



Sgt. Jeanine Madden directs a platoon of coin-sized drones to investigate a desert ambush in a fictional entry by *NCO Journal* Managing Editor Chago Zapata. While Madden's technology sheds light on external threats, internal tensions flare and age-old prejudices rear their ugly heads. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

The Drone Patrol

By Chago Zapata

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Prologue

The 300-millimeter rocket zipped in like a bullet, detonating on the combat operations center. The old, air-conditioned concrete building, trailing wires leading to antenna arrays and filled with command staff and communications personnel, seemed to contract as the thermobaric warhead drew oxygen from its surroundings and exploded outward in a great fiery flash, generating a massive blast wave.

It wasn't supposed to happen, but the enemy timed it perfectly. A Russian-made BM-30 Smerch launched two rockets a split second apart. The first exploded over the base, releasing a massive electromagnetic pulse just before the Forward Operating Base's counter-battery system could deploy countermeasures.

The EMP disabled communications and knocked out the FOB's sensors and targeting systems, allowing the second rocket to slip in during the blackout to destroy the command and control center. Electronic equipment was knocked out throughout the base.

Two- and three-rocket salvos kept coming erratically, destroying hardened artillery positions, the airfield, motor pool, barracks, and even the crowded dining facility.

A zipping whine, a pulse, a second zip, and a bright, pulsing blast.

Lines of dirty black smoke trailed skyward like thick, writhing snakes from all over the FOB. Fires and secondary explosions lit the dirty, overcast sky while wounded and panicked Soldiers screamed, "Medic!"

It was a scene of chaos and destruction.

It wasn't supposed to happen ... but it did.

Where did the rockets come from? Why wasn't the

Army aware of their existence?

The FOB was down, and the Soldiers on a lone patrol were on their own. Nowhere to fall back. No resupply. No communications. No close air support. Only an enemy capable of destroying a FOB in minutes was still out there. Somewhere.

Part 1

Recently promoted Sgt. Jeanine Madden knew something was wrong. She spun at the spaced boom, boom and boom, boom, boom sounds echoing faintly in the distance from the direction of the FOB.

She couldn't place what they were or what they meant.

She hadn't heard anything like it in her past two months in country.

She spent a few moments craning her head, trying to look over the up-armored Humvee crouching like a grumbling beast next to her.

A hand slapped the back of her helmet.

"Madden! Don't get distracted. Stay focused," said Sgt. 1st Class Bill Johnson, her unit's platoon sergeant. "We'll find out what that was after you deploy the Mogdees. We need to see what that was and what's around us."

In frustration, he swatted the back of Madden's helmet again, pointed urgently at the pouch at her waist, and made a "get on with it" motion with his gloved hand.

The sound of Spc. Harvey Still's voice cut through the noise of the rumbling and clacking Humvee engines.

"Sarge, comms is down!" he shouted excitedly.

"That's all we need," Sgt. Johnson grumbled under his breath, just loud enough for Madden to hear him.

"Copy that," he responded, turning to the young Soldier with a thunderous scowl on his leathery face. "Make sure you let the El-Tee know."

Madden turned away, visually scanned the area, stuck the tip of her index finger in her mouth to moisten it, and raised her hand to test the wind. Negligible. She raised her left arm and skimmed her fingers over the curved reflective device strapped tightly to her left forearm.

The "Mogdee" was the MOGD.

Why did the Army have to make an acronym for everything?

Miniature Optically Guided Drones was a mouthful, so she guessed it made sense in this instance.

Madden slid her right index finger skillfully down the curved left edge of the hardened OLED screen display on her left forearm and watched it light up, showing the familiar layout with a black background.

She reached down to her right hip, just below the lower edge of her flak jacket, into a padded magazine pouch, drew out a stack of 10 small disks the size of silver dollars, and tossed them high in the air with an underhand swing.

The disks separated in the air, and as they ascended, she touched the screen, watched it light up, and heard a nearly imperceptible hum from above as four small rotors popped out from the edge of each coin-sized drone just as they reached the apex of their climb. They



Lines of dirty black smoke trailed skyward like thick, writhing snakes from all over the Forward Operating Base. Fires and secondary explosions lit the dirty, overcast sky. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)



The drones broadcast to Madden's Kevlar helmet, which featured a built-in visor that slid down to cover her eyes. It made a snug seal, similar to civilian virtual reality headsets. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

whirred softly, bobbing as they righted themselves.

