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The Most Important US Air Force Base You've Never Heard Of. The Ramstein Air Base in Germany

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Global Research, March 26, 2018
The Nation 7 July 2016

Region: Europe
Theme: Militarization and WMD, US NATO War Agenda

This article which was originally published on Global Research in July 2016 outlines the underreported air base of the US in Germany which plays an important role in the US' global "war on terrorism".

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The overseas hub for America's "war on terror" is the massive Ramstein Air Base in southwest Germany. Nearly ignored by US media, Ramstein serves crucial functions for drone warfare and much more. It's the most important Air Force base abroad, operating as a kind of grand central station for airborne war—whether relaying video images of drone targets in Afghanistan to remote pilots with trigger fingers in Nevada, or airlifting special-ops units on missions to Africa, or transporting munitions for airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Soaking up billions of taxpayer dollars, Ramstein has scarcely lacked for anything from the home country, other than scrutiny.

Known as "Little America" in this mainly rural corner of Germany, the area now includes 57,000 US citizens clustered around Ramstein and a dozen smaller bases. The Defense Department calls it "the largest American community outside of the United States." Ramstein serves as the biggest Air Force cargo port beyond US borders, providing "full spectrum airfield operations" along with "world-class airlift and expeditionary combat support." The base also touts "superior" services and "exceptional quality of life." To look at Ramstein and environs is to peer into a faraway mirror for the United States; what's inside the frame is normality for endless war.

Ramstein's gigantic Exchange store (largest in the US military) is the centerpiece for an oversize shopping mall, just like back home. A greeting from the Holy Family Catholic Community at Ramstein tells newcomers: "We know that being in the military means having to endure frequent moves to different assignments. This is part of the price we pay by serving our country." Five American colleges have campuses on the base. Ellenmarie Zwank Brown, who identifies herself as "an Air Force wife and a physician," is reassuring in a cheerful guidebook that she wrote for new arrivals: "If you are scared of giving up your American traditions, don't worry! The military goes out of its way to give military members an American way of life while living in Germany."

That way of life is contoured around nonstop war. Ramstein is the headquarters for the US Air Force in Europe, and the base is now pivotal for using air power on other continents. "We touch a good chunk of the world right from Ramstein," a public-affairs officer, Maj. Tony Wickman, told me during a recent tour of the base. "We think of it as a power-projection

platform." The scope of that projection is vast, with "areas of responsibility" that include Europe, Russia, and Africa—104 countries in all. And Ramstein is well-staffed to meet the challenge, with over 7,500 "active duty Airmen"—more than any other US military base in the world except the Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.

Serving the transport needs of war efforts in Iraq and Syria (countries hit by 28,675 US bombs and missiles last year) as well as in many other nations, Ramstein is a central pit stop for enormous cargo jets like the C-5 Galaxy and C-17 Globemaster. The Ramstein base currently supports "fifteen different major combat operations," moving the daily supply chain and conducting urgent airlifts. Last July, when Ankara gave Washington a green light to use Turkey's Incirlik Air Base for launching airstrikes in Syria, vital equipment quickly flew from Ramstein to Incirlik so F-16s could start bombing.

But these days a lot of Ramstein's attention is focused southward. The base maintains a fleet of fourteen newest-model C-130 turboprops, now coming in mighty handy for secretive US military moves across much of Africa. With its sleek digital avionics, the cockpit of a C-130J looked impressive. But more notable was the plane's spacious cargo bay, where a pilot explained that it can carry up to 44,000 pounds of supplies—or as many as 92 Army Airborne "jumpers," who can each be saddled with enough weapons and gear to weigh in at 400 pounds. From the air, troops or freight—even steamrollers, road graders, and Humvees—leave the plane's hold with parachutes. Or the agile plane can land on "undeveloped air fields."

