CHAPTER 7

THE OPERATORS

‘It’s a very, very strong tug of war inside a pilot, that he has to think about employing this against someone that he really would probably like sitting in a bar with and having a drink. Pilots all love flying, that’s what they love more than anything else. They don’t love killing.’

Jeffrey L. Ethell, former military pilot[156]

‘Insurgents were like having a house infested with rats; the more of them you killed, it seemed, the more they bred.’

US Lieutenant Colonel Matthew J. Martin, drone operator[157]

DURING WORLD WAR II, fighter pilots earned a reputation for being the crème de la crème among enlisted men. Survival in that theater necessitated quick wits, unflappable composure under extraordinarily stressful conditions, and technical savvy at maneuvering a very complicated machine while dodging bullets from all sides. Many pilots sent out on sorties never returned, and those who did were lauded as certified heroes, their sheer survival serving as the proof of their prowess. In World War I, the vocation of the military pilot required perhaps even more daring, as the technology being used was so new.[158] The men who flew out to joust with fighters from the other side in what were tantamount to duels in the sky were esteemed as the best – the boldest and the bravest – in the military. Many of the combatant pilots during World Wars I and II may have been killed in spite of their talent and keen powers of perception, but one thing is clear: those who survived managed to beat not only the odds but also their rivals on the enemy side.[159]

The heroic image of wartime pilots continues to inform people's attitudes toward the military in the twenty-first century, long after such conflicts have receded into the annals of history. For decades now, modern wars have not involved such duel-like combat in the air between the soldiers of two adversarial nations. Instead, the wars waged by technologically advanced states have become very one-sided affairs, with the people on the ground, mainly civilians, subject to massive bombing as pilots above attempt to weaken the forces of the enemy below. Stores of weapons and enemy headquarters are typically located in civilian-populated areas (often urban), with the result that fighting what is depicted as a 'just war' against an 'evil enemy' may result in the slaughter primarily of innocent people who happen to reside in the vicinity of military targets.

The positive image of fighter pilots who fire massively destructive munitions remains nonetheless firmly etched in the minds of war supporters. To those who view the 1945 atomic bombings of Japan as having been permissible or even necessary, Paul Tibbets and Kermit Beahan, who piloted the planes used to destroy the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were heroes. Knowing that their planes might be shot down, the pilots flew over Japan to let loose the most destructive bombs in existence to that point in history. To those who view the razing of civilian population centers in Japan as excessive, the pilots who delivered the bombs to the cities may look more like war criminals. No one, however, denies that fighter pilots exhibit courage, for they risk their lives by flying above territories equipped with anti-aircraft defense systems.

With the advent of the UCAV, a thick wedge has been driven between the myth and the reality of those who maneuver military aircraft. Today, much of the bombing and reconnaissance essential to planning on the ground is being conducted by machines capable of absorbing all of the risk formerly incurred by human pilots. Predator drones and other UCAVs transmit information to and receive instructions from operators sitting in offices thousands of miles from the site of conflict. During World Wars I and II, troops had to persist in makeshift trenches in extreme weather conditions while being deprived for weeks or even months on end of all creature comforts, unable to bathe or change their clothes for long periods of time and subsisting on minimal rations. The stench of death hung in the air, a constant reminder of

the fragility of the troops' existence. In stark contrast, 'office warriors' firing on a twenty-first-century 'battlefield' on the other side of the planet can run out for a Dunkin' Donuts break between their various point-and-click killing missions and return to their homes for a hot meal at the end of the day.

At first glance, it may seem beyond dispute that new technology which takes pilots completely out of harm's way is a positive development. But the effect of this technological capacity on the very concept of war and warriors should not be ignored. The courage and composure so important to military personnel in the past have become less and less necessary, not only for the commander in chief sequestered behind an impenetrable bastion, but also for these so-called warriors themselves. In the twenty-first century, commanders and operators watch war on a big screen, in the manner of a sporting spectacle, not a threat to their ongoing existence. This radical change in the conduct of war is a concern not only among antiwar critics and pacifists who view remote-control killing as murder. When the US Department of Defense drew up plans to offer a medal of valor to drone operators, combat veterans protested so vehemently that the award was scrapped.[160] Veterans who survived potentially lethal missions and witnessed some of their comrades die recognize that both courage and soldierly sacrifice have been deleted from the drone operator's job description.

