



(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy via the National Archives)

# The Threat of Small Unit Air Dominance

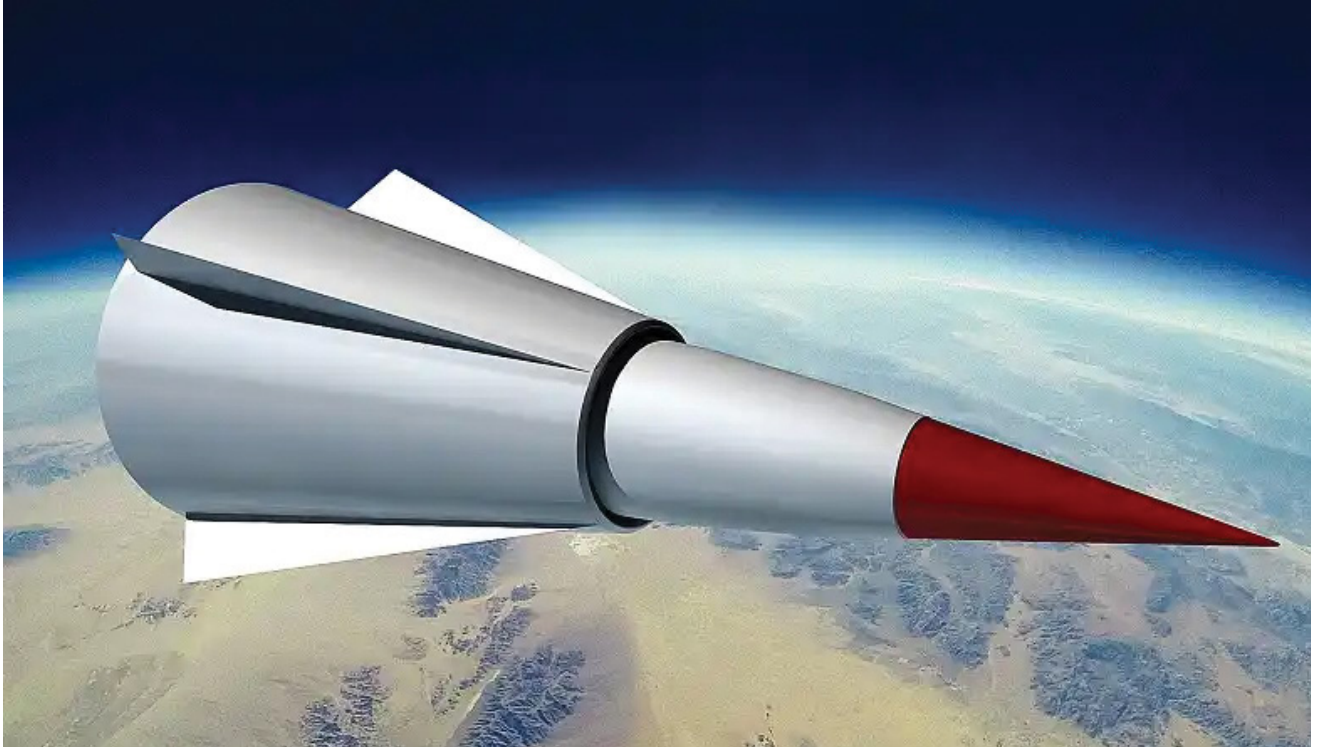
## Part 1

1st Lt. Chris Hudson, U.S. Army

**S**uper Bowl Sunday, an unofficial holiday for most of the country, is a chance for all Americans to drink more than usual and kill more poultry than at any other time of the year. With the military as no exception, a late call is always in order for the drinking binger on football's holiest day. In the South China Sea, the sailors

of a carrier battle group wrapping up a taxing Freedom of Navigation exercise were eager for any chance at R&R, even shipboard on the open sea. Most of the eyes on the ships were glued to TVs, enjoying the American pastime.

