



# —(烏水溝)—

## OPERATION BLACK DITCH (PART 2)

### Introduction of the PROBLEM

In the business world, firms will often do a *pre-mortem*, where they imagine all the various ways a new project could fail then examine each in turn. Another approach is requiring a team to write the press release for their new project just to get approval to spin off a new team.

In the national security circles, *fictional intelligence, or FICINT*, attempts to envision the future by examining the latest technologies and trends. All three of these require leaps of imagination, educated guesses, not necessarily on what will happen, but what may happen.

Perhaps the most famous FICINT is *Ghost Fleet*, the book was so good it became a verb. As the U.S. Army Special Operations Command looks at the next decade, the commanding general asked every Soldier in each town hall how they envision the future fight. 'Ghost Fleet 2.0' is out there, in the minds of the ARSOF Soldiers. A story that helps the Soldiers of every regiment visualize the various ways ARSOF is going to prevent and, if necessary, fight, World War Three — a story which sparks the imagination of ARSOF's innovative operators and enablers.

The following narrative, *Operation Black Ditch*, is just one vision of how a future conflict with the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP, could play out. What role do you see playing in the coming conflicts? What tools do you see yourself using? What training will you need to focus on? What tools do we need to drop? What will we no longer be able to rely on? What about the future conflict with Russia? Iran? Somewhere else the National Defense Strategy isn't looking? Submit your ideas to [DL-USASOC\\_CAG@socom.mil](mailto:DL-USASOC_CAG@socom.mil).

Editor's note: The following article is fiction. The blue text is a link, and the blacked out text is for aesthetic purposes.



## THE LOOMING SPRING ██████████ (PHILIPPINES)

Seven years wasn't enough to get Ukraine ready. It hasn't been half that since I was first here as a captain. Now a major, George Raleigh stood musing between his sergeant major and his Philippine Special Operations Command on the docks as the sun began to set. We needed more time. His look was dour as he surveyed the four detachments in front of him, two Philippine, two U.S., before turning to his sergeant major saying quietly, "Captain Vissel is young, barely in the company two weeks. Not sure the kid's ready."

Sergeant Major Russel "Rusty" Parkhill couldn't help but grin. "Don't recall you having a lot of miles on your legs the first time you were here in ██████████." When he caught the glare from his commander it only made the old sergeant major grin more. "Sir, pretty soon every one of them is gonna have more experience than they could ever want."

"While I understand the Sergeant major's dark sense of humor, do you really think we're past the point of turning back?" asked Philippine Lt. Col. Jose Pamonag. He shared the same expression as the Maj. Raleigh, as he watched his own Philippine soldiers make final preparations of their kit. Both George and Jose had worked together in more exercises since their first joint combined exchange training (JCET) together years ago, as had the men in their units. Both commanders now shared concerns of losing these men.

Eager to shift his mood, George turned and walked over to one of the members of his headquarters detachment. Psychological Operations (PSYOP) noncommissioned officer (NCO) Sgt. 1st Class Tent Sindal was unwrapping a box full of playing card decks. "What are these?" George asked.

"What's old is new, sir. It's the old World War Two ship identification decks," he said splaying one deck out open in his hands. "We're giving them to the locals and to the teams. With over 5,000 West Philippine Seas users, it'll help us give 7th Fleet an understanding of what's going on down here. I don't expect we'll spot the Fujian, but we'll help them prioritize their resources elsewhere."

Next to him, the AOB's senior digital warrant, also known as "Hacker Chief," Chief Warrant Officer 2 Craig Parkins was opening up two lines of tough boxes. The left line held four drones each, their rotors folded neatly atop each with two skids raised above, only the skids were lined with a small, rubberized track. He began putting each through their diagnostics, then shifted over to the right row and pulled out four small black boxes brimming with small antennas almost like a tiny porcupine.

"Craig, drones I know," Raleigh offered, ... "but what the hell are those?"

