

The Woes of an American Drone Operator

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By Nicola Abé

A soldier sets out to graduate at the top of his class. He succeeds, and he becomes a drone pilot working with a special unit of the United States Air Force in New Mexico. He kills dozens of people. But then, one day, he realizes that he can't do it anymore.

For more than five years, Brandon Bryant worked in an oblong, windowless container about the size of a trailer, where the air-conditioning was kept at 17 degrees Celsius (63 degrees Fahrenheit) and, for security reasons, the door couldn't be opened. Bryant and his coworkers sat in front of 14 computer monitors and four keyboards. When Bryant pressed a button in New Mexico, someone died on the other side of the world.



The container is filled with the humming of computers. It's the brain of a drone, known as a cockpit in Air Force parlance. But the pilots in the container aren't flying through the air. They're just sitting at the controls.

Bryant was one of them, and he remembers one incident very clearly when a Predator drone was circling in a figure-eight pattern in the sky above Afghanistan, more than 10,000 kilometers (6,250 miles) away. There was a flat-roofed house made of mud, with a shed used to hold goats in the crosshairs, as Bryant recalls. When he received the order to fire, he pressed a button with his left hand and marked the roof with a laser. The pilot sitting next to him pressed the trigger on a joystick, causing the drone to launch a Hellfire missile. There were 16 seconds left until impact.

"These moments are like in slow motion," he says today. Images taken with an infrared camera attached to the drone appeared on his monitor, transmitted by satellite, with a two-to-five-second time delay.

With seven seconds left to go, there was no one to be seen on the ground. Bryant could still have diverted the missile at that point. Then it was down to three seconds. Bryant felt as if he had to count each individual pixel on the monitor. Suddenly a child walked around the corner, he says.

Second zero was the moment in which Bryant's digital world collided with the real one in a village between Baghlan and Mazar-e-Sharif.

Bryant saw a flash on the screen: the explosion. Parts of the building collapsed. The child had disappeared. Bryant had a sick feeling in his stomach.

“Did we just kill a kid?” he asked the man sitting next to him.

“Yeah, I guess that was a kid,” the pilot replied.

“Was that a kid?” they wrote into a chat window on the monitor.

Then, someone they didn’t know answered, someone sitting in a military command center somewhere in the world who had observed their attack. “No. That was a dog,” the person wrote.

They reviewed the scene on video. A dog on two legs?

Invisible Warfare

When Bryant left the container that day, he stepped directly into America: dry grasslands stretching to the horizon, fields and the smell of liquid manure. Every few seconds, a light on the radar tower at the Cannon Air Force Base flashed in the twilight. There was no war going on there.

Modern warfare is as invisible as a thought, deprived of its meaning by distance. It is no unfettered war, but one that is controlled from small high-tech centers in various places in the world. The new (way of conducting) war is supposed to be more precise than the old one, which is why some call it “more humane.” It’s the war of an intellectual, a war United States President Barack Obama has [promoted](#) more than any of his predecessors.

In a corridor at the Pentagon where the planning for this war takes place, the walls are covered with dark wood paneling. The men from the Air Force have their offices here. A painting of a Predator, a drone on canvas, hangs next to portraits of military leaders. From the military’s perspective, no other invention has been as successful in the “war on terror” in recent years as the Predator.

The US military guides its drones from seven air bases in the United States, as well as locations abroad, including one in the East African nation of Djibouti. From its headquarters in Langley, Virginia, the CIA controls operations in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

‘We Save Lives’

Colonel William Tart, a man with pale eyes and a clear image of the enemy, calls the drone a “natural extension of the distance.”

Until a few months ago, when he was promoted to head the US Air Force’s Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) Task Force in Langley, Tart was a commander at the Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, near Las Vegas, where he headed drone operations. Whenever he flew drones himself, he kept a photo of his wife and three daughters pasted into the checklist next to the monitors.

