

Inside the WEZ, 2026

Some history from the future

by Donald M. Bishop

Marine Corps Deployed Historical Team F
Transcript of Interview
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Interviewer: 1stLt Simmons L.A. Marshall, USMCR

Interviewee: GySgt Alejandro “Zorro” Hernandez, USMC

Location: U.S. Naval Hospital, Guam

[Beginning of Audio file 1]

Q: GySgt Hernandez, I am one of the field historians looking at the recent operations inside the first island chain. There is a crowd of historians at Quantico looking at all the messages from III MEF, Seventh Fleet, MARFORPAC, INDOPACOM, the Pentagon, and the White House. And to piece together what the other side was doing, they have thousands of intercepts to translate and read. But what we really need to learn is what was going on with Marines inside the WEZ (Weapons Engagement Zone). At the headquarters, they were thinking and planning; you Marines were the ones who would have to fight.

HERNANDEZ: You got that right, lieutenant!

Q: So, you and your detachment were in Okinawa when Chinese Marines took that Philippine ship that had been grounded on the shoal in the Spratlys—the one with Philippine Marines aboard to enforce their sovereign maritime claim—as well as the next day when the USS *George C. Foulk* was surrounded and rammed by vessels of China’s “maritime militia” as it moved through the South China Sea. Some of the Foulk’s Sailors were casualties.

Were those incidents just a few more salami slices or were they opening

>Mr. Bishop serves as the Bren Chair of Strategic Communications in the Krulak Center at Marine Corps University.

moves in a larger plan? While Washington was debating how to respond, and our diplomats got no sleep getting our allies, partners, and some reluctant nations to clear their decks, the admiral at INDOPACOM and LtGen Hahne at III MEF did not wait. Fearing that the purpose of these incidents was either to discourage us from countering a People’s Republic of China move against Taiwan

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or a showdown for control of the South China Sea, he ordered that all his Marine units disperse from the vulnerable big bases in Okinawa and Japan. The littoral regiment’s units should move to their pre-planned fighting locations along the first island chain to stand inside China’s WEZ. And your detachment went to ...

HERNANDEZ: I never did learn the real name of that island. Actually, it had several different names in different languages. I guess the person who wrote the plan decided to give the islands “American” names. In our outfit, different detachments went to “Kodiak,” “Manhattan,” “Nantucket,” “Largo,” and “Catalina.” So yes, your map is right; we were on “Catalina.” You can

see it is well positioned to block the strait and cramp any adversary moves through that part of the littorals. At least that is what I understood.

Q: Had you been there before?

HERNANDEZ: We had twice deployed the detachment, but both times it was to islands in the Okinawa chain. This was to practice movement and setup under field conditions. We were due for evolutions to the actual islands in the plan, but that had not happened before the balloon went up. I remember Gen Hahne visited us during one of the practice setups near Okinawa, and he said the Marine Corps hoped to be ready for this new kind of fight in 2030. I guess things moved faster than he and the other big shots expected.

Q: How long did it take your detachment to get from Okinawa to Catalina?

HERNANDEZ: I cannot tell you much about the whole big plan, which had all our detachments moving, some to ships, some to smaller craft, and some to islands and shore points. This push came to shove before we were completely reconfigured and ready to fight inside the WEZ. Our detachment, for instance, had not been married up with the new vessels—so we had to get to our designated location by air.

Things were a little crazy in Okinawa, lieutenant. We knew we were part of a naval campaign—Sailors and Marines together. Our pals, the Sailors, were busy loading weapons and fueling all the new boats, tenders, and underwater vessels—some with crews, some without—and putting them to sea. The Marine and naval aviators were deploying aircraft and many different new-model

unmanned aerial vehicles to ships and forward locations. The logistics Marines had long been working to reinvent their business to make it agile and resilient to support Marines in so many dispersed detachments and aboard so many ships, and Gen Hahne's order was the whistle to get on the field for the big game. Everyone was busy!