Before the dawning of the drone age, the changes in what continues to be termed 'warfare' were quantitative in nature. The distance between troops and the enemy was increased through the invention of more and more powerful weapons to be fired from greater and greater distances, but soldiers still risked death through deployment. As technology advanced over the course of the twentieth century, the vocation of the pilot became progressively less dangerous, requiring a person correspondingly less courageous to fill that role. At the same time, risk aversion among commanders and politicians increased dramatically in tandem with the more and more formidable lethality of weapons.

During the 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo, pilots flew high above their targets so as to avoid combatant casualties, even at the cost of mistakes on the ground. The risk intolerance witnessed during that intervention was undoubtedly an effort to avoid the political consequences of soldierly sacrifice after the 1993 'Black Hawk Down' catastrophe in Somalia, when the bodies of slain US marines were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu as rebel forces jeered and cheered. To avoid another such unsavory scenario, US President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright intervened in Kosovo but without deploying ground troops. Not a single US soldier died in the 1999 intervention, but it was still physically possible, in principle, for the pilots to be shot down by enemy forces. When modern pilots flying thousands of feet above their targets face the specter of death in combat – however improbable that may be – it remains possible to believe that they are akin to the heroic warriors of the past.

Persons dressed in military attire, but who no longer bear the risks key to the very concept of the soldier, would seem to be engaged in an altogether different sort of task. There is no sense in which a drone operator's individual instances of killing constitute *literal* acts of self-defense, as was the case in former times whenever soldiers confronted armed adversaries directly – whether on the ground or in the air. Before the drone age, soldiers often found themselves in the position of having to kill or be killed. In stark contrast, point-and-click killers do not risk death should they miss or decline to shoot their targets. Nimble-fingered desktop warriors may be adept video game players, but the game in which they are engaged is unilaterally deadly. If UCAV operators and their associated analysts fail to perform competently, then the people who pay for their mistakes are civilians on the ground.

When the killers formerly known as 'soldiers' are taken completely out of harm's way, then the 'sacrifice' made by commanders becomes *only* the people on the ground – whoever they may be. UCAVs have reduced the physical danger to their pilots to nothing more serious than the carpal tunnel syndrome to which modern office workers in general are

vulnerable. Drone operators depress buttons to kill without incurring any risk to their person should they place an arrow on the wrong image or hit the space bar by mistake. There is, on the other hand, significant risk to the inhabitants of the land in which such missions take place. Not only one errant click, but one piece of bad or expired intel, one false address, one misidentification, one erroneous set of GPS coordinates means the difference between neutralizing a cluster of suspected Al-Qaeda operatives and blowing up a wedding party, human limbs strewn far and wide.[161]

A lengthy kill chain is only as strong as its weakest link. From the perspective of those concerned by the many mistakes made – assuming that the tragic weddings-turned-funerals were not intentionally targeted – the large number of persons involved in the drone killing program introduces the possibility of layers and layers of literally fatal error. Military administrators take great pains to vaunt the superior precision of their latest arms, but the high frequency of friendly fire incidents in Afghanistan and Iraq revealed that, however 'smart' weapons may be, they are still wielded by all-too-human operators. One telling example of friendly fire drone killing was that of Navy Hospitalman Benjamin Rast and Marine Staff Sergeant Jeremy Smith, who on 6 April 2011 were misidentified as Taliban and 'taken out', essentially for being military-age men in a hostile territory.[162] On 9 June 2014, again in Afghanistan, five US soldiers were killed by their own comrades. A military investigation concluded that the incident was 'the result of poor communication, inadequate planning and several other mistakes'.[163] Had the victims been not US soldiers but unnamed 'terrorist suspects', then no investigation would have taken place, and the deaths would have served as proof of their guilt in the official story proffered to the people who paid for the strikes.