He doesn’t like the word drone, because he says it implies that the vehicle has its own will or ego. He prefers to call them “remotely piloted aircraft,” and he points out that most flights are for gathering information. He talks about the use of drones on humanitarian missions after the earthquake in Haiti, and about the military successes in the war in Libya: how his team fired on a truck that was pointing rockets at Misrata, and how it chased the convoy in which former Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi and his entourage were fleeing.

He describes how the soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan are constantly expressing their gratitude for the assistance from the air. “We save lives,” he says.

He doesn’t say as much about the targeted killing. He claims that during his two years as operations commander at Creech, he never saw any noncombatants die, and that the drones only fire at buildings when women and children are not in them. When asked about the chain of command, Tart mentions a 275-page document called 3-09.3. Essentially, it states that drone attacks must be approved, like any other attacks by the Air Force. An officer in the country where the operations take place has to approve them.

The use of the term “clinical war” makes him angry. It reminds him of the Vietnam veterans who accuse him of never having waded through the mud or smelled blood, and who say that he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

That isn’t true, says Tart, noting that he often used the one-hour drive from work back to Las Vegas to distance himself from his job. “We watch people for months. We see them playing with their dogs or doing their laundry. We know their patterns like we know our neighbors’ patterns. We even go to their funerals.” It wasn’t always easy, he says.

One of the paradoxes of drones is that, even as they increase the distance to the target, they also create proximity. “War somehow becomes personal,” says Tart.

‘I Saw Men, Women and Children Die’

A yellow house stands on the outskirts of the small city of Missoula, Montana, against a background of mountains, forests and patches of fog. The ground is coated with the first snow of the season. Bryant, now 27, is sitting on the couch in his mother’s living room. He has since left the military and is now living back at home. He keeps his head shaved and has a three-day beard. “I haven’t been dreaming in infrared for four months,” he says with a smile, as if this were a minor victory for him.

Bryant completed 6,000 flight hours during his six years in the Air Force. “I saw men, women and children die during that time,” says Bryant. “I never thought I would kill that many people. In fact, I thought I couldn’t kill anyone at all.”

An Unpopular Job

After graduating from high school, Bryant wanted to become an investigative journalist. He used to go to church on Sundays, and he had a thing for redheaded cheerleaders. By the end of his first semester at college, he had already racked up thousands of dollars in debt.

He came to the military by accident. One day, while accompanying a friend who was enlisting in the army, he heard that the Air Force had its own university, and that he could get a college education for free. Bryant did so well in tests that he was assigned to an intelligence collection unit. He learned how to control the cameras and lasers on a drone, as well as to analyze ground images, maps and weather data. He became a sensor operator, more or less the equivalent to a co-pilot.

He was 20 when he flew his first mission over Iraq. It was a hot, sunny day in Nevada, but it was dark inside the container and just before daybreak in Iraq. A group of American soldiers were on their way back to their base camp. Bryant’s job was to monitor the road, to be their

“guardian angel” in the sky.

He saw an eye, a shape in the asphalt. “I knew the eye from the training,” he says. To bury an improvised explosive device in the road, the enemy combatants place a tire on the road and burn it to soften the asphalt. Afterwards it looks like an eye from above.

The soldiers’ convoy was still miles away from the eye. Bryant told his supervisor, who notified the command center. He was forced to look on for several minutes, Bryant says today, as the vehicles approached the site.

“What should we do?” he asked his coworker.

But the pilot was also new on the job.

The soldiers on the ground couldn’t be reached by radio, because they were using a jamming transmitter. Bryant saw the first vehicle drive over the eye. Nothing happened.

Then the second vehicle drove over it. Bryant saw a flash beneath, followed by an explosion inside the vehicle.

Five American soldiers were killed.

From then on, Bryant couldn’t keep the five fellow Americans out of his thoughts. He began learning everything by heart, including the manuals for the Predator and the missiles, and he familiarized himself with every possible scenario. He was determined to be the best, so that this kind of thing would never happen again.

‘I Felt Disconnected from Humanity’

His shifts lasted up to 12 hours. The Air Force still had a shortage of personnel for its remote-controlled war over Iraq and Afghanistan. Drone pilots were seen as cowardly button-pushers. It was such an unpopular job that the military had to bring in retired personnel.