Of course, there were not enough transport aircraft—Marine, Navy, Air Force—to execute the whole Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations war plan and to move all the detachments and the gear by air. Fortunately, someone arranged to give our detachment a movement priority. Once we got moving on the third day, things were pretty well executed, I thought. The C-130s got us, the vehicles, our weapons packages, the air defense detachment, and the supply containers to the unimproved air strip on the island—even if the pilots were sweating the landing on the short “runway.” Even one of the new flying boats joined in. Once we landed, we were operational the next day. We were congratulating ourselves on our success, but then the problems began.

Q: Problems?

HERNANDEZ: Not just the normal goat rope!



Training, building relationships, and operating “among the people” will be critical to winning inside the WEZ. (U.S. Navy courtesy photo.)

The captain, the lieutenant, and the first sergeant were focused on the mission: get the comm and the weapons set up, and get ready for any adversary moves—air, sea, submarine, missiles, swarms, a landing, whatever. And they were thinking ahead about how we could make a quick move to another fighting location. What they found was that all those intentions were jacked up by having to deal with the local population.

Q: Tell me some more about the island.

HERNANDEZ: It was about twelve miles long, southwest to northeast. In the center, facing the mainland, was a small town. The harbor had a few dozen small boats, a jetty, and a slip for ferries. It was about a 90-minute ferry ride from the mainland.

On our first trip into town, I took a good look at the ferries. We might, after all, have to move from the island by ferry if no air or sea lift were available as any fighting unfolded. The ferries reminded me of the landing craft in the World War II movies but a little larger and a lot rustier. That the crews kept the old tubs operating was a small wonder.

We were at the north end of the island where there was enough flat land for the air strip. There were hills and a

few small mountains between us and the town, which was five or six miles away, as well as more hills south of the town. We initially figured that we could “shoot” from the north end and then “scoot” to the south end. There were also a few hidden coves that could provide other locations for us to set up before we would have to go to another island.

A few hundred people lived at the town. Some of them fished, farmed, or ran little restaurants and places for tourists. As for local government, there was an elected island mayor and a village clerk. There were three policemen and someone from the national fisheries authority. We did not know it at first, but the population included some reservists and some veterans. There was a small church, a temple, a mosque, and some local shrines in or near the town. There was no doctor, but the government provided a nurse practitioner in a small clinic.

When the national internet program had been set up, the island was pretty much forgotten. There was spotty cellphone coverage that depended on a single tower sending and receiving signals from the mainland. They had electricity, of course, but the island's electric grid had been planned with the needs of a small and remote rural economy in mind.

Well, you asked about problems.

First, on the map, it looked like we were a good distance from the town, with hills between us and them, but there was actually a gravel track between the town and the air strip. After all, the townspeople visited the airfield whenever an aircraft came in. Also, we did not know that the island was regularly visited by tourists who roamed all over.

Next, because airlift was so scarce, we jury-rigged our own supplemental logistics. Would you believe there was a FedEx pickup at the town across the water on the mainland? We ended up sending stuff on the ferry to the Fedex shop and waiting for the ferry to deliver

shipments to us. No one had anticipated this, so until the contract and finance folks back on Okinawa made arrangements, the captain had to pay the Fedex fees with his own credit card. I am not confident that he has even been paid back yet.

Third, we discovered that almost no one on the island spoke English. None of us spoke the national language, not to mention the island dialect. We had always exercised around Okinawa where you can find locals who speak enough English. Here we were, in another country, out on a far-off island with a few hundred people. We wished they would just stay away, but who knew if we might need their cooperation? Either way, we could hardly communicate. Even the “English teacher” on the island’s school was tongue-tied with spoken English.

Q: Had you not been issued one of those handheld translation devices?

HERNANDEZ: It might have worked if the local people spoke the standard national language. But they spoke something else. I never want to be dependent on a device for that kind of work again.