"Wasn't sure they'd get here in time, sir; these are the latest chameleons." The tech savvy chief quickly inventoried them before preparing to issue out one per cell.

"Looks more like a bug than a lizard," Parkhill chimed in.

Craig held one up in his hands, the antennas bristling atop them. "These things are going to have the PLAN searching for the 7th fleet from here to Natuna. Even when they figure out they're chasing ghosts, it'll help erode their confidence in their equipment."

As each team's senior commo sergeants began to cycle by and get the new kit, they also drew a single black backpack from Master Sgt. Krivokrasov. The commo NCOs had all spent the last two months training repeatedly with the new kit. "How do you pronounce his name again?" Maj. Raleigh quietly asked his sergeant major, who blanched.

"Just call him Starlord," Craig answered. The command team shared a glance and shrugged.



"Explains the walkman morale patch on his kit," Rusty added. Inside each backpack was the latest version of the tough boxes Craig and Starlord had struggled to lug back to the truck years ago.

The kit had been reduced, replaced with mostly of the shelf parts they could acquire locally, but it still had all the power as it did when it was the size of a truck trailer. With it the teams could disrupt almost any satellite, so long as they could get under the ellipse. And because the systems were so easily produced, these kits weren't just being handed out here on the docks of Palawan. In Djibouti, along the Panama Canal, and even high up in the Line of Actual Control in India, detachments were preparing to wreak havoc on the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) satellite systems.

Lieutenant Colonel Pamonag rejoined the AOB command team on the dock, having just completed similar checks with his teams. Each of the four teams' 16 operators were broken down into further four-man cells, and then partnered with a Philippine cell. The U.S. cell leaders shook hands with a local Philippine fish captain and began loading their equipment on the small boats, to include boxes loaded with high-altitude balloons and tanks of helium. The cells were armed with one of two drones, ready to be attached to these balloons, which despite their given three-letter acronyms, the teams had taken to calling "bats" and "falcons." "Bats" were emitters, similar to the chameleon backpacks they had on their boats. These would broadcast electromagnetic signals to confuse the People's Republic of China's (PRC) sensor arrays, and had already been approved for use. The "Falcon" variety couldn't be employed without authorization, but needed to be in position now. These would dangle from their high-altitude perches and drift over the mainland, before dropping. While not as large as PrSMs or hypersonics, these incredibly accurate weapons could drift over critical logistical equipment, and guided by the PRC's own BeiDou satellites, drop precision destruction on fuel and ammo supply depots. But that also meant striking the PRC's mainland, and thus the POTUS approval required.

As the teams finished loading their gear, there wasn't any last rousing speech, or any cheers. Just a look and a nod from each cell leader to the others. Then the boats silently slipped off the dock, each to their respective missions. Major Raleigh looked to the east and saw nothing but clear skies. With tensions rising every day to the north, he found himself wishing for poor weather. The *Plum Rains* couldn't come soon enough.

#### TAIWAN

Master Sergeant Matt Swann and Sergeant Major Simon Lee sat in a small truck, tucked just under the trees. They waited for another shipment to arrive at the docks. With so many jets streaking overhead these days, it wasn't safe to loiter out in the open. Simon shuddered to think how he'd grown up comforted by the sound of a fast mover overhead back in Afghanistan. No longer. There wasn't going to be anything like that kind of air superiority any time soon.

The PLAN had enacted their soft-blockade a few weeks ago, but thankfully there'd been enough of a warning that the forces on Taiwan hadn't been caught unawares. Ships could still deliver supplies to the island, but they needed a coalition escort past the PLAN ships if they wanted to arrive with their cargo unmolested. There were reports of entire cargo ships having their contents pushed overboard by blockade enforcers. Instead the military's shipments had shifted from cargo tankers to smaller craft, those too small for the PLAN's attention. All the same, this would probably be the last shipment Simon could expect for a while.

