks were receiving targeting data, Ruiz found a place behind the line and went to sleep.

Three hours later, in the dead of the night, Ruiz was violently shaken awake from a deep sleep. Flinching hard, Ruiz grabbed for his rifle as his eyes focused and his ears began to accept a coherent sound. One of the lance corporals was crouched next to him shaking his shoulder and talking rapidly.

“Sergeant you better come quickly. Comms are going nuts, and we can see something out on the water.”

Ruiz jumped up and began running to the ROGUE NMESIS truck. As he got closer, he could see the low illumination of the TacChat screen scrolling down rapidly as text information was exchanged. The corporal on duty updated him quickly,

“Sergeant, we were just sitting here and all of a sudden, we saw a ton of flashes out on the water. It looked like a HIMARs strike but from the water. We could see the missiles headed over to the southwest. I immediately sent to wake you up and then the chat started going crazy.”

Ruiz looked grim. “Anything from the major?”

“No, Sergeant. I checked all the channels on TacChat and I’m getting no reply from MUOS. The PLA-N are definitely firing on something. The Navy command net is what we are looking at now. It looks like they are actively moving to a defensive posture, but I can’t tell if they are actually being shot at.”

The corporal switched the screen back to the fires net, but it remained blank.

Ruiz pulled out his burner phone. “Keep monitoring the Navy and fires chats. Also, tell the Marines to pack up and be ready to displace. If we get the order to fire, we are going to have to move fast.”

Ruiz punched Jackson’s number into the phone and pressed the call button. It was a calculated decision, but Ruiz was willing to gamble the phone call to make a connection with the Major. As the phone was ringing another set of lights and smoke flashed from way out on the water to the northeast and more missiles streaked away into the night. This time though the missiles detonated a few miles out over the water in brilliant flashes of light apparently shooting down incoming missiles intended for the PLA-N ships.

“Sergeant!” yelled the corporal from the truck seat pointing out over the water to the flashes.

“I see it, I see it!” yelled Ruiz.

The phone kept ringing.

Ruiz hung up and then tried again. The chat continued to update but still only on the Navy command net. The phone still would not connect.

A third salvo of missiles, fire, and smoke belched from the point out on the water.

The phone stopped ringing and Ruiz looked down at the screen and saw that the signal had disappeared. He glanced over at the chat which was continuing to update. Suddenly a set of coordinates came across the Navy command chat followed by the words, “PLA-N location, fire for effect.”

The Marines who had gathered around the JLTV all froze. Who was the Navy talking to?

“Check the fires net,” said Ruiz.

The corporal switched the screen, but the fires net still stood empty.

“Ask in the chat if they mean us,” said Ruiz.

The corporal put the question in but received no reply.

“Have any of the Navy ships been hit,” asked Ruiz.

“I didn’t see anything in the chat,” said the corporal.

The two of them looked back at the Navy command chat screen. The chat continued to update as the ships coordinated their defensive positions.

Ruiz stood up straight. “I’m making the decision. Target the PLA-N coordinates and fire the NSMs. As soon as the missiles are away, I want us out of here. The ROGUE NMESIS will head to the next firing point. Send one of the civilian trucks there now with Marines to secure it. The second truck needs to be on the road as the missiles are launching. Let’s move quickly before the targeting data is no longer good. And keep trying to reach the major.”

A couple of minutes later the first civilian truck filled with Marines in the back peeled out as it headed to secure the next firing point. The rest of the Marines had loaded into the second truck and were headed up the trail to the main road. Ruiz watched as the ROGUE NMESIS operators input the targeting coordinates and then looked up to him.

Ruiz nodded his head, and the launch sequence began. The missile pods lifted into the air and with an incredibly loud rush of flame, four Naval Strike Missiles erupted from the pods in a flash of light and screamed away into the night.

“Go now!” yelled Ruiz to the driver who spun the wheel on the command vehicle, and they pulled away toward the road. Bouncing onto the main road from the trail, Ruiz was mildly surprised to see the two follower vehicles already on the side of the road.

“I gave them the command to meet us here,” explained the operator.

Ruiz nodded and all three vehicles pulled away into the night.

Epilogue

In the weeks that followed, Ruiz learned he had made the right decision. The PLA-N had fired on two civilian tankers misidentifying them as military ships. The American destroyers had responded by helping defend against the attack and then launching their own counterattack. The PLA-N had jammed all normal lines of communication across the island leading to the difficulty of reaching Jackson who had

been desperately trying to reach Ruiz with the order to fire the NSMs. Neither Jackson nor Ruiz ever found out why only the land-based networks had been affected by the jamming and MUOS had not worked. Of the four NSMs that Ruiz’s team had fired, only one got through the PLA-N defenses, crippling a PLA-N guided missile cruiser. The presence of Ruiz’s team somewhere on the island combined with the American destroyers and the Philippine Navy was enough to cause the PLA-N SAG to fall back to Chinese territorial waters. The worldwide outcry against the PLA-N firing on civilian ships changed the risk calculus for the PLA-N as a whole, and they withdrew their blockade of Taiwan. When Maj Jackson, Sgt Ruiz, and the rest of the Marines of Ripper were pulled off Lubang Island, the situation had cooled but remained dangerous. Task Force Peleliu remained in the theater for follow on tasking if necessary.

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