Next problem: We assumed the government would send us someone who would, on one hand, interpret and translate—*dang*, the two are not the same—and also be our liaison with the islanders. Such a person did not arrive for three days after we did, and when he arrived on the ferry in his necktie, he put off the island’s leaders. He was too “capital” and too “office,” and he did not speak the local dialect. He had soft hands, and you could tell that he had not spent much time in the sun. He did not want to eat MREs, for sure, and he expected us to drive him into town for meetings and meals. When he went to the—shall we say *downscale*—local restaurants, he acted all high and mighty. He was used to giving orders, not persuading.

Problem number five: Before we went, we had not thought about tourists—maybe a hundred each day. They came

on the ferries for excursions to smell the unpolluted sea breezes, I guess, and eat fresh seafood and drink the famous local yellow lightning. The kind that has a snake in the bottle, too. We were surprised to learn that some of those tourists came from other countries. Those of us who had been on Okinawa for a while knew Japanese when we heard it. LCpl Nguyen grew up in the United States, and she did not speak Vietnamese, but she could hear Vietnamese being spoken among the tourists. The same for Cpl Huang—he recognized individuals were speaking Chinese, even if he did not know what they were saying. In any case, these tourists enjoyed hiking all around the island, sometimes along the shore, sometimes in the hills. Some came to the end of the island to gawk at us. We began to worry about spies among the tourists.

And who knew? There were two part-time reporters on the island: one from a national daily in the capital and another from the province newspaper. They knew how to report by video, too. In the glamorous national media, these two were at the very bottom of the greasy pole. For years, they had sent humdrum local stories to their mainland editors—the fish catch, school graduations, local elections, blessings of the fishing boats by the monks, or an occasional visit by a movie star or famous soccer player. With the arrival of Marines at a time of international tension and crisis, they were now on scene to report a big story.

The local journalists were troublesome enough, but soon every ferry brought Japanese and Korean television crews. They are very aggressive. They also hired local aircraft to fly over our position, so they could send back visuals.

Sixth, we did not know that the islanders heavily supported the opposition party at each election. They could get pretty heated about it—like in Okinawa. And who knew that even a small place like Catalina had in its population dissidents, touchy environmentalists, and antiwar activists.

Our unexpected arrival caught the islanders by surprise. The mayor seemed unaware that his island was to have a role in regional defense against a great power. We guessed the central government may never have told him because they did not want to face adverse local reactions.

Q: Remember that their national government had long been trying to avoid “taking sides,” and they had resisted any planning for operations along the island chain. They were late to see the need to join the regional effort and to give permission for detachments to set up in their territory. When in the capital, they tried for so long to wish away the threat; it is no surprise that local leaders were not in the loop.

HERNANDEZ: It was only the third day after we arrived that one of our vehicles swiped the wall of a small store located on a sharp corner in the town. In Okinawa, everyone relied on the MEF to handle such local problems, expressing sympathy and making an initial recovery payment. A claim would follow. But we did not have any civil affairs Marines who knew how to handle such an incident, and soon the irate shop owner was joined by some friends at the entrance to our little camp at the air strip, demanding restitution for damages. They made quite a scene, all of it recorded by the two reporters. Capt Perkins did his best to calm them down, but he was baffled by this unexpected flareup with local people, and he was unclear how the faraway MEF might help out. Then, the two reporters turned on their cameras and put microphones in his face. He looked like a deer in the headlights.

The island’s member of the National Assembly lived on the mainland and only visited the island during election campaigns, but seeing the sensationalized news reports—and maybe some social media posts planted by a nation that does not wish us well—prompted him to make a trip. As a member of the opposition party, he told the islanders that any supposed threat was overblown. He got wound up and said the Marines

were the real threat, and the real danger was that innocent island residents would soon be the target of attacks.

So, many locals got riled up, encouraged by a few radicals who came over from the mainland. We had people with peace placards at the air strip. That was what we could see.