They'd been stocking supplies on the island for years now – in warehouses and corners all over the bustling urban terrain that lined the west coast, and deep in bunkers and tunnels throughout the

western mountains. There were even some new and novel subsurface storage designs that had been rushed into service, fabricated to be accessed by unmanned-underwater drones.

Over the last four years, the vast majority of shipments had contained just the things to keep the island alive, food and, more importantly, gas. But those hadn't been Simon's job, those were for logisticians from U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC).

His goods were of a much more devious variety. There were plenty of the old staples like shape charges, ammunition, radios. But, there were also newer, more interesting toys. The latest three-dimensional printers had been an early acquisition, with the requisite filaments to help make replacement parts from plastic or metal.

And, oh so many drones. Simple ones to see things, like the tiny drones that put on light shows instead of fireworks these days. But, also much more deadly ones. Things that made the Turkish Bayraktar look like an iPod One. And not just ones that flew, but ones that swam as well. Things designed to kill every ship and helicopter the PLA planned to use to try and cross Taiwanese Straits, or as the locals called it, "The Black Ditch."

Seeing the ship finish tying up along the dock, Master Sgt. Swann threw their small bongo truck into gear and the pair quickly drove down to get their cargo. Twenty minutes of forklift ballet later and the pair were returning up the narrow mountain road west. It was a long drive back to the other side of the island. Simon looked at the oversized Civil Affairs NCO, hunched over the wheel like the Hulk and realized, they might not be making that drive much longer. The sun set and the sky darkened quickly in the mountains, but no clouds obstructed the moon overhead.



#### TAIWAN

Major Chloe MacLeod sat at her computer in the underground headquarters, clearing out her emails from the day. She'd spent the afternoon running another class of local Taiwanese citizens through first aid and how to spot and report anything they saw. The training was rewarding but also meant when she got back to the headquarters, there was a whole day of messages to catch back up on. There'd barely been a handful of computers when this had been stood up years ago, but now the hive was buzzing.

She spotted Staff Sgt. Robert Agneau talking with a team of Taiwanese and American Soldiers as they looked at a scrolling feed of social media posts. The partnership with the [REDACTED] had only grown over the last four years, and the team had several big wins, in particular with the mobilization messaging. No one was going to take the time to thank them, but it wouldn't have been possible to get four hundred thousand reservists organized and equipped without their work.

They'd also been working both sides of the IO fight. Crushing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) disinformation was a constant job, but Sgt. Agneau described it as "Time to make the donuts," or work they had to do every day, but not very taxing. Where he'd had less success was in messaging back across the straits. The messages they built had impact, but they were always in a race against the censors who would quickly take them down. The latest campaign, targeting the mothers whose whole family line would be lost in the bottom of the Taiwanese Strait seemed to really piss off the CCP, which meant it must work.

Chloe decided to wait on reading her emails and opened up the secure chat app.

How's it going back there?

Major Kaitlin Daishi replied quickly, indicating she was also pulling a late night at the keyboard.

Busy. Wanna See?

If it means I don't have to look at 78 unread emails, yes

Her screen suddenly lit up with a map covered in icons, mostly salmon pink and light green, but a few blue ones throughout.

You're so proud of the CIP you made 🤔

Chloe sent back.

Damn right I am

Kaitlin shot back, followed by a gif of Wonder Woman dancing in a circle. She had every reason to be impressed with herself. Across her Common Intel Picture she had thousands of open source accounts marked, each a spotter trained by one of a tier two open-source intelligence (OSINT) cadre. Tose numbered in the hundreds and she had each marked with a score of one to six on their reliability in assessing and reporting their own analysis. Coupled with the machine learning script, Kaitlin could see a heat map of where she could reliably know what was going on, which meant she could focus her resources on this much smaller piece of the map.

What's the latest projection?

Chloe asked.