With Ramstein as its home, the C-130J is ideal for flying war matériel and special-operations forces to remote terrain in northern and western Africa. (The Pentagon describes it as "a rugged combat transporter designed to take off and land at austere fields.") In mid-2014, the itinerary of a single trip got into a fleeting news story when a teenage stowaway was found dead in a wheel well of a C-130J at Ramstein, after the plane returned from a circuit to Tunisia, Mali, Senegal, and Chad. Stealthy intervention has escalated widely in the two years since journalist Nick Turse found that the US military was already averaging "far more than a mission a day on the continent, conducting operations with almost every African military force, in almost every African country."

The officers I met at Ramstein in early spring often mentioned Africa. But the base mission of "power projection" hardly stops there.

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In the American foreign policy lexicon, peace has become implausible, a faded memory, a mythic rationale for excelling at war. An airlift squadron at the Ramstein Air Base, which proudly calls itself the "Fighting Doves," displays a logo of a muscular bird with dukes up. On lampposts in a town near Ramstein's gates, I saw campaign posters for Germany's Left Party (*Die Linke*) with a picture of a dove and a headline that could hardly have been more out of sync with the base: *Wie lange wollt Ihr den Frieden noch herbei-bomben?* "How much longer do you want to keep achieving peace by bombing?" Such questions lack relevance when war is perceived not as a means to an end, but an end in itself.

More than ever, with relatively few US troops in combat and air war all the rage, the latest military technology is the filter of the American warrior's experience. When Ramstein's 60,800-square-foot Air and Space Operations Center opened in October 2011, the Air Force crowed that it "comes with 40 communication systems, 553 workstations, 1,500 computers,

1,700 monitors, 22,000 connections, and enough fiber optics to stretch from here to the Louvre in Paris." (Mona Lisa not included.) A news release focused on "the critical mission of monitoring the airspace above Europe and Africa" and "controlling the skies from the Arctic Circle to the Cape of Needles." But the Defense Department didn't mention that the new hyper-tech center would be vital to the USA's drone war.

Ramstein receives visual images from drones via satellite, then relays the images to sensor operators and pilots at computer terminals in the United States. "Ramstein is absolutely essential to the US drone program," says Brandon Bryant, a former Air Force sensor operator who participated in drone attacks on Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia for five years while stationed in New Mexico and Nevada. "All information and data go through Ramstein. Everything. For the whole world."

Bryant and other sensor operators had Ramstein on speed dial: "Before we could establish a link from our ground-control station in the United States to the drone, we literally would have to call Ramstein up and say 'Hey, can you connect us to this satellite feed?' We would just pick up the phone and press the button and it automatically dials in to Ramstein." Bryant concluded that the entire system for drone strikes was set up "to take away responsibility, so that no one has responsibility for what happens."

The US government's far-flung system for extrajudicial killing uses Ramstein as a kind of digital switchboard in a process that fogs accountability and often kills bystanders. A former Air Force drone technician, Cian Westmoreland, told me that many of the technical people staffing Ramstein's Air and Space Operations Center are apt to be "none the wiser; they would just know a signal is going through."

Westmoreland was stationed in Afghanistan at the Kandahar Air Field, where he helped build a signal relay station that connected to Ramstein. He never moved a joystick to maneuver a drone and never pushed a button to help fire a missile. Yet, in 2016, Westmoreland speaks sadly of the commendations he received for helping to kill more than 200 people with drone strikes. "I did my job," he said, "and now I have to live with that."

During his work on the drone program, Westmoreland developed "a new kind of understanding of what modern warfare actually is. We're moving towards more network-centric warfare. So, orders [are] dealt out over a network, and making systems more autonomous, putting less humans in the chain. And a lot of the positions are going to be maintenance, they're technician jobs, to keep systems up and running."