Bryant remembers the first time he fired a missile, killing two men instantly. As Bryant looked on, he could see a third man in mortal agony. The man’s leg was missing and he was holding his hands over the stump as his warm blood flowed onto the ground — for two long minutes. He cried on his way home, says Bryant, and he called his mother.

“I felt disconnected from humanity for almost a week,” he says, sitting in his favorite coffee shop in Missoula, where the smell of cinnamon and butter wafts in the air. He spends a lot of time there, watching people and reading books by Nietzsche and Mark Twain, sometimes getting up to change seats. He can’t sit in one place for very long anymore, he says. It makes him nervous.

His girlfriend broke up with him recently. She had asked him about the burden he carries, so he told her about it. But it proved to be a hardship she could neither cope with nor share.

When Bryant drives through his hometown, he wears aviator sunglasses and a Palestinian scarf. The inside of his Chrysler is covered with patches from his squadrons. On his Facebook page, he’s created a photo album of his coins, unofficial medals he was awarded. All he has is this one past. He wrestles with it, but it is also a source of pride.

When he was sent to Iraq in 2007, he posted the words “ready for action” on his profile. He was assigned to an American military base about 100 kilometers (63 miles) from Baghdad, where his job was to take off and land drones.

As soon as the drones reached flying altitude, pilots in the United States took over. The Predator can remain airborne for an entire day, but it is also slow, which is why it is stationed near the area of operation. Bryant posed for photos wearing sand-colored overalls and a bulletproof vest, leaning against a drone.

Two years later, the Air Force accepted him into a special unit, and he was transferred to the Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico. He and a fellow soldier shared a bungalow in a dusty town called Clovis, which consists mainly of trailers, gas stations and evangelical churches. Clovis is located hours away from the nearest city.

Bryant preferred night shifts, because that meant it was daytime in Afghanistan. In the spring, the landscape, with its snow-covered peaks and green valleys, reminded him of his native Montana. He saw people cultivating their fields, boys playing soccer and men hugging their wives and children.

When it got dark, Bryant switched to the infrared camera. Many Afghans sleep on the roof in the summer, because of the heat. “I saw them having sex with their wives. It’s two infrared spots becoming one,” he recalls.

He observed people for weeks, including Taliban fighters hiding weapons, and people who were on lists because the military, the intelligence agencies or local informants knew something about them.

“I got to know them. Until someone higher up in the chain of command gave me the order to shoot.” He felt remorse because of the children, whose fathers he was taking away. “They were good daddies,” he says.

In his free time, Bryant played video games or “World of Warcraft” on the Internet, or he went out drinking with the others. He can’t watch TV anymore because it is neither challenging or stimulating enough for him. He’s also having trouble sleeping these days.

‘There Was No Time for Feelings’

Major Vanessa Meyer, whose real name is covered with black tape, is giving a presentation at the Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico on the training of drone pilots. The Air Force plans to have enough personnel to cover its needs by 2013.

Meyer, 34, who is wearing lip gloss and a diamond on her finger, used to fly cargo planes before she became a drone pilot. Dressed in green Air Force overalls, she is standing in a training cockpit and, using a simulator to demonstrate how a drone is guided over Afghanistan. The crosshair on the monitor follows a white car until it reaches a group of mud huts. One uses the joystick to determine the drone’s direction, and the left hand is used to operate the lever that slows down or accelerates the unmanned aircraft. On an airfield behind the container, Meyer shows us the Predator, slim and shiny, and its big brother, the Reaper, which carries four missiles and a bomb. “Great planes,” she says. “They just don’t work in bad weather.”

Meyer flew drones at Creech, the air base near Las Vegas, where young men drive in and

out in sports cars and mountain chains stretch across the desert like giant reptiles. Describing his time as a drone pilot in Nevada, Colonel Matt Martin wrote in his book "Predator" that, "Sometimes I felt like God hurling thunderbolts from afar." Meyer had her first child when she was working there. She was still sitting in the cockpit, her stomach pressing up against the keyboard, in her ninth month of pregnancy.

