



(AI rendering by Charlotte Richter, Army University Press)

# Death, Taxes, and Low-Intensity Conflict

Christopher D. Booth

First Lieutenant Jones observed the dark street through his optics, which presented the Burmese slum in daylight colors, amplifying heat signatures and ghostly heat trails where individuals had scrolled alongside the cinderblock walls. He watched his platoon deploy the length of the alleyway. Earlier, intel techies had attempted to deploy a battle bot to crawl silently and rat-like through the sewage system to provide a subterranean vantage point of the target site. But the sewers in this part of town (like

a lot of the infrastructure in the feral megalopolis) hadn't been serviced in decades, and the robot found itself contributing to the clog. A scummy effluence running along the curb and the smell of night soil from too many people with too few resources testified to Yangon's breakdown.

Jones had first heard the predictions of great power competition culminating in a global war featuring hypersonic missiles and robot systems driven by AI at West Point—that was what the “Army of 2040” needed



Burmese insurgents. (AI rendering by Charlotte Richter, Army University Press)

(expeditionary advanced basing operations), deploying stand-in forces, and engaging in whatever other acronyms that meant they were waiting for the balloon to go up and the gloves to come off in a war against China. As a result, the Army increasingly found itself as America's go-to force for constabulary assignments even in maritime environments.

The EPO (erythropoietin, a performance-enhancing drug long relied upon by Russian Olympians and Tour de France competitors) they began taking as they departed Fort Drum helped them quickly adapt to the climate and master the load of their body armor and infantry kit. Jones watched Pfc.

Miguel García de los Monteros ("MGM" to his squad mates) step over a weblike mass of jerry-rigged electrical wiring hanging off a light pole and

to prepare for. But he relied on the perspective his dad had passed down from his tour in Iraq in 2006 and the Battle of Ramadi: *Think-tanks and the defense contractors pitch Congress on high-tech, sterile, push-button, remote war, but more often than not infantrymen find themselves fighting in highly kinetic urban gunfights against irregular forces in hot, humid, and trash-filled streets that are anything but antiseptic.* To Jones, Yangon with its notional government, warring militias, and decades of chaos resembled the Mogadishu of Black Hawk Down more than anything he'd been told the "Army of the future" would be facing.

He recalled assigned reading from his yearling year predicting the growth of highly networked megacities along the littorals serving as likely cauldrons of conflict by the mid-twenty-first century. To Jones's mind, that prediction appeared completely correct, but it didn't explain why his Army light infantry found itself tackling what would otherwise seem to be a classic assignment for America's sea service. The unsatisfactory answer was that the Marines were largely tied up doing EABO

connected to a tangle of apartments. MGM was following a "partner force" guide. The smaller man was not a Yangon native but had long worked in the megacity as a betel nut vendor and shadow cadre for his ethnic armed group (an EAG in USMIL speak). The lieutenant knew that America's Quad partner, India (more specifically its Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)—India's external intelligence service), had long-standing relations with this guerrilla group, so he and his soldiers relied on a proxy of an ally to guide them into position for a safehouse takedown. There were no streetlamps outside the target compound, and the courtyard was in even deeper shadow by a peeling billboard proclaiming the wonders of Chinese financed construction by "the Burmese people's friend CRBC: the China Road & Bridge Corporation."

Earlier, Army cyber operators conducting target reconnaissance utilized the Internet of Things as an attack vector and compromised a flaw in the microphone of a smart refrigerator to confirm that Objective RAZOR PHASE was home. He was a dark-web

financier who facilitated ties between the insurgents and those profiting from Burma's instability. Burmese methamphetamines were a multibillion-dollar industry with tentacles that touched Southern China for

narrow alleyways for low-flying UAS—further evidence of rumored Chinese assistance to the insurgents. PLA troops were headquartered in the port's free-trade zone, and private military contractors (resembling



His internal physiology system noted a spike of adrenaline and cortisol, and an implant pushed a micro dose of chemistry to counter stress and sharpen focus.



precursor chemicals and ran along Southeast Asian banking and smuggling routes. The handiwork of the moneyman and others like him ensured that American troops regularly faced guerrillas armed with the latest high-end NORINCO weapons. Such weapons had recently cut down a convoy of blue-helmeted Bengali soldiers, despite the unit's experienced veterans of past UN peacekeeping missions. Some of the larger, more sophisticated EAGs had long had their own weapons factories and utilized licensed Chinese patents. Alarming, coalition forces had credible reports that the major drug trafficking organizations employed "retired" Russian, Chinese, and even Israeli intel officers with esoteric skill sets to run sources, employ cyber tools, and eliminate leaks through ruthless counterintelligence investigations.