Nowhere was the fallibility of the CIA and its associates more spectacularly displayed than at Camp Chapman on 30 December 2009, when government analysts and private contractors were blown up in a suicide bombing by a double agent who had tricked high-level personnel into believing that he was on their side. Just as the Pentagon, the institution charged with defending the United States against physical attack, proved incapable even of protecting the perimeters of its own buildings on 11 September 2001, the CIA, the agency charged with generating and analyzing intelligence, was hoodwinked into serving up some of its own to Al-Qaeda.

Supporters of the targeted killing program tend to ignore the disturbing implications of such mistakes and gullibly assume that the 'militants' and 'insurgents' reportedly slain in missile strikes were guilty, not innocent, suspects. However, the documented destruction of obviously innocent children by the US government in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya reveals that the civilian occupants of lands under weaponized drone surveillance are at continuous risk of the arbitrary termination of their lives. This is a particularly sinister type of moral harm to the innocent persons terrorized by the prospect of their imminent demise and the impossibility of protecting themselves from the menacing drones hovering above in the sky.

A further, and in some ways more insidious, moral wrong is being done at the same time to the communities where strikes are carried out. Persons terrified of being marked as *associates* begin to draw into themselves as social gatherings become increasingly dangerous for their potential to be misinterpreted as terrorist retreats. Once people are killed by missiles thundering down from above, militants on the ground round up and execute persons whom they believe to be treacherous collaborators with the perpetrators of the drone strikes. David Rohde, an American journalist who was held in captivity for months by the Taliban, relays one such incident: 'Several days later, we hear that foreign militants have arrested a local man. After the militants disemboweled the local man and chopped off his leg, he purportedly "confessed" to being a spy. Then the militants decapitated him and hung his body in the town bazaar as a warning to the local population.'[164]

In this way, entire communities come under siege as trust and interpersonal relationships are destroyed along with intended individual targets (suspects who may or may not be guilty of capital crimes) and the unintended victims. Qadir Khan, a Waziristan civil servant, illuminates the stressful conditions of the people living in the peripheral areas under attack:

> Innocent people are being killed day in and day out. Some are killed by militants to terrorize people, branding them as American spies and friends of Pakistan army; others are killed by Pak army for violating so-called lawful orders or branding them as conspirators and friends of the militants and yet others are killed by drone attacks of the Americans. They are all killing innocent civilians without a fair trial, without a chance to prove their innocence. They are all together in the kill for different reasons.[165]

Some drone operators appear to be insulated from the moral questions raised by their vocation and may even delight in the production of 'bug splats' and 'splashes' using joy sticks familiar to them from video games played during childhood.[166] They may gleefully pursue the 'squirters', the fleeing survivors of an initial strike who run desperately away in an attempt to evade annihilation by a follow-up missile. Other operators have denied that they kill their targets mechanically, as though in a video game. Chad, an RPA operator interviewed in the documentary *Rise of the Drones*, staidly reports: 'It's not like a video game at all. There's no reset button. There's no turning it off. You have to stay there … and stay focused on the destruction that you just caused, from your aircraft.'[167]

Operators sometimes become troubled to the point where they develop PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and abandon the profession, although they never personally risked any physical danger as they killed.[168] Such cases reveal that, more than trauma from the fear of death, moral consequences such as guilt may weigh heavily on an institutional killer's conscience. Drone operators may track their targets over lengthy periods of time before killing them, watching them interact with their family, eat meals and engage in other normal human activities. After a target is taken out, the drone operator monitors what happens as people rush to the scene. When a strike victim does not die instantly, the operator watches him slowly bleed to death, as the infrared heat signature of a living body fades from the screen, and the person 'splashed' eventually blends in with the ground.

Given the fluid context of factional terrorism and the malleable selection criteria and ROE more generally, reports of drone operators who suffer compunction for what they have been asked and have agreed to do should come as no surprise. Nor is the high burnout rate of persons in this profession difficult to comprehend.[169] The most fundamental ROE of a uniformed soldier, that his very life or his comrades' lives should be in immediate danger before he wields deadly force, has been altogether dispensed with in contexts where there are no soldiers on the ground to protect. This situation naturally evokes critical questions in some operators' minds regarding what precisely they are doing and why. Will they be condemned as murderers later on down the line? Even if they are not, they must live with the knowledge of what they have done.