Those systems strive to reduce the lag time from target zone to computer screen in Nevada. The delay during satellite transmission ("latency" in tech jargon) can last up to six seconds, depending on weather conditions and other factors, but once the signal gets to Ramstein it reaches Nevada almost instantly via fiber-optic cable. Permission to fire comes from an attack controller who "could be anywhere," as Bryant put it, "just looking at the same video feeds as us pilots and sensors. He just sits in front of a screen too." As Andrew Cockburn wrote in his recent book *Kill Chain*, "there is a recurrent pattern in which people become transfixed by what is on the screen, seeing what they want to see, especially when the screen—with a resolution equal to the legal definition of blindness for drivers—is representing people and events thousands of miles and several continents away."

For all its ultra-tech importance, the Air and Space Operations Center at Ramstein is just a steely link in a kill chain of command, while a kind of assembly-line Taylorism keeps

producing the drone war. “I think that’s part of the strength of the secrecy of the program,” Bryant said. “It’s fragmented.” Meanwhile, “We were supposed to function and never ask questions.”

Worlds away, the carnage is often lethally haphazard. For example, classified documents obtained by The Intercept shed light on a special ops series of airstrikes from January 2012 to February 2013 in northeast Afghanistan, code-named Operation Haymaker. The attacks killed more than 200 people, while only 35 were the intended targets. Such numbers may be disturbing, yet they don’t convey what actually happens in human terms.

Several years ago, Pakistani photographer Noor Behram described the aftermath of a US drone attack: “There are just pieces of flesh lying around after a strike. You can’t find bodies. So the locals pick up the flesh and curse America. They say that America is killing us inside our own country, inside our own homes, and only because we are Muslims.”

Even without a missile strike, there are the traumatic effects of drones hovering overhead. Former *New York Times* reporter David Rohde recalled the sound during his captivity by the Taliban in 2009 in tribal areas of Pakistan: “The drones were terrifying. From the ground, it is impossible to determine who or what they are tracking as they circle overhead. The buzz of a distant propeller is a constant reminder of imminent death.”

But such matters are as far removed from Little America in southwest Germany as they are from Big America back home.

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The American drone war has long been unpopular in Germany, where polling indicates that two out of three citizens oppose it. So President Obama was eager to offer assurances during a visit to Berlin three years ago, declaring: “We do not use Germany as a launching point for unmanned drones…as part of our counterterrorism activities.” But such statements miss the point, intentionally, and obscure how much the drone war depends on German hospitality.

Attorney Hans-Christian Ströbele, a prominent Green Party member of the Bundestag, told *The Nation* that “the targeted killings with drones are illegal executions at least in countries which aren’t in war with Germany. These illegal executions offend against human rights, international law and the German *Grundgesetz* [Constitution]. If German official institutions permit this and do not stop these actions, they become partly responsible.”

With 10 percent of the Bundestag’s seats, the Greens have the same size bloc as the other opposition party, the Left Party. “To kill people with a joystick from a safe position thousands of miles away is a disgusting and inhumane form of terror,” Sahra Wagenknecht, co-chair of the Left Party, told me. “A war is no video game—at least not for those who have not the slightest chance to defend themselves…. These extrajudicial killings are war crimes, and the German government should draw the consequences and close down the air base in Ramstein…. In my view, the drone war is a form of state terrorism, which is going to produce thousands of new terrorists.”

A lawsuit filed last year in Germany focuses on a drone attack in eastern Yemen on August 29, 2012, that killed two members of the Bin Ali Jaber family, which had gathered in the village of Khashamir to celebrate a wedding. “Were it not for the help of Germany and

Ramstein, men like my brother-in-law and nephew might still be alive today," said Faisal bin Ali Jaber, one of the surviving relatives behind the suit. "It is quite simple: Without Germany, US drones would not fly." But the German judiciary has rebuffed such civil suits—most recently in late April, when a court in Cologne rejected pleas about a drone strike that killed two people in Somalia, including a herdsman who was not targeted.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has played dumb about drone-related operations in her country. "The German government claims to know nothing at all," Bundestag member Ströbele said. "Either this is a lie, or the government does not want to know." The general secretary of the Berlin-based European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, Wolfgang Kaleck, sums up the German government's strategy as "See nothing, hear nothing, say nothing." He charges that "Germany is making itself complicit in the deaths of civilians as part of the US drone war."