The game's first half was winding down when three-quarters of the lives on the carrier were



(Photo courtesy of the People's Liberation Army)

vaporized as the thermal blast and shock wave from a tactical nuclear warhead, delivered by a hypersonic antiship missile travelling at slightly over Mach 5, slammed into the ship.

The first on-scene report of the “incident” to reach the U.S. Navy originated from a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force frigate patrolling on the northern outermost perimeter of the battle group. On U.S. Space Force displays in Colorado, the missile’s precise flight path glowed bright red. Due to the speed of the vehicle and the relatively short distance involved, the flight had already terminated as controllers confirmed the nature of the event. But there was no doubt as to the vehicle’s point of origin. The fact that the People’s Republic of China announced that it would stand down to permit rescue and recovery operations (as a humanitarian gesture and prelude to negotiations) was as incriminating as it was irrelevant. For the United States, this would be the first peer-to-peer conflict since Korea.

The halftime performers were just exiting the stage, enveloped in fireworks, when the news hit mainstream media. From there, events took on a life of their own. The U.S. dollar and the Chinese yen both fell against the Euro while Asian stock markets, just opening,

collapsed and suspended trading. Their European and American counterparts announced that markets would not open on Monday morning and would remain closed for “at least the trading week.” For Wall Street, the closure was only the fourth in its history; the last was in the wake of 9/11.

Within thirty-six hours, Ranger Regiment elements started seizing landing strips across the Spratly Islands. Forty-eight hours after the strike, U.S. Marine Corps landing forces began hitting the beaches of the larger islands in the Southwest Pacific to gain a foothold in the southern region of the designated corps area of operation.

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It had all happened quickly. On Sunday evening, 1st Lt. Tyler Jennings was sipping beers with his neighbor with the prospect of staff duty the next day. Two weeks later his light infantry platoon was stacked well over the

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(Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

seating capacity of the C-17 transport and was enroute to a small island in Southeast Asia.

Within thirty-six hours of wheels down, he was given a company operations order tasking his platoon with an area reconnaissance mission in the company's area of operations.

The island had a name, but to make it simple for the military staff at all levels, the island and hundreds of its siblings had been assigned numeric identifiers.

Jennings' unit, 3-127 Battalion, was tasked along with the rest of 1st Brigade, 22 Infantry Division, to secure I-704, a three-mile wide and seven-mile long island roughly two hundred miles off the coast of Mimaropa.

Jennings felt confident—his soldiers had been briefed on the mission and everyone knew their jobs along with those of everyone else in the platoon. All that remained was to finish rehearsals, conduct pre-combat checks and inspections, and begin movement toward the forward line of troops to conduct a forward passage of lines—fancy military terms meaning it was the last chance to grab an extra can of dip off the guys in the other platoons in the company before crossing the wire. Today the platoon was about to get its first real taste of war.

Commencing fifteen minutes after the end of local twilight, their order called for a three-kilometer-deep movement, clover leafing in the area of operations to recon forward of the company defensive position. The

platoon's movement formation was tight, three-to-five-meter separation between each man. The squads were to be placed in a file for most of the movement but on occasion, pushed out to a "wedge" formation. The terrain they were to traverse was mostly rolling hills that ultimately ended in abrupt cliff faces. They would be moving under thick tree canopy most of the time. To their immediate rear was one of two sand beaches on the island. This was where the brigade main command post, the command hub for controlling all the battalions' movements, was now set up.

The squads were led by experienced NCOs. Jennings was confident in their ability to prepare their squads by ensuring they were properly packed for the mission and that the appropriate rehearsals were conducted. As is common among officer leadership in their company, many junior officers had no prior deployment experience so the NCO corps made up for the general lack of real-world experience. In Jennings' case, all his NCOs had deployed, some multiple times, in support of Global War on Terrorism missions.