Some of these 'soldiers' no doubt recognize that a 'rule' according to which males between the ages of sixteen and fifty are fair game for targeting is arbitrary – and perhaps even deeply unjust. The notion that a person should be erased from existence for the 'crime' of carrying a weapon in a country such as Pakistan, which is not even under US occupation, is equally preposterous, and all the more so in view of the fact that Americans generally affirm their right to bear arms as a means of self-defense. The young operators (often recruited directly out of high school) asked to kill fellow human beings in accordance with such ROE may appreciate that they themselves would have been branded as

terrorists and fair game for execution, if only they had been unfortunate enough to come of military age in a territory identified as 'hostile' by the Predator drone program administrators. The ROE have become more and more lax as definitions and concepts are modified in order, apparently, to maximize the number of targets killed. Such killings can then be claimed as successes in the seemingly endless war against violent extremists, accruing political capital to the commander in chief and high-ranking officials at the expense of the innocent persons terrorized and destroyed.[170]

Seasoned professionals may occasionally feel pangs of compunction about their acts of killing, even when they are convinced that the persons whom they eliminated were guilty of crimes. Such operators may not abandon the vocation but still perceive on some level that there is something vaguely disturbing about the practice in which they are engaged. Yuval Diskin was the head of Israel's Shin Bet from 2005 to 2011, the period during which targeted killing came to be a standard operating procedure as a result of the advent of drones. About this practice, he reflects:

> Sometimes it's a super-clean operation. No one was hurt except the terrorists. Even then, later, life stops, at night, in the day, when you're shaving. We all have our moments. On vacation … You say, 'Okay, I made a decision and X number of people were killed. They were definitely about to launch a big attack. No one near them was hurt. It was as sterile as possible.' Yet you still say, 'There's something unnatural about it.' What's unnatural is the power you have to take three people, terrorists, and take their lives in an instant.[171]

Drone strikes are viewed by advocates as legitimate acts of war but by opponents as the point-blank annihilation of either a soldier denied the right to surrender or a suspect denied the right to appeal his extrajudicial conviction. Predictably enough, given these diametrically opposed ways of viewing remote-control killing, there are essentially two types of operators: those who become plagued by what they do, to the point where they abandon the profession, and those who rise in the ranks to become commanders.

Brandon Bryant is an example of the burnout operator. In reflecting on his experience he laments: 'I saw men, women and children die during that time. I never thought I would kill that many people. In fact, I thought I couldn't kill anyone at all.'[172] Only those operators who are able to process this practice as morally permissible, and even worthy, will come to occupy command and control positions in the future. They will naturally promote and perpetuate the Predator drone program, in part as a way of demonstrating that what they have already done was right all along.

Predator (2010), the memoir of drone operator Matthew J. Martin, who killed targets in both Afghanistan and Iraq, disturbingly reveals that 'well-adjusted' personnel (not suffering from PTSD) may regard their victims as subhuman – he refers to them variously as 'rats', 'mice' and 'rabbits' – while also knowing that their anger has been provoked by the US military itself. The most obvious problem with Martin's rat analogy (aside from its denial of the humanity of the persons 'exterminated') is that, in occupied lands such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where Martin pursued and killed insurgents, the 'house infested with rats' was owned by the 'rats', not their killers. The hegemonic presumption that the United States has the right to occupy any land on the planet is in fact what has directly motivated much, if not most, anti-American terrorism.

Occasionally Martin evinces short blips of awareness of what critics might find to be wrong with his role as a remote-control killer, executing people in lands far away when his own life is not in any direct danger at all. In reflecting on the 'unreal' nature of his involvement in wartime operations when he flew from Virginia to Nevada to kill people, Martin

writes: 'I flew nearly 3,000 miles to climb into a stationary cockpit and fly an unmanned warplane 7,500 miles away to find some angry poor people and kill them. Then I caught a commercial air carrier to go 3,000 miles back home to have breakfast with my wife.'[173]

