

Marine Forces Special Operations Command

MARSOC

Fictional Intelligence (FICINT) Short Story

SAFE HARBOR II

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SAFE HARBOR II: A Raider 40 Origin Story

The following “useful fiction” narrative is designed to help envision key elements of the MARSOC operational concept known as SSR — Strategic Shaping and Reconnaissance. A “sequel” to the prior scenario, “Safe Harbor,” it depicts a key waypoint on the transformation of the Raider force toward its 2040 operating concept, as explored in the RAIDER 40 series of narratives produced by MARSOC G5.

OBJECTIVE ECHO, 0339 HOURS LOCAL

As the boat prop spun just ten feet away from his head, Staff Sergeant Jason “JP” Poole stopped kicking. It wasn’t from fear, but that the wake of the passing RHIB churned the canal’s brackish water, reducing the already horrible underwater visibility to less than arm’s length. Unable to see even the tactical display screen on his forearm, the Marine Raider paused for the turbid water to clear up even a little. He then gave a single tug on the paracord swim line that linked him to the rest of his team. For a few moments, he, his fellow Raider, and two commandos from a partner nation hung in the water, floating ten meters from the target building built on the low-bank waterfront five miles upriver from the province’s main port city.

For once, Poole thought, they must be ahead of time. He couldn’t see the mission clock in the muck, but eight years of operational experience told him that the outgoing tide must have been less of a challenge for their Triton jet-drive maritime personnel propulsion systems (“swim test cheats” the Marines jokingly called them) that towed them from their coastal insertion point.

Poole strained to see his screen again. They were indeed slightly ahead of schedule. He then checked comms to see if any updates had been sent by their nearby MARSOC ISR and cyber elements. Nothing.

He gave three quick tugs of the cord, this time signaling it was time to move to the next — more difficult — phase of the mission. Whether it was deployments in the Arctic conducting long-range signals reconnaissance or a strategic shaping engagement on an island in the Indian Ocean, he had found that the one consistency in MARSOC was the getting-in part was always the easiest box to check off a mission order.

The other Raider, Sergeant Elias Ho, felt the tug and detached the cord, swimming ahead slowly, careful not to disturb the water’s surface. He then slipped beneath the sundeck of the river house that extended over the canal. Mud grabbed at his fins, and so he pulled himself up slightly, wrapping a gloved hand around one of the cracked wooden piers. Reaching into his tac-vest, Ho carefully placed a pair of cockroach-shaped bots on the deck to scout inside the house for the brothers.

The twin brothers were among the most successful small UAS designers in the region. They had made a name for themselves working for the team currently ranked third in the Drone Racing League. But local intelligence had picked up that they were also running a side hustle, selling their wares to a clientele that had started with criminal gangs, but now moved on to an arms dealer running the local clandestine supply chain for a major U.S. adversary.

That dealer set the brothers up in what was an upscale house within a fenced compound of homes for the wealthy that was vigorously patrolled by a private security firm. The house was built in the style of a traditional home from a century ago, an unassuming-looking blend of wood walls and stucco-like nanomaterials. The brothers apparently felt safe: Their relaxed resting states were confirmed by the respiration rates and body temperatures overlaid onto the outlines of the two figures in the bedrooms projected back onto the Raiders' augmented reality lenses. From one slumber to another, thought Ho; the plan was that they would incapacitate the two men and extricate them the same way they had come in, hence the extra Triton swim bots to pull the brothers and the air tanks they'd be using.

The four commandos pulled themselves onto the sun deck and took positions on each side of the sliding glass door that led into the house.

Poole was old school and began counting down with his fingers.

Before he got to two, the deck door's pane glass exploded and bullets began tearing into the far wall of the canal, sweeping from one side to another. Even as Ho dove to the deck, his mind registered the sound of 7.62-mm rounds firing from a machine gun mounted just inside the building. The weapon must be some kind of automated defensive system the inventive brothers had rigged up. The whine of drones on the porch followed, taking flight from a cache the brothers concealed in what looked like a wooden planter box of flowers.

