

“Thinking War Is Bloodless Is a Mistake.” Talking Drones and Remote War with Air Marshall Bagwell

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Global Research, January 09, 2018

[Drone Wars UK](#) 8 January 2018

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

Featured image: Air Marshall Greg Bagwell (Source: Drone Wars UK)

Air Marshall Greg Bagwell is a recently retired senior Royal Air Force officer who served as Deputy Commander Operations at RAF Air Command. While being a vocal supporter of the use of armed drones, in his role of President of the Air Power Association he has also [argued](#) for greater openness and engagement with the public on air power issues. Following on from our interview with former [RAF Reaper pilot 'Justin Thompson'](#), we asked him if he would also be willing to be interviewed on some the wider operational and strategic issues raised by armed drones. He happily agreed.

[A full transcript of the interview is available here](#) but it's worth highlighting some of the key points discussed.

Like many other military officers, AM Bagwell has regularly argued that drones are no different from other military aircraft engaged in surveillance and strikes operations and during the interview he told us that he struggled to see why drones are singled out for attention. He understood, he said, why people would want to discuss some of the underlying issues, such as kill lists and targeted killing, but he did not understand the focus on “the tool” used. At the same time, when pressed, he accepts, that the kind of operations that lead to most controversy were in fact made easier by the availability of armed drone technology.

Asked whether the UK could deploy its armed drones without US support, AM Bagwell said that while it was “theoretically possible”, in reality it would be “challenging”. Reading between the lines, it seems this is due to infrastructure issues (satellite communications etc.) and personnel numbers.

With regard to the impact of drone operations on the crew, he spoke about how fatigue from the burden of operations meant that he had resisted pressure from above to increase the number of Reaper missions over Iraq and Syria. Pressed on whether UK drone operations should now end as Iraq has declared victory of ISIS, he said he understood why the deployment could be on-going as it was “the nature of the beast.” He went on

“It's a surveillance capability that will always be in demand, will always be employed to the maximum.”

News to us was the fact that the RAF has trained non-pilots to fly UK Reapers on operations.

This, almost certainly, indicates that the UK is struggling with recruitment of RAF pilots to this role. It will be very interesting to see if there are differences between traditional pilots and others operating RAF Reaper drones in Dr Peter Lee's forthcoming book, [Reaper Force](#), which focuses on crew issues.

A big point of disagreement came during discussion of the deployment of armed British drones into Syria in 2014, despite the fact that MPs had restricted RAF strikes against ISIS to Iraq. AM Bagwell insisted that the RAF had authorisation for the missions, and argued that restriction of operations against ISIS to Iraq alone, was like 'trying to win the FA Cup despite only playing in one half'.

As is well known, 'non-offensive' operations in Syria became offensive with the use of drones to target and kill Cardiff-born Reyaad Khan. AM Bagwell said he didn't have any issue with Khan being called an enemy combatant.

"He had clearly engaged and would continue to, so to me that's a target."

But he also wondered aloud about whether such targeted killing operations were "the right thing to do politically or morally." He clearly also had questions on the grounds of effectiveness:

"We could have the argument about whether this encourages more people to join the enemy. I don't know whether some young person in the UK seeing another Brit killed in a UK military operation will be encouraged to join ISIS or discourage them. If it discourages them, I'm all for it. If it encourages, then we got it wrong. That's a very difficult thing to judge."

Importantly, AM Bagwell strongly challenged the credibility of the MoD's position that, without evidence to the contrary, there has been no civilian casualties from UK strikes in Iraq and Syria. While insisting that the MoD has done its utmost to prevent civilian casualties he is clear that that "it's just wrong to let people think that no-one has been killed." He went on:

"There is a danger at the moment that we are conditioning ourselves to think in a certain way. That wars are bloodless and that we can carry out war in a 'nice way'. Thinking war is bloodless is a mistake because we need to be aware that war is nasty and opting for it, must be the last resort. Thinking it can be done cleanly etc. is a mistake."

He also suggested that asymmetric war is connected to the rise in terrorism. According to MoD figures, [more than 3,000 ISIS fighters have been killed in UK air strikes](#) since 2014. In that same time there has not been a single UK military personnel killed in enemy action.

"When you have an asymmetric advantage, enemies seek to find a way around it, and that is what terrorism is."

Overall the interview with AM Bagwell was something of a refreshing, grown up discussion of the issues raised by armed drones. We clearly did not agree on many of the important

aspects of the debate. But a decade into the UK's deployment of these systems, and at a time when more countries around the globe are armed drones, it's right that there is much more serious debate about the technology, remote war, and where it is leading us.

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