"It's always the little things that matter the most, it seems," Jennings noted as he watched his soldiers move through the restrictive tree line. Batteries not changed out, weapons not cleaned, and water not topped off. "Your worst enemy will always be your own apathy," he thought, never forgetting, however, that his NCOs were there to wash laxity from the platoon. However, his





(Photo by Spc. Elliott Page, U.S. Army)

worst fear stemmed from his own sense of doubt. “All the field events, live-fire exercises, and long hours at the range, was it enough training? Was it the right training?”

He took a breath and reminded himself where he was. “Keep your head in this game and you will bring them home.”

They were close to two and half kilometers into their movement to the clover leaf release point when the point man of the formation abruptly halted the PLT. Everyone froze. After thirty seconds, everyone dropped to a knee, each soldier visually scanning the terrain, pulling security to the left and right of the formation.

Jennings figured either an animal spooked his point man, or maybe the compass guy stopped the movement to readjust azimuth. The enemy situational template included in the operations order from the company commander put the enemy threat another seven kilometers forward of their present position.

Keying the mic on his 152 earpiece, Jennings made a call to his forwardmost squad leader. “Savage 1-1, what’s the hold up?” Just silence.

He repeated, “Savage 1-1 what’s the hold up, over.” Nothing.

Peering around through the hue of the faded green picture in his night vision, Jennings looked for his radiotelephone operator.

“Alex, you getting anything from up front?” he asked.

“No sir, nothing,” was the reply.

“Back to the basics,” Jennings muttered. Patting the back of the man in front of him, he weaved his way through the formation working his way forward to contact the lead squad.

By the time he made his way to the front of the platoon formation, they had been in a security halt for five minutes. “Too damn long to be so static in this low terrain with hilltops all around,” he thought to himself.

Reaching the lead squad, he asked the first soldier he encountered where the point man was positioned, “Where’s Matthews?”

Pvt. Michael, one of 1st Squad’s grenadiers, nodded his head to the point man’s position, indicating that he was up ahead, disconnected from the main platoon



(Photo by Cpl. Sean J. Berry, U.S. Marine Corps)

formation by ten meters. Scanning the area ahead, Jennings found him, flanked on the left and right by two other figures. All three were lying prone on the ground.

“What are they doing?” he thought to himself. Jennings moved forward to where the men were huddled together. It was the 1st Squad leader, Sgt. Matthews, the point man, and the compass guy.

“What’s up?” Jennings whispered.

Putting his finger over his mouth, Matthews motioned for Jennings to look to the one o’clock of their position. Using hand and arm signals, Matthews directed the officer’s attention about fifty meters out.

Jennings saw nothing. Then Matthews cupped his hand around his ear indicating to listen in that direction. Jennings moved his head off center to point his ear the way Matthews gestured, slowing his breathing and trying to dim every noise his body could make.

He detected a faint but consistent buzzing. “What the hell is that? A generator?”

Nodding to Matthews, the lieutenant mouthed for him to radio the platoon sergeant and push the rest of the platoon, except for this squad, back one hundred meters to the nearest ridge line. “I need to get the

platoon to a position of advantage but no decisive engagements.” Jennings intended for 1st Squad to be ready to provide covering fire, if needed, while the rest of the platoon bounded back to the nearest terrain feature.

Cupping his hand over the transmitter, Matthews keyed the hand mic calling for his platoon sergeant, “Savage 7.” Waiting a few seconds, he made the call again. There was no reply. Matthews motioned to the platoon leader that he had no comms.

“Try again,” Jennings whispered.

Matthews keyed the mic one more time. Silence.

At almost the same moment he keyed the mic a third time, the buzzing intensified, moving closer to the platoon formation.

“What the ... ? Sounds like a beehive,” the sergeant said.

As the sound intensified, Jennings motioned to rest of the platoon to get in the prone position. It was pitch dark, so it took seconds, which felt like hours, for the hand signals to make their way down the line.

It was too late.

The buzzing was right on top of the platoon with half the formation still down on a knee.