TROOPS IN CONTACT

When the commandos' body-worn audio sensors first detected gunfire, the message automatically blasted in bright red across their AR feeds as well as notifying their entire tactical network. It categorized the weapon as an M240B and pinpointed its location with acoustic sensors.

The cavalry will soon be coming, thought Poole, but likely not quick enough. And they would have to fight their way through the private guard force that would get here much quicker than the QRF of Raider and partner forces waiting away from the compound.

As the commandos opened fire, Ho's mind considered two questions: What must it be like to wake up to a machine-gun alarm clock? And, How much ammo does that thing have?

Poole took a round in his chest plate. The bioceramic armor stopped the round but the force of the impact made him drop his M27, which clattered on the wood of the sundeck.

"I'm good," he mumbled, between gasps. The whirring of incoming drones got louder and then a small drone detonated above them, spraying carbon flechettes that speared through one of the commandos, pinning his body to the deck.

"We need to exfil," said Poole. "Now!"

Poole was sliding over to check the commando, confirming he was gone, when a heavy-caliber round from the other direction smacked into his hand, spraying blood across Ho's AR goggles. The guard force had arrived. They were trapped.

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"I really hate that thing," said Poole, removing his VR helmet. "Data shows my CQB skills are even sharper than when I'm back Stateside with sim time every other day on this deployment. But I keep getting wasted."

The virtual training exercises were a staple of the Raiders' current deployment supporting the local maritime commando force. Given the low-profile operation, tactical training with the partner force needed to be effectively undetectable. And for live training, the Raiders had only a limited ammunition supply through their covert logistics network in the area.

"The sim is goading us, making it look too easy with the sensor data," said Ho, who handled bots and breaching for the Raider team. "And then it gets its revenge. We had an ELINT issue this time -- passive drones tracked us on the infil."

"No way this time. We sorted the signature management," said Poole.

"Nope. Sim said the shielding on the oldest Triton swim board had corroded or worn through over time."

"You talk about it like the AI actually cares," said Poole, whose dark brown civilian hiking pants and light blue t-shirt were soaked with sweat. In the sim, they were equipped with their Raider-issue raid suits. So, it was always slightly jarring to dip out of the virtual environment where you had such a clear tactical focus. On this deployment, like so many others, they dressed as if they were adventure travelers. While it was not a clandestine mission, the force of nine Americans did their best not to stand out in the capital city, even this morning reaching the op-center through a pair of seafood delivery trucks returning to the port via local car ferry.

"Oh, the AI cares," Ho said. "Trust me."

Poole cursed.

The partner commander, Major Santo Perez, entered the training room, handing out electrolyte drinks to the two Raiders.

"Saw that it got you again," Perez said. "I don't think I've ever seen you beat that thing."

"Losing's how you win," Poole responded.

"That explains your country's World Cup record," Perez said deadpan.

Poole had worked with Perez on two previous deployments, and he still couldn't tell when Perez was making a joke or not.

Perez tapped his watch, indicating a message had buzzed. “It seems we have an intel update.” Perez squinted at the tiny font on the watch’s screen. “Damn this microscopic writing! They make these things thinking we all still have the eyes of teenagers... Two destroyers and a landing ship are scheduled to arrive at the port in two days’ time. It seems we may have a reason for you and your men to see more of our beautiful country than this compound.”

Poole nodded and smiled. The prospect of getting outside the compound was something he held out hope for every day. Of course, what he wanted wasn’t the mission. This deployment was all about the Raiders effectively answering a question they regularly asked Major Perez and his commandos—What can we do for you?—knowing it was the best way to build trust and long-term strategic advantage.

So far, the answer had had very little to do with the traditional tactical skills that one thought of in military partner training missions. What the partners now wanted was the Americans’ help in the areas that made the most difference against the hybrid threats they faced every day. Between the challenges of internal instability and being on the front lines of a strategic competition between the great powers, what partner nations wanted most wasn’t old-school marksmanship classes, but help with areas like aid with ISR, information and cognitive campaigns, cyber hardening, and strategic finance reconnaissance.