Still unclear. It's not impossible for Xi to spin all this up and then not do anything, just impose 🇺🇸 on Taiwan

The build-up certainly hadn't gone unnoticed. Analysts had been projecting 2027 as the highest tension year since the turn of the decade, but in the winter of 2025, when prices on several key commodities spiked, analysts across the Department of Defense start watching closer. Pretty soon the buildup was unmistakable. You can't marshal a million Soldiers and not have anyone notice.

Yeah, but what do you think?

Why does my opinion matter so much?

You're the CJSOTF J2.  
Who on the 🌐 has a better 🧐?

Kaitlin rolled her eyes. Even with all the intelligence systems at her finger tips, and all the OSINT that defined the present operational environment, there was lots of noise.

Five years of mapping PRC state-owned enterprises had helped. Most of Taiwan was holding up well against PRC offensive cyber operations,

whilst a few clever Cyber Command hackers had managed to worm their way into the Chinese Ferries and were currently wreaking havoc on the roll-on-roll-off system.

I think Xi wants to go. He's just waiting till he's certain he can pull it off

So what do we do?

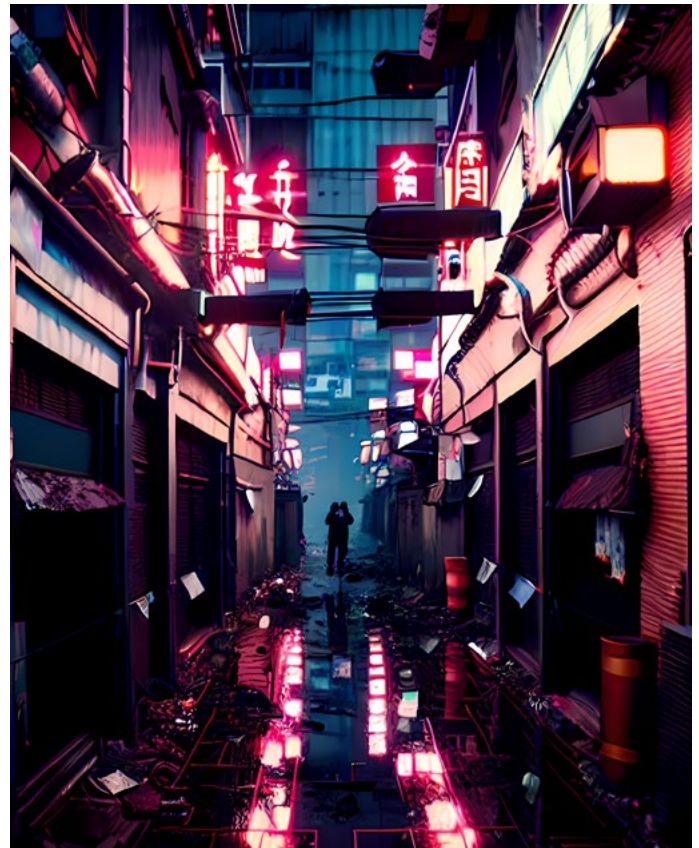
You mean beside 🇺🇸 for 🇨🇳 ?

What's the latest on that?

Plum rains are still three weeks away

So? What do we do?

The usual SOF thing. Devious shiii 🐱



#### ONE WEEK LATER ( TAIWAN)

Master Sergeant Simon Lee glanced over his shoulder before ducking to his left into the alley. Pausing a moment just inside, he waited to see if any curious onlookers followed, but seeing no one he continued on. He cast a glance above him, but saw nothing, neither drones nor the invisible fishing wires that randomly crossed between the two buildings. He'd first heard of the tactic on an NPR podcast, as a means to deter eagles from a chicken farm, but it had shown just as useful against quad copters in the urban jungles.

He paused to slip his smartphone into the faraday bag in his pack, before hustling to the door at the end of the alley. Briskly unlocking it and slipping inside, he hustled down the brief hallway and a flight of stairs before opening another door. He was falling forward more than walking at this point, and didn't stop to talk as he dropped his bag on the desk where Master Sgt. Matt Swann sat typing onto a laptop computer. He wordlessly entered the nearby bedroom, closed the door to complete darkness and laid down on the single bed, not bothering to take his shoes off. Exhaustion took over and he was asleep immediately.