Throughout his first-person account of life as a drone operator, Martin repeatedly ridicules the radical Islamists for believing that they will be rewarded with seventy-two virgins in heaven for their sacrifice. Probably the worst part of this frank but unselfconsciously disconcerting account is Martin's smug sense of superiority.[174] In addition to denigrating in a rather xenophobic way nearly everything and everyone non-American, he repeatedly refers to himself as 'the professor', even while failing to understand the most basic problems with the war in which he is killing. 'The professor's' account of why he is killing Iraqis is that 'the United States invaded Iraq on the grounds of "weapons of mass destruction" and Saddam Hussein's alleged support of Al-Qaeda terrorism'.[175] That those pretexts were entirely spurious is swiftly ignored or forgotten throughout the rest of the book, as Martin delights in deriding Saddam Hussein and everyone else labeled by him as 'the bad guys'. But if the 2003 invasion of Iraq was illegal, then every single person killed in the conflict was the victim of a war crime – including those targeted by Martin – an implication which escapes him entirely.

The author repeatedly refers to his task as 'hunting', and in several different passages equates his quarry with rodents. The hunting analogy is quite apt, for the radical power disparity between the hunters and the quarry in drone killing is patent. Animals pursued in the wild by men with big guns are obviously at a marked disadvantage. The flouting of any conception of fair play leads people on the ground to despise the US government for its Predator drones, denouncing the killers as ignoble cowards who hide in their trailers in Nevada while they snipe unwitting suspects, some of whom are entirely innocent of any wrongdoing.

The sound bite that drones 'project power without projecting vulnerability' leaves out their most important and intensely emotional effect upon some among the bereft survivors: to inspire hatred. Precisely such hatred gives rise to factional terrorism in what the perpetrators regard as just retaliation for war crimes. Faisal Shahzad, who plotted to bomb Times Square in New York City, testified at his trial: 'The drones, when they hit, they don't see children. They don't see anybody. They kill women, children, they kill everybody.'[176] A mild-mannered Yemeni lawyer expressed a related concern and strategic warning on Twitter: 'Dear Obama, when a US drone missile kills a child in Yemen, the father will go to war with you, guaranteed. Nothing to do with Al-Qaeda.'[177]

Predator offers an unsettling but eye-opening record of a drone operator's way of processing a war in which he annihilates from thousands of miles away people who pose no immediate threat to him when they are killed. Above all, Martin's account reveals the mental gymnastics needed to be able to live with oneself in carrying out such a vocation. Martin occasionally seems vaguely to grasp what is wrong with the practice in which he is engaged, but he then moves quickly to dispel this impression. The epilogue to the book is an unequivocal declaration of Martin's belief in the rightness of what he is doing, which leads one to suspect that the text may have been appended at the behest of his commanding officers.

Martin's actions contributed to the ever-expanding class of enemies in the 'house of rats' which the invaded lands became as angry poor people (by his own characterization) teamed up with terrorist factions in direct response to what they took to be war crimes committed by the US government. Yet the drone operator proceeds to forget all of this when he writes: 'Sometimes it didn't make a lot of sense, fighting the Global War by killing one or two guys at a time. Still, I supposed if we kept at it long enough and killed enough of them, the violence would eventually subside to the point that

our rebuilding efforts could gain traction and we'd be on our way to bringing some sort of stability, if not prosperity, to the country.'[178] This sort of reasoning on the part of higher-level military officers and analysts may have been what gave rise to the administration's labeling of all military-age men in hostile areas as combatants and legitimate targets, not only in places such as Fallujah but also, later, in the northwestern provinces of Pakistan.

In what has become a frenzy of killing, all sight has been lost of the human nature of the victims. 'Towel heads' and '*hadjis*' were reviled by the US ground troops who faced an unremitting threat of death as they patrolled occupied territories, but their rage blinded them to the causal mechanism – the concrete factors – which gave rise to so many incensed insurgents in the first place. Killers create killers who create more and more vicious killers, and after a few iterations of this senseless cycle of violence it becomes impossible for either side to regard the other as human beings. The enemy is cast as loathsome and evil, irremediably unjust and immoral. They must be wiped from the face of the earth in order, the killers claim, for peace and justice to be able to reign once again. But there is a glaring problem with this approach: insurgents and terrorists are not born; they are made.