The Raider team could bring them all those capabilities, either through on-site team member expertise or via reachback to the network of support run out of the Raider compound at Camp Lejeune. But for Poole, a sniper and close reconnaissance specialist, and Ho -- the unit’s “jerk,” JRC or Joint Robotics Coordinator — on the ground, it meant figuring out which of their unique skills best suited the deployment on any given day.

OPERATIONS ROOM, 0728 LOCAL

The entire Raider and partner force had assembled in the operations room, a concrete-floored and damp space that was overly bright due to the antiquated fluorescent lighting.

At long folding tables, each Raider sat in front of laptops and virtual-reality and augmented-reality helmets and glasses. For the moment, the tech was plugged in and charging, rather than worn. Keeping “eyes on host” was part of the mandate of showing respect in every way possible.

Major Perez walked the Raider element through the details of the latest development.

“Master Sergeant Dale, what concerns us is that our government has received warnings of Pacific Dawn terrorist threats targeting infrastructure near the port. These include the latest construction projects funded by our adversary, as well as even one of their workers’ dormitories,” said Perez. “This is even more worrisome, as it coincides with the expected presence offshore of two of their destroyers and an amphibious assault ship. We had expected the destroyers from discussions with their embassy about a port visit, but the landing ship was not anticipated.”

“Sir,” Master Sergeant Dale replied, “our real-time social media intelligence indicates that your suspicions are correct. This is not coincidental. We’ve also checked with the US Embassy and our command. Since we’ve got the most SOCOM time in the area, and, well, we’re here, our team and everything it can bring to bear will be the focus of the US effort at the point of contact discreetly supporting you. There isn’t much appetite for a bigger response, and hopefully, it won’t be necessary.”

“I would not have it any other way,” said Perez.

“Our models show that there is a narrative-building effort, in order to create a justification for intervention. It’s a two-step process,” said Dale. “A classic tactic: An inciting incident and intervention by what we are calling ‘Task Force 2049.’ I’ll let Staff Sergeant Schott walk you through where we have identified the adversaries’ narrative intervention and potentially how to counter it.”

It would go unsaid at the briefing, but the strategic imperative of this deployment was unmistakable. The host nation had once been a rock-steady US ally, but two years ago started to seesaw between Beijing and Washington depending on the politics of the day. Currently, US warships were not allowed to make port visits, so the arrival -- and potential digging in -- of Task Force 2049 would have an outsized strategic impact.

The Raider teams’ low profile and careful management of their military-to-military ties meant they were allowed to continue to deploy there. Yet it was never guaranteed that they would continue to be; to Dale, it meant each day they had to earn their presence particularly when the stakes for the US got so high.

Staff Sergeant Carol “Puck” Schott was a longtime Raider teammate of Dale’s, and her appreciation and mastery of shaping and indirect narrative maneuvering were among the new skills that mattered in integrated action.

Perez held up a hand.

“Thank you, but before we do, you need to know that we cannot stop the ships from arriving nor directly engage their information campaign. Whatever we do cannot be so ... direct. We still depend too much on their trade and investment to provoke them, even if their end goal is to exert greater power within our country.”

“Major, I meant no disrespect,” Dale said. “This is your show, and it always has been. We obviously have our own interests, but in this situation, we’re here to help. What do you need?”

With a smile, Perez nodded. “You say that, and I know you mean it. That is why I am being honest with you about what we can and cannot do. While we cannot engage their forces, we can eliminate the narrative rationale that would allow this ... ‘Task Force 2049’ to remain in our country. And, if it requires us to be more ‘direct’ in our action with Pacific Dawn, we have no problems with that from our national perspective.”

“Understood. Then let’s get to work figuring out how to do that,” Dale said. “Schott, can you bring up the schematics of the Pacific Dawn safehouse?”

As Schott called up a 3-D rendered image of an abandoned-looking two-story concrete and glass building, the Raiders and Perez’s commandos donned their VR rigs. Soon, they were able to zoom through all angles of the Pacific Dawn safehouse. From the outside, peeling yellow signs advertising discount air conditioners and satellite receivers covered the first floor’s filthy, black-tinted glass doors in a sign of what must have been the last days or even hours of the building’s legitimate purpose. Its second floor overlooking the three-lane one-way highway was another opaque glass wall that was incongruously clean.