What we did not see was that a small team broke through the chain link fence around the island's small power station at night, entered, and shut down the island's electricity. Whether they were local radicals or infiltrated "tourists," we did not know. Maybe they thought cutting the island's power would leave our detachment without. We had our own power, though, so our readiness was not directly affected. But without power, the townspeople began to panic, and they didn't blame the radicals, the "tourists," the country that deployed the "tourists," or the country that seized that Philippine ship—but us.

Q: When did the action begin?

HERNANDEZ: It was clear to us all that we deployed as a deterrent only, that none of us would fire the first shot. It was the morning after the power cut-off that we learned of ship movements. Breaking into the open water beyond the first island chain seemed their most likely intent. They must have known Marines would be in their way, but maybe they did not know how quickly and thickly dispersed our detachments would be.

Lieutenant, I do not know any of the big picture or what your historians are learning, but from Catalina, we did a pretty good job. A missile came over the horizon, but Sgt Washington blasted out some of that directed energy, and it came down. The missile did not get to wherever its target was, but it fell on the town. A few buildings were demolished, but thankfully none of the townspeople were hurt.

When an adversary frigate locked on us, we unlocked their lock and let them know our rockets were ready. It

changed course. Our weapons provided the cover for one of our littoral ships while it moved to a more advantageous position to bring to bear its weapons. I never learned where the UAV swarm came from, but we killed most over the water. But we could not get them all, and three put some of our weapons and sensors out of action. That was when the "tourists" fired RPGs down on us from the mountain slope. There were wounded.

Q: You included, I see.

HERNANDEZ: Yes, my bad luck. Doc knew there was not going to be a chopper to get me to a hospital within any "golden hour," so soon after we landed he had been sure to take a look at that island clinic. After the RPG attack, it was he who piled me in a vehicle and drove hellbent to that clinic at high speed. He and the nurse practitioner pulled me through. I hope he gets a medal.

After the missile fell on the town, those three local policemen and the dozen and a half local reservists got mad and organized. They knew every crick and holler on the island, and they terminated the "tourist" threat. All's well that ends well, but I wish we had been to the island before and worked out things like perimeter security with the local authorities ahead of time.

I guess you know the rest of the story.

Q: Yes, the Marine detachments on the islands were the stationary aircraft carriers, and the ships of the fleet were mobile bases in the naval campaign. So thick was the web of ISR, sensors and signals, and overlapping fields of fire by many different weapons, those "adversary" vessels withdrew, not without some damage. We historians are going to have plenty to keep us busy: the role of submarines and mines, how we and they used swarming, how all the different new naval platforms worked, how information operations made a difference, and how dispersed units were supported.

I will come back for a second session tomorrow to go over how the comm, system, and weapons worked. As for what we covered today, do you have any special points to make, your own personal "lessons learned"?

HERNANDEZ: Dang, lieutenant! Where to start? You must have interpreters, and I do not mean a pick-up team! If we are going to fight from islands or onshore again, we need a lot more information on the place—not just terrain but social and cultural knowledge. Our planning needs to think through how the national government and local communities will support us. Maybe they need to provide more local police, for instance. They need to know we are coming and on their side! We needed someone from civil affairs in our detachment to handle relations with the locals.

Finally, our officers needed to have gone through some kind of media training. Some short course and practice interviews, maybe? No one from Fox or MSNBC came to Catalina, but all the local, Japanese, and Korean media that descended on the island were just as troublesome! I do not remember any of these things being included in our simulation exercises and our practice deployments. They ought to be!

Q: What do the docs say about your recovery?

HERNANDEZ: Maybe I will be out on crutches next week. The colonel says I might be able to join him when he visits Catalina to show our appreciation to the islanders. Maybe I can take a few days of my convalescent leave there. The nurse practitioner and I have become social media friends, and I am looking forward to thanking her in person.

[End of Audio File 1]