(Photo by Suyash Dwivedi via Wikimedia Commons)

Those still kneeling, uncertain and relying on instinct, pointed weapons in the air frantically trying to identify the source of the noise that seemed to be all around them. Still not knowing what was hovering over them right below the base of the canopy, Jennings knew he had to get off the X. Judging that his best bet was to treat the situation like an indirect fire attack, he yelled to the platoon, “Six o’clock, 300 meters, move!”

As everyone picked up to move, the jungle lit up like it was midday.

Everyone groaned as they were blinded by the light, its effect intensified by the dual night observation devices (NODs) all of them wore. As everyone flipped up their NODs, no one was able to identify the proper location to move or knew how to react to the loud hovering spotlights beaming down on them.

From what Jennings could make out there were at least four of them. Small but intense buzzing lights had to be at least a few thousand lumens each, circling the platoon in sporadic flying formations. Each seemed to be flying on its own flight path, weaving between the trees, vines, and brush that surrounded them.

Not knowing what to do and with no direction from his leadership, Pvt. Medina of 3rd Squad, a squad automatic weapon gunner, tried to shoot one down. He pointed his belt-fed weapon toward one of the light sources and got off a single burst before the light shut off.

Seeing that work, 3rd Squad leader, Sgt. Wyatt, ordered the rest of his squad to find a target and shoot it down. As they aimed toward the two to three lights that hovered over their portion of the platoon, the lights shut off, blending into the darkness.

“Crap!” Wyatt ordered them to keep looking for a target.

From then on, as soon as they aimed at one of the light sources weaving over the platoon, it would turn off, becoming invisible to the soldiers’ constricted pupils, only to reappear over another portion of the platoon. As more and more of the NCOs tried to take charge in the chaos, they all ordered the soldiers to find a target and engage. Soon, the ghostly orbs began to shut off and on in reaction to the soldiers’ actions and a strobe effect took over. It looked like a heavy metal concert on steroids. The now six hovering lights turned the immediate area around the platoon into the





(Photo by Spc. Rolyn Kropf, U.S. Army)

brightest spot in the jungle while also disorienting everyone in an erratic display of dancing, flashing lights.

The area had become a mosh pit of soldiers, each trying to identify and engage a target.

Seeing the platoon sergeant, Jennings yelled, “Jack, we have to move! Take 3rd Squad and move them 300 meters to our last dog leg location.” The dog leg was on their previous phase line so it should be ingrained in all the soldiers’ minds from the route rehearsals prior to the mission.

“Yeah, anywhere but here,” the platoon sergeant replied.

As the man took off, Jennings turned around just in time to see half of 1st Squad’s A team, still laying prone, get strafed by a burst of gunfire. Sgt. Matthews, seeing the same thing, yelled for contact 10 o’clock.

Thirty seconds before A team was buzzed, Pfc. Washington, B Team, 2nd Squad, was trying to get a hit on one of the buzzing strobes. “I’m not losing this motherf\*\*\*\*\*.” Washington followed what he thought was the same light when it reappeared, flying five meters to the left of A team, 1st Squad, moving their way. Almost as if anticipating his tracking, the light dipped low, flying directly over the team.

Washington, not seeing A team, opened up, sending seven rounds of 5.56mm into the team.

Having dropped their rucks to be more maneuverable during the engagement, the platoon also did not have time to pull out and put on their body armor. The rounds ripped into the unprotected bodies of the four men laying on the ground, one of their heads popping open from the opposite side of the entry wound.

Jennings, realizing that it was fratricide, tried to stop Matthews from maneuvering the rest of his squad and possibly opening fire on other parts of the platoon. Screaming “Stop!” to Matthews, he bolted to grab him. By the time he made it up the slight grade to the NCO, one of his gunners opened fire and sent three rounds into Washington, two in the chest and one in the head. He died instantly.

“NO! NO! NO! Hold your fire, it’s Washington!” Matthews froze as he realized he had just committed the worst action a leader on the battlefield can commit. He’d just ordered the death of one of his own.