A maroon Toyota Hilux pickup -- recently washed -- was parked in the weed-covered lot in front of the building. The adjacent buildings were concrete as well, a mixture of electronics distribution warehouses and small restaurants and stores. Old plastic crates were stacked haphazardly on the roof, a tactic used to conceal satellite comms gear and even drone launchers. From the street, it was a busy area, but not so busy that a close surveillance team would easily blend in.

“They’re hiding in plain sight, it seems,” Schott said.

Dale said, “Schott, I want you to jam out a quick CONOP and we’ll send it to the GCC.”

“On the portal?” Schott asked, referring to the SOCOM mission planning tool that blended generative AI with the PowerPoint prior generations of Raiders knew too well.

“No, use Brute to develop it so you can take some snapshots from the training sims.”

Schott offered a thumbs up and began tapping into the Marine Corps edge AI, known as Brute, the Raiders brought on deployments like this. It was less sophisticated than the SOCOM portal but functioned better with the low bandwidth they had.

Dale was last to put his rig on, pausing to look his team over first, hoping they would be just as effective in the real world as they were in navigating the new digital fog of war. The operational environment and the new array of threats -- from microdrones to DNA trackers -- favored software and robotics closing the distance with an enemy. Proximity meant risk. But he knew that in many cases you needed humans to navigate those last few feet to really understand what was going on -- and with that risk came real reward.

OPERATIONS ROOM, 1521 LOCAL

Overhead drones, social media data and imagery, and the team’s CubeSat multispectral sensors stitched together imagery of the quartet of commandos moving through one of the port’s open-air markets, just outside the main terminal area. They had timed the operation for the lull in the shopping day when most people sought relief from the sun and humidity.

The commandos did not wear uniforms or even military-grade kit to stow their weapons and gear -- nothing to flag their intentions to either the Pacific Dawn or state adversary intelligence operatives that were surely watching the same markets. Instead, they wore the garb of dockside laborers, using clothes and even backpacks they had bought at a second-hand shop. Poole wondered if their partners realized the team whose logo was on the packs hadn’t actually won the Super Bowl that year.

In addition, the local commandos wore the jigsaw face paint that had become popular even among civilians, designed to scramble any face-rec brokers stalking the port. Tracking faces was lucrative ground for underworld digital bounty hunters, hunting everyone from debt scofflaws to dissidents and journalists. The painted faces gave the streets around the port a carnival-like collection of abstract-looking faces in brightly colored clothing.

“Jaguar, Hornet. Immediately pull back your element two blocks to the east, past the canal.”

The message that went out to all four of the local commandos came not from the on-site MARSOC team but from one of the Raiders in the newly launched blended human/AI reachback teams — Hive — working out of the MARSOC compound in North Carolina. The Raider steered each of the local commandos to a next waypoint, which would put them out of sight of the loitering surveillance micro-drones outside the terrorist group's safe house. The Raiders' CONUS intel support element had also marked that the terrorist group's micro-drone tech was beyond commercial grade — some kind of a blended organic-mechanical design based on the local inch-long horseflies that seemed to be everywhere in the port district. It was another indicator there was more to the situation than a local group lashing out. If the terrorist group had this capability, there was a good chance they were getting other assistance from the adversary.

“How did you pick that up?” Perez asked Schott. She had a snake tattoo wreathing her neck beneath the VR rig, which made it look like the reptile was nested inside the helmet.

“Our Hive AI passively picked up the flight patterns of the bugs, uh flies, based on some multispectral analysis. It didn't say how, at least yet,” she said. “Soon as I know how I can ...”

“No, don't worry about it. Nice work. Stay with the team,” said Dale.

She offered a thumbs up and hunched over her workstation.

Dale took off his VR helmet and wiped his brow. He walked over to Perez and tapped him on the forearm; people seemed to startle less that way when they wore their rigs than if you put a hand on their shoulder. Doing that in a room like this could get your elbow dislocated or worse.

“Have a quick minute, sir?” Dale asked. “I'd like to explore something with you.”

“Yes,” Perez said. “I think I already know what you are thinking: We may not be able to get close enough for a proper reconnaissance.”