During the US occupation of Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to his credit, at one point posed a surprisingly incisive question: 'Are we capturing, killing, or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against [our forces]?'[179] Rumsfeld did not, however, go on to connect the dots. He somehow failed to process the direct causal connection between the commission of war crimes by agents of the US government and the increased propensity of young Islamic men to join the ranks of the insurgents retaliating violently against such acts. Insurgents and terrorists do not simply pop into existence *ex nihilo*. They are formed in cultural contexts from children (usually boys), and have often witnessed the consequences of military campaigns.

When young persons observe the brutal effects of bombing and night raids, this serves to confirm in their minds what insurgent and terrorist leaders have already claimed in efforts to galvanize support for their cause to defeat the enemy through jihad. General Stanley McChrystal reportedly coined the phrase 'insurgent math' to explain how killing two members of a group of ten insurgents would not leave eight behind, but perhaps twenty, because: 'Those two that were killed, their relatives don't understand that they're doing bad things. Okay, a foreigner killed my brother, I got to fight them.'[180] Admiral Michael Mullen offered a related warning: 'Each time an errant bomb or a bomb accurately aimed but against the wrong target kills or hurts civilians, we risk setting our strategy back months, if not years.'[181]

Unfortunately, the essentially self-defensive logic of much of the insurgency in Iraq appears to have escaped those who ordered the disruptive patrols and night raids throughout that land. Had the patrols not been carried out in the way in which they were, had military-age men not been rounded up like cattle, taken away for months at a time and subjected to 'enhanced interrogation techniques' until they 'divulged' what they may or may not have known, then in all likelihood the insurgency would never have grown to the unwieldy extent to which it did. As the State Department itself owned, the global incidence of terrorism increased markedly subsequent to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration averred that during the occupation Iraq became a 'magnet' for aspirant terrorists, who traveled to the country and in some cases martyred themselves for the opportunity to kill US troops.

Some war supporters spun the 'magnet effect' as good in the sense that the military was 'taking the battle to the enemy' and drawing terrorists to a centralized place where they could be hunted down and obliterated rather than allowed to attack the US homeland as on 11 September 2001. This view, which gained a following among many people

in the United States, mistakenly assumed a constant, finite number of terrorists who could be drawn to the magnet and then dispersed like iron filings in the wind. In truth, the practices of the US military and its associates were largely responsible for the rapid and continuous augmentation of the ranks of the insurgents.

In thinly veiled efforts to rationalize their actions above all to themselves, Matthew Martin and other drone operators invoke episodes from the past, especially World War II, drawing analogies between what they do and what enlisted men before them did. The analogy to World War II falls apart the moment one recognizes that the US troops in Iraq were more like the Germans than the Allied forces in France. As far as their general role as 'soldiers' is concerned, the drone operators who report to work in combat uniform to spend the day in secluded trailers far from the bloody fray and impervious to any form of threat are not unlike George W. Bush, who, too, dressed up in combat pilot gear, pretending to be a warrior in a staged appearance on an aircraft carrier to announce 'Mission Accomplished' after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. All of this might be laughable if it were not so devastating for the victims and the survivors left bereft in the wake of missile strikes and terrified by the prospect of being next in the line of fire.

The suicide hijackers of 11 September 2001, despite having been willing to march directly to their deaths in defending their 'cause', were decried as 'craven' and 'cowardly' by many Americans, including the president and other government officials, and this depiction was further promoted by patriotic pundits in the mainstream media. In fact, a closer look at the criminal actions of terrorist factions reveals that they have done no more than to devise innovative strategies with the aim of defeating an adversary whose orthodox military means vastly exceed their own. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates were not the first groups in history to have adopted this ploy.

During World War II, members of the French resistance operated covertly, in civilian attire, using guerrilla warfare tactics to sabotage the operations of occupying German troops. Helmuth Tausend, a former captain in the German army who was stationed during the occupation in Clermont-Ferrand, recounts one such episode during an interview in Marcel Ophüls' film *Le chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*) (1969):

> A detachment of our troops near Clermont passed in front of twenty-odd peasants digging up potatoes. Suddenly they all dropped their hoes, dashed toward their guns, and proceeded to shoot fourteen of our men dead. Do you consider that a partisan war? For me, partisans are people who wear armbands, helmets and the like. What happened in that potato field was assassination. You must admit that we were obliged to react. I'd even say that it was our duty, as officers, to demand security measures for our troops.