"There was no time for feelings" when she was preparing for an attack, she says today. Of course, she says, she felt her heart beating faster and the adrenaline rushing through her body. But then she adhered strictly to the rules and focused on positioning the aircraft. "When the decision had been made, and they saw that this was an enemy, a hostile person, a legal target that was worthy of being destroyed, I had no problem with taking the shot."

No Room for the Evils of the World

After work, she would drive home along US Highway 85 into Las Vegas, listening to country music and passing peace activists without looking at them. She rarely thought about what happened in the cockpit. But sometimes she would review the individual steps in her head, hoping to improve her performance.

Or she would go shopping. It felt strange to her, sometimes, when the woman at the register would ask: "How's it going?" She would answer: "I'm good. How are you? Have a nice day." When she felt restless she would go for a run. She says that being able to help the boys on the ground motivated her to get up every morning.

There was no room for the evils of the world in Meyer's home. She and her husband, a drone pilot, didn't talk about work. She would put on her pajamas and watch cartoons on TV or play with the baby.

Today Meyer has two small children. She wants to show them "that mommy can get to work and do a good job." She doesn't want to be like the women in Afghanistan she watched — submissive and covered from head to toe. "The women there are no warriors," she says. Meyer says that her current job as a trainer is very satisfying but that, one day, she would like to return to combat duty.

'I Can't Just Switch Back and Go Back to Normal Life'

At some point, Brandon Bryant just wanted to get out and do something else. He spent a few more months overseas, this time in Afghanistan. But then, when he returned to New Mexico, he found that he suddenly hated the cockpit, which smelled of sweat. He began spraying air freshener to get rid of the stench. He also found he wanted to do something that saved lives rather than took them away. He thought working as a survival trainer might fit the bill, although his friends tried to dissuade him.

The program that he then began working on in his bungalow in Clovis every day was called Power 90 Extreme, a boot camp-style fitness regimen. It included dumbbell training, push-ups, chin-ups and sit-ups. He also lifted weights almost every day.

On uneventful days in the cockpit, he would write in his diary, jotting down lines like: "On the battlefield there are no sides, just bloodshed. Total war. Every horror witnessed. I wish my eyes would rot."

If he could just get into good enough shape, he thought to himself, they would let him do

something different. The problem was that he was pretty good at his job.

At some point he no longer enjoyed seeing his friends. He met a girl, but she complained about his bad moods. “I can’t just switch and go back to normal life,” he told her. When he came home and couldn’t sleep, he would exercise instead. He began talking back to his superior officers.

One day he collapsed at work, doubling over and spitting blood. The doctor told him to stay home, and ordered him not to return to work until he could sleep more than four hours a night for two weeks in a row.

“Half a year later, I was back in the cockpit, flying drones,” says Bryant, sitting in his mother’s living room in Missoula. His dog whimpers and lays its head on his cheek. He can’t get to his own furniture at the moment. It’s in storage, and he doesn’t have the money to pay the bill. All he has left is his computer.

Bryant posted a drawing on Facebook the night before our interview. It depicts a couple standing, hand-in-hand, in a green meadow, looking up at the sky. A child and a dog are sitting on the ground next to them. But the meadow is just a part of the world. Beneath it is a sea of dying soldiers, propping themselves up with their last bit of strength, a sea of bodies, blood and limbs.

Doctors at the Veterans’ Administration diagnosed Bryant with post-traumatic stress disorder. General hopes for a comfortable war — one that could be completed without emotional wounds — haven’t been fulfilled. Indeed, Bryan’s world has melded with that of the child in Afghanistan. It’s like a short circuit in the brain of the drones.

Why isn’t he with the Air Force anymore? There was one day, he says, when he knew that he wouldn’t sign the next contract. It was the day Bryant walked into the cockpit and heard himself saying to his coworkers: “Hey, what motherfucker is going to die today?”

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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