In overwatch, Sgt. Kaneda lay camouflaged in his "invisibility cloak" (a metamaterial manufactured via nanotechnology) behind his sniper rifle as he scanned the target compound. His internal physiology system noted a spike of adrenaline and cortisol, and an implant pushed a micro dose of chemistry to counter stress and sharpen focus. Next to him, his spotter, Specialist Al-Mas'udi, monitored a variety of inputs via a mini-heads-up-display. It provided her with situational awareness from the ISR feed as well as from her optics, which operated in the visual and electromagnetic spectrum (to avoid surprise from a kamikaze loitering munition). As García de los Monteros vaulted the coiled cables, Al-Mas'udi lost the drone feed. "Damn it," she whispered through her bone transmitter. "Looks like they brought it in too close and it hit silk." Synthetic spider silk was a product that often originated from specialized looms in Chengdu and fouled up

the Wagner mercenaries that had served as Vladimir Putin's *Schutzstaffel*) were arrayed across the city, ostensibly to protect Belt and Road projects tying China's southwestern hinterlands to the Indian Ocean.

As Kaneda shifted his focus from the scope he looked further down the alley where MPs had set up a roadblock with a "McChrystal," which was the troops' nickname for mobility critical light (MCL) vehicles (because like the famously acerbic general, they ran great distances on "one meal a day," and also because it needed the brass who tolerated the sobriquet but could not officially endorse it). The MCL utilized a refractory armor that rendered it invisible on the infrared spectrum and allowed it to blend into its environment, particularly from aerial observation. Hydrogen fuel contributed to the MCL's stealth, which provided a smaller thermal footprint. Also the MCLs had engines that generated no noise, smoke, or odor. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, the sniper continued his scan for more distant targets along the roofline out toward the distant river.

A flash drew Kaneda's attention back to the intersection as an antitank missile struck the MCL. "Maybe that was a leftover Uke Javelin that had followed Eastern European ratlines along the new Silk Road," he thought. It tore through the truck's rear, but rather than erupting in a fireball, the McChrystal's hydrogen fuel tank emptied in a skyward rush. Simultaneously, the MP standing by the opposite quarter panel was thrown forward, her Rattler skittering across the ground. Her subdermal implant kicked off a flood of pharmacology to revive her, ward off shock, and counteract any cascade of damaging hormones from a possible TBI. As she lay on the ground, the wearable tech woven into



the uniform warned her that her left calf was substantially bleeding, so she quickly deployed one of the built-in tourniquets located below her knee. An infantryman ran up and dragged her out of the street, as the electro-camouflage of the MCL strobed, vainly trying to adjust its chameleon pattern following the strike of the round. Simultaneously, breachers blew in the safe house compound gate.

“Damn it!” Lt. Col. Rice exclaimed watching the chaos unfold via video piped to battalion headquarters from Al-Mas’udi’s scope.

“Do we have another angle?” he called out through the TOC.

“Two, I need a SITREP on who they’re engaged with, and what is going on out there. We needed to spin up another platform five minutes ago. I need eyes on now!”

From behind her bank of monitors an intel specialist called out, “ISR on site in three, sir!”

Captain O’Shaughnessy replied, “Sir, we had chatter that a new EAG calling itself the Arakan Martyrs Brigade had been looking to make a splash with an ambush on coalition forces. Despite their self-proclaimed Muslim background, there are reports that China has been arming them to stir up trouble with the Indians and maybe serve as a spoiler of our efforts to establish security here.”