By denouncing in no uncertain terms what he takes to be this outrage, the German captain appeals to the 'rule of war' according to which soldiers, even 'partisans', must identify themselves as combatants by wearing uniforms or, at the very least, some form of visible insignia on their arms, in order to distinguish themselves from noncombatant civilians. What the German officer appears not to understand – although it is difficult to see how that could be – is that to have done so would have made the French resisters immediate targets for execution by the occupying troops. Not only would identifying themselves as dissenters have been suicidal, even more importantly it would have utterly sabotaged their own mission to defeat the Germans. The desperate underdogs in these conflicts are often willing to die for their cause, but they are not willing to die for no reason at all. In this regard, they do not differ from regular, uniformed soldiers, who fight only until it becomes obvious that there is no hope, at which point they lay down their arms before the more powerful force.

Matthew Martin goes out of his way to relay his experiences on site in Afghanistan and Iraq, where he was sent to train other operators, and specifically his sense of fear when his living quarters came under attack from enemy fire. However, he fails altogether to recognize that when, as a drone operator, he labored to protect troops on the ground in occupied Iraq, he was much closer to German soldier Helmuth Tausend than to any US soldier sent to Europe during World War II. From Martin's first-person perspective, of course, his life is in danger. But because the land had been wrongly invaded, the occupiers had no legitimate cause for complaint when the local people retaliated violently. That Iraq went on to become a meeting ground and recruiting camp for Al-Qaeda jihadists in the region was simply the grandest consequence of the many strategic follies of an ill-advised war against another nation at peace, followed by an inept occupation.

Reading *Predator*, the published first-person account of a drone operator whose self-proclaimed mission is to 'hunt and kill' persons deemed worthy of death by anonymous analysts, does not provide much reason for believing that those who fire the missiles are any less fallible or ignorant than the employees of Blackwater, some of whom were reported to have indulged in 'target shooting' of innocent people while working in Iraq.[182] Here is a typical example revealing Martin's basic ignorance of history, specifically regarding how Saddam Hussein became a dictator: 'I flew missions over Baghdad, looked down upon where he was confined, and puzzled over the depravity of human nature that spawned sadistic men like him and allowed them to attain such power'.[183] Martin, 'the professor', appears to be entirely unaware that his own government empowered Saddam Hussein by furnishing him with military aid and technology throughout his vicious eight-year war with Iran.

The significance of this account is not merely anecdotal. Given that the author is an active-duty officer of the US military – indeed, a lieutenant colonel – his work must have been vetted by the powers that be. Martin's is not just some outlier piece of screed scrawled by a 'bad apple' or low-level grunt soon to be court-martialed, unemployed and perhaps even homeless. *Predator* is a book-length account which has been approved by some of the very administrators who decide when and where other people should die. The operator's ignorance of basic facts of history, and his unbridled disdain for the cultures of the people slain, screams out from every page. The fact that his memoir was even published reveals that Martin's commanders, too, see nothing wrong with characterizing the victims of drone strikes as vermin, 'rats' and 'mice' to be hunted down and exterminated.

At one point, Martin explains the criterion used for deciding to kill a person posing no physical threat to him: 'A target was fair game as long as he [the ground commander] could demonstrate a hostile act or hostile intent.'[184] But 'hostile intent' is entirely a matter of interpretation. Is yelling out in rage against the US occupation a demonstration of 'hostile intent'? Apparently so. Journalist Michael Hastings learned from discussions with military personnel that 'pilots gauge enemy and friendly areas by the reaction of the Afghans they fly over. Friendlies wave and smile. Enemies throw rocks and show the bottoms of the soles of their feet, an insult in the Muslim world.'[185]