Waking up felt like he was clawing his way to the surface of a deep black pool. He momentarily had no idea where he was, or where up was for that matter. Slowly Simon's memory kicked in and he rolled himself out of bed, opening the door.

Matt cast a glance over his shoulder, and broke into his typical wide grin. "Perfect timing," he said, hoisting the fresh pot of coffee he'd just brewed. Simon staggered over and filled his own mug before heading to the computer desk. "Take it easy, I already transferred all your data of the SD card and downloaded all the latest updates back onto it."

Simon still felt torn but finally decided 30 minutes of coffee and food was a necessary sacrifice if he was going to keep moving. "How long was I out?"

"Maybe four hours. Not enough, but all we seem to get," Matt replied as Simon pushed past him in the small kitchen to start making some ramen. "Those were good reports, and it sounds like the ROC is doing better than expected in the north."

Simon gently placed his bowl of ramen on the coffee table, then fopped back on the couch and stared at the wall-sized map across from him. Neon post-its covered the north and south of the island, depicting both People's Liberation Army in pink, and Republic of China in green. Four days. It felt like longer since Xi had kicked off the invasion.

It wasn't clear what the inciting incident was. There'd been efforts on both sides to deescalate. Just as in Ukraine years earlier, Washington decided to "whistle out of the pool" all its overt forces. However, recognizing Taiwan was not Ukraine and there was no way to drive back in, SOF had been allowed to remain behind in its much smaller size under a strict advise and assist at the joint task force-level only mission. The 1st Special Forces was used to working under such restrictions over the last two decades in the Philippines, but when the PRC started their landing, the conditions of that advising changed.

The CCP wanted to capture Taiwan, not destroy it, so there hadn't been a barrage of missile strikes. Insisting this was an "internal matter" and, in an effort to keep the U.S. and its allies out of the fight, the CCP had deliberately not struck any U.S. forces, both afloat and in the first and second island chain. But the CCP certainly expected SOF on the island, and Simon and Matt both knew they were aggressively being hunted.

The threat was real, but much like in the 1950s, U.S. analysts had underestimated Taiwanese counter-intelligence capability. When the first ships loaded with Soldiers launched from Fuzhou, Beijing found thousands of their agents had been detained or killed overnight.

But the U.S. suffered their own CI failures, and found more than a couple of their cache sites had been burned. One small glimmer of hope had come from the technical shops of one of the special mission units who'd spent the last five years building all sorts of sensors and finding ever more cunning ways of miniaturizing them. These sensors went a long way toward both identifying moles in the network, and protecting critical logistics caches.

Now that the island was fully embargoed, even little logistical losses stung. Every time one of their networks was penetrated it exposed dozens of lives, but even more critically, it could cost them critical supplies and weapons. Simon found himself seething over every time

over the last five years that critical talent and knowledgeable enablers had been forced to PCS to meet arbitrary career timelines and gates. For two decades, new Special Forces NCOs had cut their teeth focused on shooting six-inch dots with nine millimeter rounds. Now that same staff sergeant was advising battalion and brigade commanders on the FLOT and how to maneuver their forces. Simon wondered if they'd prepared these young NCOs enough for the task. Had they gotten nearly as many reps?

The CCP's landings in [REDACTED] had been their largest, and had managed some small success at gaining a lodgment. Further west at [REDACTED] [REDACTED] had been a disaster, in no small part thanks to a battery worth of Palletized Field Artillery Launchers (PFALs) the task force had managed to emplace. The PLA had been so spooked by the tactic they not only avoided dockyards, but they'd also taken to shooting almost every shipping container they saw.