The lieutenant from the MP unit attached to the battalion spoke up, “Col. Rice, we’ve got another MCL that moved up as QRF from the parallel street over. They’ve got a brown note and are blasting to suppress the suspect POO site.” Rice knew that folks in the vicinity of the point of origin would become violently ill as they fell victim to the nonlethal but incapacitating high-frequency device. The device would suppress any additional attacks from that vicinity, though the ambushers had likely already vacated their hide site.

Down on the street, Jones caught the movement of the new McChrystal racing up in his peripheral vision.



(AI rendering by Charlotte Richter, Army University Press)

His earbuds provided sonic dampening to spare his hearing during a gunfight, and they amplified his team and platoon nets. They also generated white noise to cancel out the MP truck’s disruptive frequency. He heard the tone and his med-implant automatically provided a dose of Dramamine just in case.

As he watched the stack flow into the courtyard after the breachers’ blast had done its work hurling the steel door into the compound, Jones saw García de los Monteros turn and look back to the street, and then suddenly Jones was thrown violently backward. After bouncing off the building behind him, the lieutenant found himself on all fours as he was pelted with masonry clattering down from the building he lay against. He shook off the overpressure shockwave and looked toward the safehouse to see a largely vaporized structure. Seconds later the higher floors pancaked down into rubble. Several flatline tones were buzzing in Jones’s right ear, telling him that a number of the assault squad’s soldiers were likely killed in action. To his left, he caught sight of the body of the betel nut vendor guide hanging in a



(AI rendering by Charlotte Richter, Army University Press)

utility pole's wires where he had been heaved skyward when the bomb detonated.

From overwatch, Sgt. Kaneda panned across the scene of destruction. "L-T, I've got MGM in the street, looks like the explosion threw him clear." The private was almost in a low crawl as he dragged himself away from the blast site through the debris and in the gutter's runoff. His body armor and assault pack had provided shielding in the split second when he had turned away from the building. A piece of rebar protruded from where it had bisected his left bicep, and his implant was working overtime pushing meds.

Al-Mas'udi came on the net—amped, "Squirtersoutheast quadrant courtyard. Tall, thin, Asian male, burnt, in civies. Probably blown up pretty bad, stumbling in shock."

The platoon sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Wakefield, ordered third squad to set up near- and far-side security, and came running forward with the weapons element and medic to provide immediate onsite treatment. The medic pulled a compact infrared strobe from her cargo pocket to guide a CASEVAC drone to the casualty collection point.

Barbecued mystery man pulled himself upright, steadying himself against the remaining gatepost. But before the suspicious survivor could gather his wits and escape down the alley, first squad's squad leader poleaxed him with his rifle's buttstock. A fire team gained control of the prisoner on the ground and searched him. "Sir, we've got a badly burnt Asian male, second- and third-degree burns on his arms and hands. Doesn't look Burmese. No weapon. Black jeans and black T-shirt and looks like some plastic rig's melted to his face."

Ten minutes later, Cpl. van Halen had an IV in No Name's arm, as he rested against an unscarred building's wall. Van Halen pulled back the space blanket to spray the man's blackened matchstick arms with a burn treatment, while another soldier captured his biometrics. "Get good pics of whatever the hell that thing melted on his head is. The MI folks are going to want to see that," Wakefield instructed. As the medic ministered to his patient, the track commander on the undamaged MCL radioed Jones. "Sir, we're going to need you over here. Some dip-plated Chicom-version of a



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Mercedes is here insisting we have a Chinese national and demanding we turn him over.”

Jones dusted off his uniform off and strode purposefully over to freshly washed, new model black Hongqi sedan, its gleaming paint job making it look like some kind of alien probe investigating the Yangon ghetto. A well-manicured dark-suit-wearing functionary exited the vehicle flanked by two “contractors” wearing PLA uniforms absent of any insignia and carrying QBZ-35s. “Latest generation assault rifles,” Jones noted.

“Lieutenant, we are here to retrieve one of our citizens. We understand that he was kidnapped by criminal elements, and we appreciate that you have recovered him and provided medical treatment.”

Jones didn’t buy for a second that Burning Man was an innocent victim who coincidentally was abducted by the target and had spent his time playing multiplayer PlayStation with a headset when he was thrown to freedom by the blast into the arms of his 10th Mountain troopers.