The Air Force Distributed Common Ground System (AF DCGS), also referred to as the AN/GSQ-272 SENTINEL weapon system. (US Air Force)

After an uproar over US National Security Agency spying in Germany caused the Bundestag to set up a special committee of inquiry two years ago, it became clear that surveillance issues are intertwined with Ramstein's role in a drone program that relies on cell-phone numbers to find targets. The Green Party's representative on the eight-member committee, Konstantin von Notz, sounded both pragmatic and idealistic when I interviewed him this spring at a Berlin cafe. "We assume that there is a close connection between surveillance and Ramstein," he said, "as data collected and shared by German and US intelligence services already led to drone killings coordinated via Ramstein."

Left Party co-chair Wagenknecht was emphatic about the BND, Germany's intelligence agency. "The BND delivers phone numbers of possible drone targets to the NSA and other agencies," she told *The Nation*. "The BND and our foreign minister bear part of the blame. They do not only tolerate war crimes, they assist them."

The United States now has 174 military bases operating inside Germany, more than in any other country. (Japan is second, with 113.) The military presence casts a shadow over German democracy, says historian Josef Foschepoth, a professor at the University of Freiburg. “As long as there are Allied troops or military bases and facilities on German soil,” he wrote in a 2014 article, “there will be Allied surveillance measures carried out on and from German soil, which means, in particular, American surveillance.”

For surveillance and an array of other spooky purposes, the US government created what would become the BND at the end of World War II. “We grew it carefully,” a retired senior Defense Intelligence Agency official, W. Patrick Lang, said in an interview. “They’ve always cooperated with us, completely and totally.” Intelligence ties between the two governments remain tightly knotted. “When it comes to the secret services,” Professor Foschepoth told a public forum in Berlin last summer, “there are some old legal foundations where the federal [German] government follows the American interests more than the interests of their own citizens.”

Extending such talk to depict the current US military presence as bad for democracy in Germany is a third rail in German politics. When Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg quoted from Foschepoth’s article at the Berlin forum—and pointedly asked, “Why are American troops here still? Why the bases?”—the panelist from the Green Party, von Notz, vehemently objected to going there. “I wouldn’t open the discussion or have in the background that this is still an occupation problem or something,” he said. “It’s not a problem of troops somewhere—it’s a problem of lacking democracy, state of law, controlling our secret services today.”

Nine months later, talking with him at Café Einstein on Berlin’s Kurfürstenstrasse, I asked von Notz why he’d pushed back so heatedly against the idea that US military bases are constraining German democracy. “Germany needs to take full responsibility of what is going on on its territory,” he responded. “The German government can no longer hide behind a US-German relation allegedly characterized by the post–World War II occupation. Germany strictly has to ensure that the US intelligence services comply with the law without ignoring the illegal actions of its own Federal Intelligence Service [the BND].”

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Whatever the state of its democracy, Germany is continuing to enable America’s furtive warfare in Africa. Ramstein’s many roles include serving as home to US Air Forces Africa, where a press officer gave me a handout describing the continent as “key to addressing transnational violent extremist threats.” The military orders come from the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) headquarters in Stuttgart, a two-hour drive from Ramstein.

At first, AFRICOM—which calls itself “a full-spectrum combatant command”—was to be a short-term guest in southwest Germany, some 800 miles from Africa’s closest shores. A State Department cable, marked “Secret” and dated August 1, 2008, said that “no decision has been made on a permanent AFRICOM headquarters location.” Two months later, just as AFRICOM was going into full-fledged operation, a confidential cable from the US Embassy in Berlin reported that “the German government strongly supported the US decision to temporarily base” AFRICOM in Germany.