As the rest of what was left of 1st Squad realized what they had just done, no one beside Jennings seemed like they could snap out of the mental shock.

Jennings, seeing the situation take hold of everyone around the corpse of Pvt. Washington, began to call for the medic as others in the platoon took notice and began to render aid to the three remaining survivors. At the same time, the ground next to and the air above



(Photo courtesy of China Military Online)

3rd Squad, by then following the platoon sergeant out of the kill zone, erupted in a flash of fire and dirt.

“Indirect?” Jennings had to get everyone moving. The freak show of lights was now the least of their worries, Jennings began to grab and push everyone in the direction of the shrapnel-torn PSG’s lifeless body.

“Move, go, leave your shit and get out of here,” he ordered.

As the splintered remnants of the platoon began to move out of their current position, three more explosions walked down the center of the gaggle of men. Amid the screams of the newly wounded, Jennings ordered everyone to keep moving. As they moved, he noticed that the lights moved with them. It looked like there were more of them now!

Immediately after the last explosion, gunfire opened up from two separate positions on their right flank. Jennings, now in the rear of the formation and pushing his men to keep moving, watched as the whole platoon, still bathed in the strobes, seethed, jolted, and fell to the ground. They were being ambushed. With the front two squads now wounded or dead and the whole platoon disoriented, all he could think to do was grab what

was left of 1st Squad and set up a local support by fire to provide covering fire, buying time for whoever was still alive to escape.

Jennings was able to get the team online to shoot, identify target reference points, and start the covering fire. However, his team was not ten seconds into the firefight when another explosion rocked the ground around him.

Despite the agony of Jennings’ intestines being shred apart, the thought of how every man in his platoon had just been killed ripped his heart more than his body ever could be. One word crossed his mind as he lay on the ground, “apathy.” Then everything went dark.

The strobing light effect of the drone quadcopters hovering over the kill zone ceased and the dark of the jungle flooded in. The drone swarm assumed a static position over the lifeless bodies of Savage Platoon. As they hung in the air, they switched to a thermal capability and rotated their optics to face away from the center of the kill zone. Once the drones had assumed 360-degree security, six figures emerged from the ambushing support-by-fire position. As they moved down the slope, weapons at the low ready and night vision



down over their eyes, they searched for any survivors. They moved methodically over each body, the whispers of silenced QVZ-95s thudding into the American bodies. After checking all the corpses, the leader of the People's Liberation Army team counted thirty-two dead. They checked for valuable intelligence on those that looked to be the leaders and the team reconsolidated at the top of the hill. The drones followed them to the hilltop rally point as well. A head count was made; all nine members of the three-cell recon team were accounted for. Out of the six quadcopter reconnaissance/optical interdiction drones and four 35mm grenade delivery drone systems, only one quadcopter had been shot down by the American platoon.

This was no issue to the PLA leader responsible for the equipment. The drones weren't even serialized. They were so cheap and prolific; his organization didn't care to even keep track of them.

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It was fifteen minutes after the no-later-than time for Jennings to transmit the code word indicating the platoon had reached the next phase line. This caused major concern for the company commander, Cpt. David Muriel. Sitting in his command post, he tried to keep himself grounded with realistic expectations. He gave Jennings ten additional minutes then tried to raise the platoon leader from the command post. After an additional thirty minutes without response, Muriel initiated the contingency plan. He put out a message via alternate communications to the company, alerting all about the possibility that their network had been compromised, ordering the shift to the alternate frequencies that were established for such a situation, with code word "Alexander." After alerting battalion of the switch in frequencies and the reason, he activated the next pre-planned step in the contingency-search and rescue.

His company OPORD, the same one off of which 1st Lt. Jennings planned his mission, called for a small six-man quick response force (QRF) to be ready in case of such a situation. He alerted 1st Lt. Wright, the QRF leader, to prepare his six-man team to move.