The ROC had fared particularly well against the PLA's air assaults. They'd allowed the initial waves to land at the airfields in the north almost uncontested. But, when the PLA's 5th Aviation Regiment came to land the second wave, they found every rooftop brimming with SHORAD. Without enough forces to expand the lodgment, the members of the 12th Group found themselves quickly overwhelmed and defeated.

Even the forces that had successfully landed in the north were unprepared for the cunning resistance the ROC had prepared. Simon wished he could have seen the face of the 31st Amphibious Armor Brigade when they abruptly found their forces coming under attack from piles of garbage and a suddenly not so innocent recycling truck.

Every single Taiwanese citizen was a sensor in the auxiliary, and thousands had been provisioned accounts on the Taiwanese Tactical Network (TTN). Bring your own device, the system was built on zero trust, but enabled forces across the island to share an ad-hoc near-real-time picture of the fight. Special operations forces provided the key mesh network backbone and kept these nodes moving, and the comms running.

The CCP had attempted to isolate the islands' communications, but even that had proven to be an impossible task. Thousands of micro-satellites crisscrossed the stratosphere above them, as space forces waged a constant but invisible EW campaign to deny, disrupt, and wherever possible coopt each other's systems. Fiber lines had been cut coming off the island but, back at the turn of the decade, a special forces sergeant major and former comms sergeant, had revived the art of [Near-Vertical Incidence Skywave \(NVIS\) shots](#), and several repeating stations had been setup both in Taiwan and the Ryukyus.

Connectivity of island wasn't perfect but, like all domains in this fight, contested. Everyone just had to adapt to the reduced bandwidth. SDcards got passed, and KMZs became the default instead of PPT when kilobytes became the new normal. Off-line map data was prized, but paper maps were just as invaluable.

"Based on the latest from CJSOTF, it looks like the CCP is going to make another go at expanding their foothold down in [REDACTED]" Matt offered, sitting opposite Simon.

"That'll make Chloe's work even harder," Simon replied. Major McLeod had been working the humanitarian flows and civilians pushed south from Taipei and north from Kaoishong, coordinating the evacuation in real-time to deconflict with ROC offensives.

"Speaking of which, I'm due to relieve her so she can get some rack herself," Sgt. Swann stated, as he stood and gathered his own pack. "I've already pushed up the latest reports on [REDACTED] and the APOD down in [REDACTED]. Higher said the marines were very thankful for the data, and I let them know we'll keep it coming real-time from our sources if they go ahead with their landings." At the door he stopped and turned. "Do you think they'll get the green light?"



Simon saw the doubt on his fellow NCO's normally grinning face, and worried it was reflected in his own. He paused to take a drink of coffee before replying. "There's this old Bill Donovan quote, from back before the U.S. joined World War Two. Something about how the job of the OSS was to 'steal the ball, kill the umpire,' all to buy the rest of the nation time. That's what we're doing right now. Buying time for the Fleet to steam west, and for Washington to decide policy." He watched Matt's face but didn't see any change.

He stood up, picking up his bowl of ramen and walking to the computer desk. "I don't know what D.C. is going to do, but I know they wouldn't be able to do anything if we weren't here. And the marines aren't going to know where to go once they land if I don't get to work."

Matt's perpetual grin was back, and he said his good-bye as he slipped out the door. Alone again in the safe house, Simon began typing up another resupply request for the CJSOTF to ferry in under the embargo with their modest UUV feet.

#### (CLARK AFB, LUZON, PHILIPPINES)

As soon as Maj. George Raleigh and Sgt. Maj. Rusty Parkhill had returned to their [headquarters in Fort Magsaysay](#) they'd gotten word the task force would be landing in Clark, so the pair had driven the two hours to meet them as they landed.

The C-17s were in short supply, and Murphy was always the least predictable but most reliable friction. Each lift had to make a series of hops from Georgia, to McChord, Washington, to Elmendorf, Alaska, to Yokota, Japan and finally down to the Philippines. A few birds had broken down along the way, and thus it'd taken almost four days for the typically swift movement to be completed. As each lift arrived after over twenty-four hours of traveling, the young Rangers staggered off the ramp in a haze.