Yet at the outset, as US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks show, tensions existed with the host country. Germany balked at extending blanket legal immunity under the NATO

Status of Forces Agreement to every American civilian employee at the new AFRICOM facility, and the dispute applied to "all US military commands in Germany." While the two governments negotiated behind the scenes into late 2008 (one confidential cable from the US Embassy in Berlin complained about the German Foreign Office's "unhelpful positions"), AFRICOM made itself at home in Stuttgart.

Nearly eight years later, the "temporary" headquarters for AFRICOM shows no sign of budging. "AFRICOM will stay permanent in Stuttgart if Germany won't protest against it," said the Green Party's Ströbele, who has been on the Bundestag's intelligence committee for almost twenty years. He told *The Nation*: "We do not know enough about the AFRICOM facility. Nevertheless there is the assumption that this facility is used to organize and to lead US combat missions in Africa. Because of this reason no country in Africa wanted to have this facility." Whatever political hazards might lurk for AFRICOM in Germany, the US government finds those risks preferable to headquartering its Africa Command in Africa. And there are more and more interventions to sweep under rugs.

"A network of American drone outposts" now "stretches across east and west Africa," reports the Center for the Study of the Drone, which is based at Bard College. One of the new locations is northern Cameroon, where a base for Gray Eagle drones (capable of dropping bombs and launching Hellfire missiles) recently went into full operation, accompanied by 300 US troops, including special-operations forces. In late winter *The New York Times* reported that the United States "is about to break ground on a new $50 million drone base in Agadez, Niger, that will allow Reaper surveillance aircraft to fly hundreds of miles closer to southern Libya." In March the Pentagon triumphantly announced that drones teamed up with manned jets to kill "more than 150 terrorist fighters" at an al-Shabab training camp in Somalia.

As drone attacks have widened, they've become a growing provocation to a vocal minority of German lawmakers. "We deeply regret Germany's loss of sovereignty, but the government keeps on acting cowardly," said Sevim Dagdelen, the Left Party's leader on foreign affairs. Another member of the party in the Bundestag, Andrej Hunko, told me that "AFRICOM in Stuttgart and the Air Operation Center in Ramstein are very important hubs for drone strikes led by the US military"—but "it is very difficult for German lawmakers to control this issue."

Hunko and colleagues filed more than a dozen requests for explanation of drone-related policy from the German government, but he says "the answers were always dodgy." The Merkel government deflects formal queries about Ramstein and AFRICOM by claiming to have no reliable information—a stance abetted by the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), now in its third year of serving as a big junior partner to Merkel's right-leaning Christian Democratic Union. While Left Party legislators and some in the Green Party denounce the stonewalling, they have scant leverage; the two parties combined are just one-fifth of the Bundestag.

Merkel's stone wall is strengthened by the fact that some Green Party leaders have no problem with US bases. (Citing the very left-wing pasts of several key figures in today's party, one peace activist near Ramstein tartly remarked that "the Green Party changed from red to green to olive green.") In the affluent state of Baden-Württemberg, home to AFRICOM headquarters, the state's Green minister-president Winfried Kretschmann is a military booster. Likewise, the drone program has nothing to fear from Fritz Kuhn, mayor of Stuttgart, the largest city in Germany with a Green mayor. Kuhn declined to answer any of

the questions that I submitted in writing about his views on AFRICOM and its operations in his city. “Mayor Kuhn wants to waive the interview,” a spokesman said.

More than publicly acknowledged, the economic benefits of hosting AFRICOM’s headquarters were major factors in the German government’s decision to allow it to open in the first place, a member of the Bundestag told me. With the US military footprint shrinking in the country, Germany’s political establishment saw the chance to welcome AFRICOM as very good news. Today, AFRICOM says that 1,500 US military and civilian personnel are stationed at its Kelley Barracks command center in Stuttgart.