This done, Muriel sent another update to the battalion informing them of his planned course of action. "Battalion Main, this is Massacre 6, SP for QRF to search for 1PLT will be fifteen mikes, break .... Will report progress if major incidents occur and at every hour mark, over." Not waiting for a response and only

expecting a "roger, out," he began to make his way out of the command post. "Need to make sure Wright has his head on straight, I can't lose anyone else," he thought to himself.

Muriel was barely out of the tent when his RTO yelled after him, "Sir, stop!"

He turned to face the RTO, "What's up?"

"It's battalion, the commander wants us to halt all actions and is ordering every company command team to report to the main command post now," the RTO replied.

"Give me the hand mic," Muriel ordered. "Battalion Main, this is Massacre 6, am I being told not to send my QRF to look for my current MIA platoon? Over."

The reply was immediate and insistent, "Massacre 6, this is Killer 6, correct do not send anyone past your current defensive line, break .... Move to the Main CP, time now, over."

Feeling his nicotine withdrawal headache start to turn into a migraine, Muriel held the hand mic and stared into the ground. "Is this one of those moments you read about, defy orders, keep your men safe, and pray to God you either don't get sent to jail or shot ... No." He assured himself, "The commander wouldn't have done this if it wasn't important." Still feeling like he was about to do something terribly wrong, he keyed the mic. "WILCO, out." He told Wright and his team to stand by.

The battalion main command post, like its higher equivalent one kilometer to the rear on the tropical beaches, was the hub for controlling all the company movements inside the battalion. Usually full of staff officers helping flip brigade orders into battalion ones or stuck in the gears of the military decision-making process trying to plan the next tactical order, it was now empty of everyone but the company command teams from all four of the infantry companies, the headquarters and headquarters company and the support company. Capt. Muriel, the last to arrive, wondered if everyone was as confused as he was. Taking a further look around the tent, he noticed that all the communications equipment was gone. All that was left was a cargo box toward the front of the room that was facing a downed projector screen. Spotting Capt. Andrew Selous sitting quietly in the corner without his first sergeant, Muriel moved his way.

"Where's your first sergeant?" asked Muriel.



(Photo courtesy of Ziyao)

“Same place as yours,” replied Selous. “Here we are in the middle of a damn war and the brigade sergeant major thinks a meeting with the 1st sergeants on proper field hygiene and metrics is called for.”

“Yeah, I’m glad to see everyone else must have had broken comms when that message went out.” They both smirked at each other.

Taking a seat next to Selous, Muriel shifted his mind back to Savage Platoon. “It’s probably just the usual comms issues. Jennings is a strong leader and his team is experienced. He’s not that far away, we would have heard an engagement, I think?”

Selous broke his train of thought, “Funny, not too long ago this place would have been infested with lieutenants praying to get a platoon or edging to be sent to Ranger Regiment.”

“Well, half of them got their wish with the Security Force Assistance Brigade push,” Muriel replied. It wasn’t a bad idea, he thought. The Security Force Assistance Brigade was designed to train and advise military forces around the world. They were made up of companies and platoons dehydrated of lieutenants and lower enlisted personnel. Senior captains and NCOs would filter into the makeshift platoons, while company leadership would be made of field grades. Their purpose would be to train other nations’ forces as if they were their own soldiers back in the states. With the outbreak of the war, they were recalled to their home stations to form new platoons with lieutenants

and “shake and bake” privates/NCOs. Original SFAB platoons would form into new companies, and the companies would become battalions and so on, over and over. “They wouldn’t make the war until the second wave, how lucky.” Sighing, Muriel leaned back in his seat. His thoughts returned to the present, “Hurry up and wait, how typical.”

He was barely able to finish his sentence when someone announced the arrival of their battalion commander. Everyone rose to attention but were called to relax by the battalion commander. Lt. Col. Maxwell Carr was shorter than one might imagine as the leader of an infantry battalion but his command presence more than made up for his physical stature. He was known for his love for his soldiers as well as for a down-to-earth realism when it came to what he expected from his team. Not to say his expectations were not a high standard. He was liked by everyone in the battalion who’d had a chance to speak with him. For those who hadn’t yet met him in-person, Carr made it his first duty of every day to rectify that issue.