But, in true Regimental fashion a couple senior NCOs started barking and soon the task force headquarters was up and running and the arriving Soldiers billeted. The 160th maintainers were quickly rebuilding their birds and running them through the requisite test flights. The question now was where to apply their forces.

The decision on where to send the task force had to be made quickly, as the resources to move them quickly dried up, but sitting idly was certainly not an option. As the only battalion in the Army that could activate and deploy in under a day, the question was where they could be most useful. Djibouti was floated as an early option but, in the end, the leadership in the Pentagon decided to fly the task force to the First Island Chain. They were a visible sign, part of an attempt to deter the CCP, but they also represented options.

Now Rusty and George stood around a map of the South China Sea alongside the task force leadership and their Intelligence officer. They were trying to come up with exactly that, options.

"What about Subi Reef?" offered Rusty. "You've got that close access cyber team. Why not a smash and grab?"

Major John Lisink, the task force air planner, shook his head. "290 nautical miles from the nearest airfield. That's zero room for errors. With every AFSB east of the Second Island Chain there's no bingo fields to help."

The task force commander, Col. Bob Kitchens gave an equally grim look at the map, 'Gotta be air-land. We'd be pinned to the dirt just on rolled ankles alone in an airborne drop'.

"Ain't no terrain masking out there over the ocean," added one of the 160th chiefs.

"Okay, okay, so that was a shit idea," Rusty apologized. He turned and looked at his commander, "You got any ideas?"

Major Raleigh blanched, giving his sergeant major an annoyed look. Tanks. He stared at the map, and at a loss for ideas, began laying out what he knew. "My teams are all afloat on Philippine fishing boats, spread along the coasts," drawing a line with his finger from Palawan up to the Batanes. Then an idea hit him. "We spent the last year seeding HIMARs pods across the archipelago. The idea was to support marine HIRAIN shoot and scoots, as well as disperse our supplies in case the PLA attacked the PI."

"The marines need a C-130 to put down their launchers, but you could divvy up your squads and disperse them throughout the islands pretty easily with the birds you have."

Colonel Kitchens looked at his command sergeant major, who had a skeptical look in his eye. It wasn't clear if that was because he wasn't seeing the value in the mission, or if he was worried about what trouble young Rangers could get up to on their own tropical islands. "I'm still not sold, but we'll take a look at the locations. Just get the data to my opso."

Sergeant Major Parkhill caught the fellow sergeant major's eye and, gesturing to the map, offered "Well Rangers, lead the way."

#### (JAPAN)

Major Kaitlin Daishi peeled off a strip of Rip-Its, popping one capsule out and quickly swallowing it as she sat down at her desk. They were actually called Soldier Readiness Capsules, or as the military was obsessed with unpronounceable three-letter initialisms, SRCs. But, in part, as a nod to the previous two decades of deployments, and because they came in tear apart strips, everyone quickly started calling the energy pills Rip-Its.

She definitely hadn't gotten as much sleep as the CJSOTF commander was telling everyone to get, but then who was? Despite knowing better, she cracked up a can of energy drink to help wash down the pill and turned off the 'GBNT' screen-saver she'd put on earlier when she'd left the JOC for a nap.

Her system booted up and the machine learning scripts began running through her CIP, pulling in the latest open-source reporting and running preliminary [deepfake scans](#). It wouldn't find everything, but the machine learning scripts at least weeded out the low hanging fruit. It would assign every post a Bayesian score in the upper right corner. Anything below a threshold Kaitlin set was automatically thrown out. It would ask her input on those just above it, which allowed the algo to keep refining and learning. The OSINT poisoning had become just as competitive and evolutionary as warfare itself, only at a much faster and larger scale. Both sides were in an all-out effort to deepen the fog of war.