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“Ramstein is a preparation center for the next world war,” Wolfgang Jung said as we neared the base. War has overshadowed his entire life. Jung was born in 1938, and his childhood memories are vivid with fear and the destruction that came with bombs (from both sides). He lost two schoolmates. His father ended up on the Russian front and died in a POW camp just after the war’s end. As a teenager, Jung saw Ramstein open, and in the decades since then he has become a dogged researcher. The base is not just about drones, he stressed. Far from it.

The entire region is brandishing huge arsenals. Ten miles from Ramstein, the Miesau Army Depot is the US military’s biggest storage area for ammunition outside the United States. In late February the depot received what *Stars and Stripes* reported as “the largest Europe-bound ammo shipment in 10 years”—more than 5,000 tons of US Army ammunition that arrived while the Pentagon was “ramping up missions on the Continent, particularly along NATO’s eastern flank, in response to concerns about a more aggressive Russia.”

In many ways, this heavily militarized stretch of Germany is now a ground-zero powder keg. The consolidated Allied Air Command, “responsible for all Air and Space matters within NATO,” has been at the Ramstein base since 2013. The command includes a center for missile defense, the nexus of the latest US scenario for a missile shield—which the Kremlin views as a threatening system that would make a first strike against Russia more tempting and more likely. Interviewed by the German newspaper *Bild* in January, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he saw “striving for an absolute triumph in the American missile defense plans.”

Such matters preoccupy Jung and his wife Felicitas Strieffler, also a lifelong resident of the area. She spoke of Ramstein as a grave menace to the world and a blight on the region. Locals dread sunny days, she said, because roaring warplanes take to cloudless skies for training maneuvers. On a hillside, after climbing a 60-foot tower—a red sandstone monument built in 1900 to honor Bismarck—we looked out over a panorama dominated by Ramstein’s runways, hangars, and aircraft. Strieffler talked about a dream she keeps having: The base will be closed and, after the chemical pollutants are removed, it will become a lake where people can go boating and enjoy the beauties of nature.

Such hopes might seem unrealistic, but a growing number of activists in Germany are working to end Ramstein’s drone role and eventually close the base. On June 11, several thousand protesters gathered in the rain to form a “human chain” that stretched for more than five miles near the Ramstein perimeter. At the Stopp Ramstein Kampagne office in Berlin, a 37-year-old former history student, Pascal Luig, exuded commitment and calm as he told me that “the goal should be the closing of the whole air base.” He added, “Without

Ramstein, no [US] war in the Middle East would be possible." With no hope of persuading the US government to shut down Ramstein and its other bases in his country, Luig wants a movement strong enough to compel the German government to evict them.

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The Pentagon top brass can't be happy about the publicity in Germany connecting Ramstein to the drone war. "They like to keep these things low key, just because there are points of vulnerability," former drone technician Cian Westmoreland said, noting that "the military is all about redundancies." In fact, even while Ramstein's Air and Space Operations Center was going into action nearly five years ago, a similar facility was on the drawing boards for the Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily.

According to some sources, the ultimate goal is to replace Ramstein with Sigonella as the main site for relay of drone signals. (Replying to my inquiry, an Air Force spokesman at Ramstein, Maj. Frank Hartnett, wrote in an e-mail: "There are currently no plans to relocate the center's activities." He did not respond to follow-up questions.) An investigative journalist working for the Italian newsmagazine *L'Espresso*, Stefania Maurizi, told me in mid-spring that progress toward such a center at Sigonella remained at a snail's pace. But on June 21, she reported that an Italian engineering firm had just won a contract for a building similar to Ramstein's relay center. Construction at Sigonella could be completed by 2018.

As part of the militarization process in Italy—"the Pentagon has turned the Italian peninsula into a launching pad for future wars in Africa, the Middle East and beyond," author David Vine observes—Sigonella already has some infrastructure for satellite communication. Another asset is that Italy is even more deferential to the American military than Germany is. "Italy has become the launching pad for the US wars, and in particular for the drone wars, without any public debate," Maurizi says. "Our responsibilities are huge and the Italian public is kept in the dark." And when the Pentagon decides to build big in Italy, it doesn't hurt the momentum that—as Vine documents in his 2015 book *Base Nation*—the lucrative contracts are routinely signed with Italian construction firms controlled by the Mafia.