Each drone's optical gyroscope and three-axis micro-accelerometer instantly righted it. Its ultra-high-definition camera immediately began broadcasting video and information to Madden's Dynamic Arm Display, commonly known as the DAD or "scratchass," as some of the Soldiers had taken to calling it.

They also broadcast to her Kevlar helmet. It was specially designed with a visor that slid down from a built-in compartment to cover her eyes. It made a snug seal against her face, similar to civilian virtual reality headsets, but thinner and more streamlined.

Every bit of information they gathered, from weather conditions to video feed, was also relayed to a dedicated satellite that sent the data to a special facility in Fort Meade, Maryland.

As the 10 drones climbed and dispersed, Madden reached into her pouch, drew out another stack of 10, and tossed them in the air. Again, they activated with a soft whir and dispersed.

She went through these motions three more times until 50 drones hovered around 20 meters over her head, spread over half the length square of a football field, and just far enough that she couldn't hear the faint whir of their rotors.

She'd been told to write up an after-action report after every mission, and she'd referred to each stack as

a squad, five squads as a platoon, and five platoons as a company. There was a company of drones in her pouch, minus the platoon hovering overhead ... and she had another company in her Humvee.

She stepped away from the vehicle, pulled down the VR visor, shoved the earpiece deeper into her ear, reached into the pouch again, and pulled out what looked like a video game controller – only with a half-a-dozen more buttons and two more joysticks on its dark tan-colored surface.

She touched the device on her arm with a grubby finger. An image appeared on her visor and on the curved screen tightly hugging her left forearm: a view from above of seven up-armored Humvees pointed outward at a 45-degree angle from the road with Soldiers scattered around them.

A young Soldier leaning against a dun-colored Humvee about five meters away nudged one of his buddies nearby with an elbow.

"Looks like Madden got her Ds up again, huh, Martinez?" he said with a snort, but his eyes never stopped scanning the surroundings.

Specialist Johnny Martinez grunted but didn't crack a smile. The joke and different variations of it had been used way too often. His eyes were glued to a small house about 30 meters from the edge of the dusty dirt road where their vehicles were parked.

The house was made of crumbling cinder blocks and was covered with a rusted, bent, and twisted corrugated metal roof. A low wooden door was at its center, with a dirty window on each side.

It looked like a good place for an ambush.

Everyone visibly relaxed when a girl, maybe 10 years old, stepped timidly through the front door with a toddler straddling her narrow hip. She stared at them wide-eyed with fear while the child leaned his head listlessly on her shoulder.

He didn't notice the fat, black flies that landed on the thick, milky snot pooled under his nose, bunched to create a seething, black mass.

The child sat up and turned his face at a sudden noise, disturbing the hairy, black insects and setting them buzzing around his sunken, dejected face.

Maybe it's not a bad place to stop, Martinez thought with relief, instantly deciding the house posed no danger. Turning to watch Sgt. Madden deploy her small drones, he didn't notice how the girl struggled to hitch up the blanket-covered child.

The MOGDs were small and light, but they were packed with microtechnology.

They each had a built-in barometer, magnetometer, proximity and ambient light sensors, GPS, thermal imaging and infrared night vision capabilities, sound isolation and wide spectrum microphones, dynamic

stereo speakers, a powerful transmitter, and a powerful built-in rechargeable lithium-ion battery providing 30 hours of life at full charge. Their flat sides could become magnetic, which meant they could be easily carried or attached to ferromagnetic metals. They each also had a small explosive charge at their core, allowing them to self-destruct and kill or maim anyone within a 3-foot radius.

There was nothing like this system ... and it was Madden's baby.

Madden had some idea about what she'd gotten into when she "volunteered" to be a Virtual Reconnaissance MOGD operator. Yet the idea didn't compare to the reality.

After five and a half months in the One-Station Unit Training (OSUT) for infantry Soldiers at Fort Moore, Georgia, she got orders to 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light), at Fort Drum, New York. She was immediately attached to an infantry platoon.

She was the only woman in the platoon.

She was there all of two days before she "volunteered" for the MOGD program ... before she was "voluntold," actually.

She'd scored high enough on her ASVAB line scores to get the operations officer's attention. He'd been tasked with finding a young Soldier with the brainpower to assign to the MOGD program. She was perfect: smart, new, malleable, and not yet corrupted by some of the ill-tempered members of her new unit.