“I don’t believe one word coming out of your mouth,” Jones thought, but before he was able to move

from thinking to speaking, Rice’s voice transmitted through his earpiece cut him off. The battalion commander had regained his eye-in-the-sky perspective and told Jones to cool it. “Lieutenant, the U.S. isn’t at war with China, so we’re going to need to turn over their guy. We don’t need him dying on our hands anyway. Just make sure your soldiers image him one more time with full body scanning and have Eddie V pass him politely to that lacquered turd waiting by the car.”

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#### *Camp Rainier*

Four hours later, Jones was called to the TOC from the medical tent where he had been checking on some of his wounded but ambulatory troops. Aaron O’Shaughnessy, the S-2, brought him into a Conex that served as a SCIF-in-a-box, where two strangers were waiting—one looking like a jacked Lance Armstrong and the other like a young Jason Statham. Rice was already sitting in the corner. “Uber-fit, wearing personal chameleon camo. These guys aren’t 10th Mountain. Must be black SOF,” Jones silently assessed.



Rice confirmed his appraisal. “Dan, these guys are with JSOC,” he said, nodding toward the operators.

Bulked-up Armstrong spoke. “L-T, we’re with TF-105. Objective RAZOR PHASE would have been a JSOC target, but the timing of the intel on his location caught us in a seam. Our sister squadron has been rotating out as our team falls in, and we got tasked with a priority mission to rescue some USAID folks who got themselves sideways with an EAG rumored to dabble in head-hunting on the Thai border.”

“The guy you all came across tonight is apparently a Chinese cyber operator. We don’t know if he’s a PLA Unit 61398 hacker and we are still developing theories on why he was here. The fact that he was collocated with a guerilla facilitator might be the kind of thing that could start a war. Of course, you probably heard that back in Iraq there were times when U.S. forces came across Iranian IRGC–Qods Force cadre members holding meetings with Shia militants, and that got swept under the carpet, so who knows?” Jones nodded, remembering the canteen with Mandarin characters scratched on it that he had inherited from his grandfather. Decades-old war booty from another Chinese advisor fighting in a guerrilla war in Southeast Asia that his government would deny.

The Two leaned in and explained, “We’re telling you this because we need to make sure that none of your troops are putting out any crap on their Tik-Tok Face-gram, what-have-you. We’ve already locked off internet for the next two hours. You and Wakefield need to chat with Eddie V in particular. You can expect the MI folks to have some questions. May even have to sign secrecy agreements.”

“Well, can you at least tell me what it was that we saw melted to his head?” Jones asked.

Imitation Statham answered, “For twenty years the PLA has been pursuing research combining brain science, AI, and biotech. In their military journals they’ve been open about their pursuit of ‘hybrid intelligence’ which is what they call a blending of human and machine intelligence. We believe his rig was likely part of a brain-computer interface. We don’t see PLA General Staff Department, GSD Third Department hackers outside of Shanghai. We are assessing that he may have been a trainer, or there was some reason it was worth getting close to the battlefield to experiment with new equipment.”

Rice looked Jones over, noting the uniform was still grimy with sweat, blood, and the dirt of the Burmese slum. The lieutenant was clearly exhausted. His natural adrenaline and the stimulants his implant had pushed were wearing off, and he was dealing with the combination of fear, anger, sadness, guilt, and probably several other emotions now hours after the ambush with members of his platoon casualties.

“Look lieutenant, you and your troops walked into something you weren’t prepared for, and it’s not your fault. Clearly this guy and the work that he was doing is something that the PLA takes very seriously. I’m sure you and your troops want some payback. That will come at some point, guaranteed. Until then, know that what you came across is extremely valuable for us understanding what the adversary is up to. You need to go clean up, grab some chow, and hit the rack.”