“Correct, sir, I don't think so either,” said Dale. “I can try to get some more out of our space assets but...”

“We need to move on the target tonight,” Perez said. “This came in a few minutes ago.” He held up a tablet screen to show what Dale already knew of the movement of the adversary's ships. “They're on station, waiting, our naval intelligence thinks. Once they get the order, they can be in the port within three hours, putting 500 of their marines ashore immediately.”

Dale thought of all the ways his Raider team could attack these warships if needed: cyber intrusion knocking out their climate control and onboard sewage, deniable civilian drone hits on radar and sensors, swimmy auto-nets fouling their props. To say nothing of what they could do in a non-deniable manner, calling in fires from hundreds of miles away. But he had to remind himself that the adversary's entire goal was to look like the victim. Which is why a terrorist attack on their own businesses and people was the precursor.

Dale wiped his sweating palms on his pants. He wasn't nervous. If anything the opposite. It was just so damn hot.

“You know, it kind of feels like we’re the ones saving the adversary’s interests from themselves,” said Dale. “Like we’re teaming up to do the job of their SOF for them: take out terrorists threatening their people... And that is a pretty good narrative to have out there. It shows our strength and cooperation and their weakness, but in a way that is just comparative, not directly against them.”

“I like it!” Perez said. “Can your Raiders be ready for a joint raid tonight? I already requested your support from my government as soon as the intel came in.”

“And we’ve gotten approval from our command since then. They had a few options, but the fact is we’ve put in the time, and this seems tailor-made for my team. Just let me know. We’ve got all the capabilities you need here, and more back in Stone Bay.”

“Thank you, Master Sergeant. Let’s make sure Sergeants Ho and Poole are part of it.”

OBJECTIVE ALPHA, 0210 HOURS LOCAL

The convoy of Land Cruisers heading toward the Pacific Dawn stronghold was strung out among the shift-change traffic for the port’s workers traveling along the one-way three-lane road. There were six of the vehicles, spanning more than a decade in age, and all were armored. The local commando force filled four of them and eight Raiders were in the two rear vehicles. Four motorbikes ridden by commandos in civilian clothes scouted two minutes ahead.

Poole tapped the steering wheel and snuck a glance at the front passenger seat where Ho was nodding his head as if he was in conversation with his drones, which in a sense he was.

“I’m seeing some more drone activity off the target building’s roof,” said Ho. “Vectoring in counter-measures.”

From a converted delivery van parked about 500 meters away, a flight of a dozen of his K-Blade attritable drones flew toward the Pacific Dawn safe house. Each carried a fragmentation warhead that when detonated together with other K-Blades could down entire swarms of drones with their flak-like fragmentation.

The host-nation forces would lead the assault, but Perez wanted the Raiders in the two Land Cruisers close by and at the ready. They not only had premier close-quarters combat skills, but they also brought a menagerie of flying and crawling robots that could turn the tide of the raid if resistance was fiercer than expected.

What Perez had made clear to Dale most of all, though, was he needed the Raiders’ aid in the information ops just as much. The online elements of the operation were just as important as the kinetic ones. Whoever seized that algorithmic initiative, gathering and sending out imagery in near-real-time, would establish the “truth” of the situation and drive it viral. They would also highlight most whichever aspects would aid their side’s story, shaping not just the local human and AI-driven conversations, but the global narrative soon after.

Dale, riding in the last Land Cruiser in the column, would have preferred to let his teams’ bots do the initial entry. But Perez trusted his commandos more than the Raiders’ machines. That resistance to letting the robotic elements take the most risks might change with time, maybe even by the next deployment that brought him back here, mused Dale.

Or it might never. It wasn't obstinance, but a matter of knowing that how your forces were perceived in your own country mattered profoundly to their legitimacy and thus ultimate success. Pacific Dawn terrorized innocent people with robotic weapons of all kinds. And so that wasn't Perez's way of war. That was okay, as this ultimately was his country and his war to fight. Shaping and winning the strategic environment meant always remembering that local truth. "What can we do for you?", Dale thought, is the best way to get what we want, too.

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