She spent the next 12 months at the National Geospatial-Intelligence College in Springfield, Virginia, earning the Geographic Intelligence Specialist 35G MOS designation.

A week later, she went to Fort Meade. There, she spent six months training on MOGD technology and its applications and implications, learning how to control the dozens of drones in her pouch, when to use them, and how to maintain them. She even learned to troubleshoot and perform basic repairs if necessary. She learned to fly them one at a time or hundreds at once. It was a challenge, but the process was surprisingly intuitive.

She spent those long, intense months learning skills no one else in the Army had ever learned with a small group of hand-selected Soldiers and civilians.

She finished at the top of each class, earning promotions ahead of her peers along the way. So, she was a sergeant with less than two years time-in-service by the time she once again checked into 1st platoon, Alpha Company, 2-14.

This little fact didn't earn her any friends. Older, more experienced, yet junior-



Each of Madden's drones captured images of the chaos below. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

ranked Soldiers eyed her with envy and distrust. The fact she was the only woman in the platoon didn't help much, either.

And now she was waist-deep in the armpit of the world, about 30 clicks east of the FOB, on the outskirts of a big city in the desert, on patrol looking for a ghost.

The 35-man platoon was made up of three squads of nine men each, two four-man teams per squad, a weapons squad made up of two M240 machine gun teams, each with a gunner and assistant gunner, the platoon commander, the platoon sergeant, the medic, and Sgt. Madden, the unit's supernumerary.

Sgt. Johnson watched the tall young woman confidently and expertly operate the unusual game controller, then looked up in time to see the small flight of drones flit upward and away, quickly disappearing into the dingy blue sky.

"Ready, sergeant," Madden said calmly, her contralto voice confident and professional.

Johnson opened the Humvee door and pulled out a 32-inch monitor connected to the vehicle's armored ceiling by a mechanical arm. He pressed the power button on its bottom right and then pumped his fist up and down, hollering loud enough to make the child turn his head to stare at him in fright, once again agitating the fat, black flies laying their eggs in his snot.

The lieutenant had been watching from a dozen feet away and went to stand at his platoon sergeant's side, gasping in surprise at the image that suddenly appeared on the wide-screen monitor.

"Team leaders ... Bring it in!" Sgt. Johnson hollered, then turned to look at the monitor sternly.

He glanced up and looked around, noticing the junior Soldiers were surreptitiously edging closer, trying to get a glimpse of the screen.

"The rest of you, stay put and keep your eyes peeled!"

He looked down at the screen again and cursed under his breath. He could hear the team leaders whispering among themselves and turned to the lieutenant.

"Now I know why they sent us out here, El-Tee," he rasped through a dry throat.

The young 1st lieutenant gave a terse nod and grunted.

"Yeah. We gotta find out who did this and make sure they don't ever do it again," the much younger man replied grimly, digging a finger under his helmet to scratch at a sudden itch.

Madden stared at the distant image. Thick lines of puffy black smoke curled upward, and a dark haze hovered over the base – licked by bright tongues of flame



The Forward Operating Base was a smoking ruin. The airfield was cratered with holes, helicopters were shredded, and the command center was a pile of smoldering rubble. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

from burning tents and the odd wooden building.

She'd sent the 50 drones hovering several hundred meters in the air. Her system combined their signals into one image and broadcast it into her helmet and the monitor in the Humvee. She could get a 360-degree view as if she were hovering in the sky, but right now, she knew the lieutenant wanted to see the FOB.

"Magnify 200 percent," she said.

The image zoomed in.

It was still too far away.

"Maximum magnification," she said quietly, subdued at the implications of the burning, mostly destroyed base.

The drones' ultra-high-resolution cameras, zoomed to 600 percent, captured a good bit of detail – though not enough since they were more than 20 miles away. But there was no mistaking that the FOB was a smoking ruin.

The airfield was cratered with holes, shredded helicopters were scattered around like a child's toys after a temper tantrum, and the command center was a pile of smoldering rubble. Fires raged throughout the base, and tiny, panicked people ran in every direction.

Everyone quieted down and watched the live feed somberly.

After several minutes, the lieutenant stepped in front of the monitor and noticed some junior Soldiers still trying to edge closer. He turned off the monitor and motioned toward the small house. He led the small procession of NCOs toward it, out of the troops' earshot.

The little girl, struggling to hold the child on her hip, stood at the door and stared, wide-eyed and obviously frightened, as they came closer.