Moving to the front of the room accompanied by a guest not familiar to the audience, Carr wasted little time, “Team, I’m sorry to bring you up here away from doing the Lord’s work, but I had to for two reasons. One, it is of major importance we discuss the issue at hand without the faults or delays of radios. Two, the matter is too sensitive to discuss around communications equipment. That is why all of it has been relocated

from the TOC for now.” He looked to his companion, “This is Chief Wouk from the brigade’s cyber and electromagnetic activities team in the military intelligence company. He will go into further details on the topic.”

Moving his gaze to Muriel, his face seemed to lose its color. “David, come outside with me for a second.”

Confused, Muriel rose and accompanied Carr outside the tent.

“Sir, does this have to do with my QRF?” Muriel asked.

With a sigh, Lt. Col. Carr nodded his head. “There’s no way to say this but to say it. Savage Platoon took contact about three kilometers from your defensive line and from as far as we can determine, they were all killed.”

Stricken with sudden nausea, Muriel took a few steps back from Carr. Focusing on holding back what little food he was able to put in his stomach over the past day, Muriel stroked his mouth with his hand, nausea replaced by anger. “How do you know they are all dead?” Then before Carr could respond, he added, “Why in the hell didn’t you let me try and save them? We had a plan for this and now anyone that could be left is probably dead because you butted in.”

Lt. Col. Carr, feeling empathy for his company commander, understood his anger. “David, right now what the chief is trying to describe in there is essentially what happened to your men. They were ambushed and gunned down through a combination of enemy dismounted infantry and drone air power. It sounds ridiculous at first, but they are now using small drones effectively to initiate ambushes. We know this happened to your platoon because some on-loan DIA specialist at division got something of a front row seat to the show.”

Muriel looked up into the sky with frustration. “Show? What do you mean? Were the nerds sitting in the bush while they all were slaughtered?”

Carr shook his head, “Those nerds detected jamming activity coming from around where 1st platoon was located. By the time they were able to identify what they’d found, the whole thing was over. Listen, over the almost two days we’ve been on this God forsaken island, there have been a string of incidents involving small drones for ISR, but this is the first real time they appear to have used them as a critical part of their direct-action tactics. It’s becoming a problem for the rest of the division too on the other islands. We

have what we need to fight the high-flying crap, but for the smaller stuff, it’s a different fight. One we haven’t trained for yet.”

Seeing Muriel trying to control his anger, Carr sighed.

“Listen, if you’re up to it, we could step back inside. Chief Wouk is talking the specifics of the problem and he can explain it much better than I can.” Pausing for a moment, Carr locked eyes with Muriel. “David, I need you in that tent now, I’m sorry for Jennings and the rest of your men, our men, but now is the time to hold back the emotion until we finish the fight. Before we commit ourselves further, we have to figure out how to adapt to this new threat.”

Muriel, taking a few seconds to regain at least the appearance of control over his emotions, nodded and followed the battalion commander back into the rear of the tent.

Wouk was in midsentence when the pair walked back in. Standing in the rear of the room now were the battalions operations officer Maj. Lee, and intelligence officer Capt. Welch. The looks on the faces of the officers in the audience told Muriel that Wouk had already covered the situation with the platoon.