Two clicks later she was seeing the latest inputs from her level two OSINT reporters, each again given a Bayesian score based on previous reporting and other available reports. She swiped her touch screen left and right, instantly up and down voting her sources, the algo learning from her here, as well.

She took a moment to glance around the JOC and found it roughly half-empty, GBNT screensavers dotting several screens. That was to be expected given the high op tempo of the CJSOTF. When the CCP declared their operation an 'internal matter' it'd given the surrounding nations enough space to reevaluate their commitments. As D.C. debated policy, most of the region held its breath. Singapore had been the first to move and had effectively become Switzerland, declaring they would not take part unless the conflict escalated internationally. This left the SOJTF effectively frozen in amber until US policy was set, so the CJSOTF had picked up their load.

This didn't mean there wasn't action along the periphery. The 5th Group teams were already positioned in Kyrgyzstan, and Naval

Special Warfare Command (NSW) had been given the WARNO about Djibouti. Rumor was the Indian SOLO had walked into the Minister of Defense's office and traced a line from [Ladakh through Lhasa](#) and simply asked, "Sir, where would you like the border to be?" Teams in [REDACTED] it were already energizing their networks into [REDACTED]

Domestically things were progressing, but friction abounded. The TRIWTF was trying to coordinate all the counter-CCP efforts, but they were at reduced manning. Seems the PRC was paying attention back in the winter of 2022, and had learned that instead of a cyber-attack to a SCADA system, [just a few rifle shots were all it took to cripple local power stations](#). Installations like Fort Bragg were still running, but that didn't mean Soldiers who lived in the surrounding area weren't distracted worrying about their families without power. Soldiers all over the U.S. were unleashing malware by clicking on links in emails telling them banks were over withdrawn. Ironically, it seemed the byzantine code of myPay, which seemed to barely work on a good day, was impervious to CCP cyber operators.

Kaitlin copied the algo's output OSINT report into a table and posted it into the group chat, at-ting the commander and other key staff with a quick Tweet-length executive summary. She let out a relaxing sigh at the ease of that. No more time wasted making pretty power point slide pictures. When tools like DALL-E and ChatGPT finally stopped being blocked by the DoD networks, they drove the final nails in PPT's coffin.

The AI tools also super charged the IO war. Prompt engineer became a duty title overnight and ARSOF quickly began heavily recruiting the most skilled young engineer's they could find. Where previously an IO product would take weeks to build, thousands could be generated and iterated in an hour.

Of course, it took the new commander to finally slay the PPT demon. The deputy commander had still wanted his paper copies of slides, printed one-sided of course. But when Dragon-Six actually showed up and heard the DCO refer to himself as "more of an analog kind of guy," the DCO found himself on a fight back to Washington, never to return. The new commander had introduced himself as "the first millennial brigade commander." Overnight data literacy was no longer an advantage, it was an expectation.

The COP stopped being a mega-wall in the front of the JOC. Instead, it was a pool of data that every member of the command and staff was expected to engage with through their own lenses. The AI and ML scripts helped, doing simple tasks like merging a dozen red enemy icons into a single brigade as you zoomed out, tagging it as the 124th Amphibious Mechanized Infantry Division at 62 percent strength. [Once data was the principal thing being shared, instead of pictures of data on PPT](#), all kinds of software tools could be applied and the pace of work tripled.

Abruptly an alert popped up on Kaitlin's screen with a chirp. She heard the same chirp on every other computer in the JOC, which grabbed her attention. She and the remaining staff on the JOC floor all sat up in their seats and leaned over their screens. Major Daishi clicked the pop-up and quickly skimmed the short message. *'Holy shiii, we're doing this.'*

She turned to the battle captain next to her and barked, "Go wake everybody up." As the captain sprinted from the JOC, she next directed the battle NCO, "Tell Maj. Raleigh he's a go."

She took a glance at the half-used pack of Rip-Its on her desk and decided against it, but thought nothing of chugging down a gulp of her energy drink. "Somebody, get Singapore on the line!"

**THE END**