Not a single platoon member sensed anything off but had they paid closer attention, they would've noticed the listless child in the girl's arms weighed a lot ... too much.

Two dark Middle Eastern men in loose white robes and checkered black-and-white scarves wrapped



Whoever was inside the house had more than likely triggered the explosion remotely, but Madden needed confirmation. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

around their heads peeked through the bottom corners of the small windows, expectantly watching the scene unfold. Each held a beat-up AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifle tightly in his dark hands.

They'd broken into the house the day before, tied up the children's mother and father, and spent the night making suicide vests.

It was purely by chance that they'd picked this house to make their devices of death and mayhem, and it looked like fate or Allah had provided the perfect opportunity.

They quickly strapped a vest on the girl, wrapped the child in another one, covered them with a dirty blanket, and told her to walk toward the biggest group of men, threatening to kill her parents if she didn't do as they said. They quickly ushered her out the door.

They watched excitedly as a group of about a dozen hated American Soldiers walked toward the house, led by a tall young man who carried himself with an air of authority.

The two men hissed and threatened the girl, trying to get her to walk toward the men. They didn't care how old she or her little brother were; they didn't care that they were innocents. It was Allah's will that they die in his name.

She wouldn't know to say "Allahu Akbar" before dying, meaning "God is greater" in Arabic, but that was unimportant. She and her brother were unimportant in the grand scheme of things ... as long as they did as they were told.

The small group of American Soldiers stopped a

few meters from the house. None noticed when the girl stumbled toward them, struggling to hold the child on her slim hip.

She even stumbled against a few of them as she made her way to the middle of the group. One of them steadied her absentmindedly as she fell against him, helping her get her balance. He even briefly caressed her dirty black hair with a gentle hand before turning his attention to the young man in charge.

Pushing the visor up into the helmet, Madden secured the monitor back into the Humvee, then sent a command for the drones to hover and send her a haptic prompt through her Dynamic Arm Display if there was movement around the patrol. She turned to join the NCOs crowded around the lieutenant, maybe 20 meters away.

The sudden concussive explosion sent her flying backward to land on her back with a whoosh of expelled breath as it shredded, eviscerated, and blasted men apart, sending shards of white-hot metal and human body parts cartwheeling in all directions in a shower of fire, heat, and blood.

Madden lay convulsing on her back, trying to draw breath. It was completely expelled from her lungs when she hit the ground.

Hot air washed over her prostrate body, and blood and bits of human being rained down on her like a scene from her worst nightmare.

She scuttled backward awkwardly on her hands and feet, trying to get away from the horrifying scene before

her wildly staring eyes.

She finally managed to draw in a deep, shuddering breath when a pair of hands gripped her under the armpits and pulled her to her feet.

Her knees almost gave out, but she stood swaying, gasping, and staring at the devastation.

What the hell happened, she wondered dazedly.

The acrid smell of burning plastic, the coppery tang of blood, and the nauseating stench of cooking flesh filled the suddenly still air as Madden surveyed the explosion's devastating aftermath.

The cluster of men who'd walked toward the small house were now just a scattered collection of body parts.

In horrified shock, she stood shaking on the outskirts of the carnage, her uniform splattered with blood and small, unidentifiable pieces of white bone and wet, red viscera.

Madden took a deep breath, pushing down the churning nausea and the need to spew the contents of her stomach onto the blood-spotted ground, and assessed the situation. The drones had captured the entire incident, and she knew she needed to act quickly. She couldn't afford to be paralyzed by the horror of the moment.

"Get it together, Madden," she muttered to herself, pulling the VR visor over her eyes and touching a trembling finger to one of the earpieces plunged deep into her ear canal, activating its noise-canceling feature.

She quickly accessed the drone footage, scanning for any signs of the attackers or the origin of the rocket ... if that's what it even was.

From above, she watched the skinny little girl

struggling with the blanket-covered child in her arms, weaving through the crowd of men, and then she saw the explosion. It was centered on the two children.

She rewound the footage and watched it again in slow motion.

She covered her mouth, once again pushing back the nausea and rewound further, to the point where the little girl came out of the house ... when the platoon's leadership had still been alive.

Madden saw the corners of the two windows twitch as someone inside peeked out the bottom corners.

Whoever was inside had more than likely triggered the explosion remotely, but she needed confirmation.

"Get under cover!" she hollered at the top of her voice, putting as much authority as possible into every word.