With a slight nod in the direction of the newcomers, Wouk continued, “Our team was able to identify several distinct electromagnetic field signatures within the noise, the jamming. Digging into these, we found pieces of what were identified as encrypted video feeds buried inside the jamming. Extracting the payload of one of these signals, we were able to reconstruct portions of the video. We determined that these signals came from multiple sophisticated drones. Due to the nature of the foliage where they operated, they had to be small, probably man-portable systems, likely a quadcopter or similar platform. From the distinct signatures we found, there were at least five vehicles, probably more. Given the state of the tree canopy and the way the signals behaved, we think, and a lot of this is guessing, that the systems were initially positioned on the ground. They self-activated on detection of the platoon in their vicinity, commenced emitting a jamming envelop, and then went airborne. Once the jamming occurred, they fell around the jamming radius and used a suite of sensors to locate their targets. Once they found something, they initiated the ambush with whatever payload these things have.”



Having just returned with Chief Wouk from the brigade version of this brief and only trying to motivate others to start asking questions, Capt. Welch interjected, “How were they being operated by the enemy in the area?”

Wouk nodded, “Probably to some degree by an operator in a 500m radius of the jamming signal, but the problem is that we only found one or two components in the signal that look to be a control signal. The human involvement in their ability to operate is very small, possible to the degree of hitting an on or off switch.”

Welch, starting to laugh, persisted, “So we are fighting Skynet?”

Wouk looked across his audience, “This is the first time we’ve encountered this, but these things seem to operate with a high degree of autonomy, almost completely. The traffic on the RF spectrum indicates they transmit data but receive little, partially no signals themselves. If they’re getting commands at all, it’s by some means we don’t know about. Could be voice, signal lights, hand signals, or smoke signals for all we know.”

Wouk waited to let that sink in. “It’s likely that our current interdiction methods, like electromagnetic

capabilities, would be of little use. Maybe worse, my team hadn’t analyzed much of their emissions when I left to come down here but from what we did see, the devices seemed to react when the platoon tried to employ its own comms so putting any traffic on the spectrum might invite an attack as well as allow them to locate and even prioritize specific targets.”

“What do you mean, specific targets?” Maj. Lee asked from the back of the room.

Wouk adjusted his gaze to the back of the room, “Well, sir, we can tell they have sensors to locate human targets, but we can’t rule out a capability to prioritize targets. For example, identify leaders by detecting targets who are using comms more than others. So, they’re not just looking for individual soldiers, but leaders. Get the leaders first.”

Muriel finally spoke up, “On their own? The drones you mean?”

Wouk leaned forward on the fold-out chair in front of him and responded, “Yes, sir. They could do this autonomously.”

Lt. Col. Carr scoffed, “Well that’s some bullshit.” ■

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## Photo Captions (listed in order)

1. USS *Agerholm* tests an antisubmarine rocket armed with a nuclear depth bomb in 1962. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy via the National Archives)

2. A People’s Liberation Army (PLA) DF-ZF hypersonic glide vehicle. (Photo courtesy of the PLA)

3. Uotsuri-il, Senkaku Islands, Japan. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

4. Soldiers assigned to Legion Company, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), conduct a night patrol at Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, 23 April 2018, as part of Joint Warfighting Assessment. (Photo by Spc. Elliott Page, U.S. Army)

5. Marines with Black Sea Rotational Force 17.1 watch as Ukrainian marines fire the 120-millimeter mortar during a night range during exercise Sea Breeze 2017 in Shirokyi Lan, Ukraine, 11 July 2017. (Photo by Cpl. Sean J. Berry, U.S. Marine Corps)

6. DJI Phantom 4K drone in action. (Photo by Suyash Dwivedi via Wikimedia Commons)

7. Soldiers assigned to 2nd Platoon, Lightning Troop, 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, engage targets while participating in a combined arms live-fire exercise during Noble Partner 18 in Vaziani, Georgia, 14 August 2018. (Photo by Spc. Rolyn Kropf, U.S. Army)

8. Scouts from the PLA are in training with night vision equipment. With the night vision equipment, such as the night vision, laser collimator and rangefinder, the scouts completed the tactical training subjects, including close surveillance, target tracking, collaboration, and annihilating. (Photo by Lan Guohong, China Military Online)

9. The Ziyan Blowfish A2 machine-gun-armed autonomous drone. (Photo courtesy of Ziyan)