In any event, no one can doubt that the Defense Department has become utterly enthralled with drones, officially dubbed Remotely Piloted Aircraft. "Our RPA enterprise" is now "flying combat missions around the globe," the general running the Air Combat Command, Herbert Carlisle, testified to a Senate subcommittee in March. There was no mistaking his zeal to further expand drone missions, mangled syntax notwithstanding: "They are arming decision makers with intelligence, our warfighters with targets, and our enemies with fear, anxiety and ultimately their timely end."

General Carlisle said the US military is now flying five times as many drone sorties as a decade ago—a boost that "exemplifies the furious pace at which we have expanded our operations and enterprise." But he warned that "an insatiable demand for RPA forces has stretched the community thin, especially our Airmen performing the mission." Today, almost 8,000 Air Force personnel are "solely dedicated" to Predator and Reaper drone missions. "Of the 15 bases with RPA units," Carlisle said, "13 of them have a combat mission. This mission is of such value that we plan on consistent increases in aircraft, personnel and results." Several weeks after his testimony, Reuters—citing "previously unreported US Air Force data"—revealed that "drones fired more weapons than conventional warplanes for the first time in Afghanistan last year and the ratio is rising."

Some in-house government appraisals have concluded that the drone war fails because it creates more enemies than it kills. But the "war on terror" is anything but a failure for many corporations or the individuals who spin through the revolving doors of the military-industrial complex. As a critical node in the Pentagon's global "intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance" (ISR) system, Ramstein is integral to ongoing boondoggles for contractors like Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Booz Allen Hamilton, and General Dynamics. The bottomless pit for taxpayers is a bottomless well for firms catering to the Air Force, with its jargon-larded pursuit of "a distributed ISR operation capable of providing world-wide, near-real-time simultaneous intelligence to multiple theaters of operation through…robust reachback communications architectures."



June 11, 2016 protest at Ramstein Air Base. (Courtesy: Activism.org)

Looking back at the milieu of his work in the drone program, Westmoreland has concluded that "it's more or less a for-profit venture. When you get out of the military, you expect to get a job in the defense sector, an executive position. And really it's about racking up as many awards and decorations as you possibly can."

At the top ranks, Westmoreland sees a conflict of interest: "They have an incentive to keep wars going." For the military's leadership, the available dividends are quite large. For instance, former NSA and CIA director Gen. Michael Hayden—an outspoken advocate of the drone program—received $240,125 last year as a member of the board at Motorola Solutions. That company has an investment in CyPhy Works, a major developer of drones.

Endless war propels an endless gravy train.

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Like the other drone whistleblowers interviewed for this article, former tech sergeant Lisa Ling was careful not to reveal any classified information. But when we met at a coffee shop in California, what she said at the outset could be heard as subversive of the US drone program: "I would like to see humanity brought into the political discourse." Her two

decades in the military included several years of work on assimilating Air National Guard personnel into the drone program. Now she expresses remorse for taking part in a program where “no one person has responsibility.”

The new documentary film *National Bird* includes these words from Ling: “We are in the United States of America and we are participating in an overseas war, a war overseas, and we have no connection to it other than wires and keyboards. Now, if that doesn’t scare the crap out of you, it does out of me. Because if that’s the only connection, why stop?”

After leaving the Air Force, Ling went on a humanitarian mission to Afghanistan, planting trees and distributing seeds to people she’d previously seen only as indistinct pixels. The drone war haunts her. Ling asks how we would feel if armed drones kept hovering in the sky above our own communities, positioned to kill at any moment.

In the Little America where the Ramstein Air Base is the crown military jewel, such questions go unasked. For that matter, we rarely hear them in Big America. Yet those questions must be asked, or the forever war will be.

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