In his resignation letter lamenting the disastrous mission in Afghanistan, former US Foreign Service Officer Matthew Hoh wrote: 'I have observed that the bulk of the insurgency fights not for the white banner of the Taliban, but rather against the presence of foreign soldiers.'[186] Matters only become worse when there are no commanders on the ground and no troops below to protect, as in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen, with which the United States is not even at war. At this point in history, the right to 'make the call' has been dispersed across many commanders as the web of US targeted killing has expanded and the hit lists and line items have multiplied, increasing the opportunities for abuse by

personnel who for one reason or another wish to kill with impunity, as they are now able to do. The use of the vague criterion of 'hostility' in determining whom to execute is furthermore grounded in an erroneous understanding of the enemy as bent on attacking the United States. In reality, the intentions of most insurgents are far more local. GWOT has been seized upon by many a corrupt foreign leader to enlist the US government to aid and abet their campaigns to neutralize political enemies and people living on the periphery long regarded as troublesome.[187]

Martin occasionally exhibits some awareness of how people opposed to the practice of remote-control killing view what he does. Here is how he caricatures their puzzlement: 'Some people would look at me strangely. "Let me get this right," they might say, and I knew what was coming. "You're out there on the air force base killing innocent people on the other side of the world while they can't shoot back at you?"' Yet the operator does nothing to dispel the dark cloud hanging over his vocation: 'I tried to contain my temper, I truly tried. Not always successfully. Sometimes I broke down my response to a few words: "You have no idea what you're talking about."'[188]

The burden of proof of moral permissibility lies with the person who would kill other human beings when his own life is not immediately – or even remotely – threatened, not with the person who expresses surprise and consternation that anyone should agree to do such a thing. Matthew Martin and all of the weaponized drone operators and sensors like him are, setting euphemisms to one side, professional killers. They are not soldiers in the traditional sense, and until what they are doing has been explained and justified to the people at direct risk of death, those who are regularly terrorized by drones flying above their heads, it will continue to look an awful lot like murder.

The proudest professional accomplishment of Matthew Martin, as described in *Predator*, and apparently the grounds for his promotion to the rank of lieutenant colonel, is to have shortened the 'kill chain', making it easier for operators to destroy targets without first getting higher-level clearance. The drone operator begins from the assumption that what he is doing must be right, and then maneuvers and negotiates so that he and his coworkers will be permitted to kill more people faster. What needs to be examined is why and how anyone – whether military supporter or not – should believe that killing persons located thousands of miles away who are not engaged in combat is a noble vocation. Isn't that precisely what Osama bin Laden did on 11 September 2001?

The scenario on the twenty-first-century 'battlefield' fired on by drone operators bears scant resemblance to the history of human sacrifice during the wars of centuries past. The persons directly threatened with annihilation by military weapons have become less and less likely to be soldiers themselves. Civilians may not be the targets, but they are sometimes the victims, and even when they survive, they have been and continue to be terrorized by the ominous threat of death. The diminished physical risk on the part of drone operators is accompanied by increased risk – both physical and psychological – to the innocent people on the ground. If terrorism is the arbitrary threat of death against innocent people, then there is no denying that the hovering overhead of weaponized drones is terrorism, plain and simple. It is not recognized as such by the perpetrators only because the practice of targeting killing grew slowly, step by step, out of what were construed to be acts of just war.

More than anything else, *Predator* succeeds in illustrating how remote-control killers, who face no physical danger while annihilating human beings on the other side of the planet, are able to sleep at night. Whenever conscience begins to stir, it must be suppressed, by all means necessary, in order to rationalize killing 'angry poor people' abroad. The insider perspective shared by Martin goes a great distance toward explaining the antipathy of the people of lands besieged by US missiles. Indeed, it seems safe to say that this memoir could be used as yet another recruitment tool by Al-Qaeda, revealing, as they would interpret it, the ignobility of the enemy.

From the perspective of the victims, what drone operators do seems much closer to what a professional hitman does than what the soldiers of World War II did in confronting an enemy bent upon killing them. This enormously important strategic point has been lost on those who run the Predator drone program: *The people on the ground base their future actions on their own interpretations, not those of the operators who killed their loved ones and cratered their homes.* Drone operators kill vastly more people than do soldiers in conventional combat, and the sheer magnitude of their carnage takes its psychological toll in some cases. Certainly, it seems safe to say that no soldier on the ground has personally killed or facilitated the execution of 1,626 human beings, as Brandon Bryant did.[189] Is he a hero, or is he a mass murderer?