"The enemy was in that house," she said, pointing at the shattered and destroyed building.

She quickly crouched behind a Humvee a cautious distance away and activated the Mogdees, sending them flying in and around the house.

The still-living members of her platoon were galvanized to action at her words. They quickly dove for cover and aimed their M4 carbines in the house's direction. The Soldiers manning each vehicle's weapon station spun the turret, aimed either a .50-caliber or an M240 machine gun at the house, and waited for a command.

The drones' high-definition cameras provided a live feed to Madden's visor, revealing the gruesome details inside the house. The lifeless bodies of the two men in bloody white robes lay amid the wreckage, their faces frozen in a twisted mix of satisfaction and religious fervor.

"Tangos are down!" she hollered out.



The drone patrol had taken an unexpected turn, plunging Madden and her platoon into a deadly game of survival. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

When she sent the Mogdees a command, they gained altitude and then zipped away in different directions.

Madden quickly scanned the area within a half-mile radius of their position.

“Clear!” she cried after several minutes. “All clear!”

Madden stood, gave the Mogdees a verbal command to stay in place, pushed up the visor, and looked around, her mind racing, contemplating the implications of everything that had happened within the past 15 minutes.

She knew she had to establish command, rally the surviving Soldiers, and secure the area. The Humvees were still intact. The platoon needed them for mobility and protection.

Taking a deep breath, she approached the nearest Soldier, Spc. Arnold Billings, a member of 1st squad. He appeared terrified and confused but in control.

“Specialist Billings, we need to regroup, secure the area, and figure out our next move,” Madden said, her voice cracking on the last word but calm despite the recent violent chaos around them.

The specialist nodded, his eyes reflecting a mix of confusion and grief. Some of the men who died had been friends.

Madden felt the weight of leadership settle squarely on her shoulders. As the highest-ranking surviving member of the platoon, she was now in charge.

“Get everyone together,” she ordered, moving toward her Humvee and absentmindedly brushing at the gore on her uniform.

She needed to do something, anything, to keep her mind from what had just happened, to take her thoughts away from the stinking “stuff” on her uniform that had only minutes before been walking, talking human beings.

She motioned Spc. Billings close and spoke confidently.

“We need to get a head count, assess injuries, and then get ready to move. We still got a job to do.”

The young man took a deep breath and ran to every vehicle, passing the word.

The surviving Soldiers, some dazed though none injured, gathered around her, muttering. She could sense discontent, resistance.

Madden did a quick head count, realizing they were now a significantly smaller force. She turned to the

medic and asked if anyone needed medical attention.

The man shook his head.

“We gotta head back to the FOB, man!” gibbered a shaking Soldier. “The lieutenant’s dead. Sgt. Johnson’s dead. All the squad leaders’re dead, man! They’re all dead! THEY’RE DEAD!”

Try as she might, she couldn’t dredge up the man’s name.

“Take it easy,” she said calmly, patting the air. “We’ll figure it out, but we can’t go back.”

With that, she filled them in about everything that had just happened, from the bombed FOB to the suicide bomber. She didn’t leave anything out.

“Yeah, that’s all good and well, but I say we vote on whether we go on or go back to help at the FOB,” said Spc. Gabriel Antonelli.

“They need our help. I vote we go back,” he said, looking around at his friends and nodding with his right hand raised.

“Since when was the freakin’ Army a democracy?” Madden said, raising her voice as some of the other Soldiers chimed in, agreeing to a vote.

“Look, man, you been a sergeant, what, a week? You never led an infantry platoon in combat. Hell, you never even seen real combat,” Antonelli said, looking around and nodding once again. “We need to go back to the FOB. This chick can’t lead. She don’t know jack. We don’t need to listen to her.”

Madden stared at him, her face flushed and hot in anger and frustration.

Now, she had to deal with the fallout of losing the platoon leadership all in one fell swoop.

She had to deal with Soldiers who might or might not follow a woman.

She had to convince the platoon to find and destroy the enemies who destroyed the FOB, but only after finding out who they were and where they came from.

All while dealing with misogyny, prejudice, and recalcitrant and reluctant subordinates – and still manage the drones.

The drone patrol had taken an unexpected turn, plunging Sgt. Jeanine Madden and her platoon into a deadly game of survival. The drones, her mindless but trusted companions, were now the key to uncovering the truth behind the attack and guiding them through the unknown perils ahead. ■

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