And with that, Rice stood up and led Jones to the door. As the lieutenant exited, the battalion commander added, “Karma is a bitch, and they’ll get theirs. This’ll be a long war. Counterinsurgencies always are.” ■

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## Glossary

**Biometrics**—Means to identify someone based on unique characteristics such as fingerprints, retina scans, etc.

**"Black SOF"**—Black vice White ("vanilla") special operations forces; Tier One units in the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which includes units such as DEVGRU better known as SEAL Team Six, or the U.S. Army's 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, also known as Delta Force, Combat Applications Group (CAG) or the Unit, are "Black" SOF in comparison to other special operations units such as regular SEAL teams, which are then "white."

**CASEVAC**—Casualty evacuation, often a dedicated rescue aircraft or vehicle to evacuate injured troops.

**Expeditionary advanced basing operations (EABO)**—A concept of deployed Marine forces operating remotely from islands in the Pacific.

**Flatline tones**—When someone flatlines it means that the no longer have a heartbeat or heart rhythm. Many machines that monitor vitals produce a continuous tone warning if a patient "flatlines" and no longer has a heartbeat.

**General Staff Department (GSD) Third Department**—Reportedly charged with cyber espionage and hacking for the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

**IRGC Qods Force**—The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is a separate military service in Iran dedicated to preservation of the regime. The Qods Force are the elite special operations unit in the IRGC that often engages in foreign adventurism and cooperates with foreign partners including Shi'a Militia Groups in Iraq, the Huthi rebels in Yemen, or Lebanese Hizballah in Lebanon and around the world. Often engages in terrorism, and targeting Americans. The IRGC has become a powerful actor in the Iranian state and owns businesses and interests worth billions of dollars—officers are closely involved in management of the regime.

**ISR**—Intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance are the primary missions of various drone platforms; as a result, the tools are often referred to in the military by what they do, that is ISR.

**JSOC**—Joint Special Operations Command; almost a military branch to itself, JSOC represents the elite of Special Operations Command and for much of the past two decades has become refined "man-hunters" primarily focused on counter-terrorism operations.

**MCL**—A "McCrystal" is a new type of vehicle "Mobility Critical Light" truck; similar to how a Humvee stands for high mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV).

**MI**—Military intelligence.

**NORINCO**—Acronym for a Chinese state-owned enterprise that produces weapons. The full name is China North Industries Group Corp. Ltd.

**POO site**—Point of origin, where a weapon was fired from, often a missile, mortar, or other indirect fire system.

**QBZ-35**—A fictitious model of NORINCO rifle; currently the QBZ-95 is standard issue rifle for the People's Liberation Army of China.

**QRF**—Quick Reaction Force, a unit on standby that can quickly deploy to help a unit engaged in combat in which they need reinforcements.

**Rattler**—German weapons producer Sig Sauer developed a compact personal defense weapon for U.S. Special Operations Command known as the SIG MCX Rattler short-barreled rifle, which resembles a machine-pistol.

**S-2**—The intelligence officer in an Army battalion or brigade.

**Schutzstaffel**—More commonly known as the SS, a unit of the Nazi party that provided personal security for Adolf Hitler and had an element known as the Waffen SS and elite military formation known for its fanaticism.

**SCIF-in-a-box**—A Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility for the field, where secret discussions can be held without concern that they are being overheard or intercepted.

**"Squirter"**—An enemy who has managed to escape a site being raided or attacked, for example, after a bombing of a terrorist compound, anyone seen running from the site is a "squirter."

**Stand-in Forces**—Small-sized units with a low-signature that operate primarily in the reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance fight for the U.S. Marine Corps under Marine Corps 2030 concept. See <https://www.marines.mil/News/Press-Releases/Press-Release-Display/Article/2858309/marine-corps-publishes-new-document-titled-a-concept-for-stand-in-forces/>

**TOC**—Tactical operations center, where the leadership of a unit conducts operations in the field.

**UAS**—Unmanned aircraft systems, a fancy term for drones.

**Uber-fit**—Extremely fit; adding "uber" just highlights that something is extreme in USMIL speak.

**Uke Javelin**—A Javelin antitank missile produced by the United States and provided to Ukrainian forces to counter the 2022 Russian invasion.

**USAID**—United States Agency for International Development administers civilian foreign aid and development assistance.

**USMIL**—Acronym for U.S. military commonly used in the national security community.