

‘Kill the enemy, and don’t forget to buy milk on the way home’
Preparing for the ethical challenges of remote operations in the ‘Forever Wars’
Wing Commander Jo Brick

...all our fine new technologies and fine new legal theories were blurring the boundaries of “war”, causing it to spread and ooze into everyday life.

Rosa Brooks¹

I’d literally just walked out on dropping bombs on the enemy, and 20 minutes later I’d get a text – can you pick up some milk on your way home?

Jeff Bright (retired pilot)²

As the comments from Brooks and Bright highlight, the line between war and peace no longer exists. The absence of this distinction has become the defining characteristic of contemporary military operations, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, known as ‘The Forever Wars’. This label was originally associated with a science fiction novel by Joe Haldeman – *The Forever War* – about an intergalactic war between humans and Taurans that lasts for millennia.³ The title is now the leitmotif of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have been in progress for almost two decades and currently show no signs of abating.⁴ These wars largely occur out of sight – in the cloisters of Defence headquarters, in air operations centres, and ground control stations (GCS) – whether in the operational area or at home.⁵ In the ‘Forever Wars’, Clausewitz’s aphorism has been split – war now just continues, with its ‘politics’ no longer clear or transparent.⁶ The blurring of this distinction is further exacerbated by the persistent presence and reach offered by airpower – particularly remotely piloted aircraft (RPA). Those who bear the burden of fighting these wars remain caught in a state of ‘permanent liminality’, which is an anthropological concept that is defined as meaning ‘betwixt and between’.⁷ In the context of today’s persistent wars, it can be used to describe the state of being caught between

¹ Rosa Brooks. *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything – Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016): 4.

² Eyal Press, “The Wounds of the Drone Warrior,” *New York Times*, 13 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/13/magazine/veterans-ptsd-drone-warrior-wounds.html> (accessed 21 May 2019).

³ Joe Haldeman. *The Forever War* (London: Orion Publishing Company, 2010).

⁴ See also Dexter Filkins. *The Forever War – Dispatches from the War on Terror* (London: Vintage, 2009).

⁵ For information about Air Operations Centres, one example is the Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) at Al Udeid, Qatar: US Air Forces Central Command, “Combined Air Operations Centre” 01 July 2017 <https://www.afcent.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/217803/combined-air-operations-center-caoc/> (accessed 29 May 2019). A ‘ground control station’ (GCS) is a sensor suite for RPA operators such as the MQ-9 Reaper: General Atomics, “New Block 50 Ground Control Station Flies MQ-9 Reaper” 26 February 2019 <http://www.ga.com/new-block-50-ground-control-station-flies-mq-9-reaper> (accessed 29 May 2019).

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz’s statement: ‘war is not entirely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried out by other means.’ Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 87.

⁷ Nic Beech, “Liminality and the practices of identity construction,” *Human Relations* 64, no.2 (2011): 286.

war and peace. The state of liminality exists because the reach of modern military capability has provided a bridge between two planes of existence that overlap: a physical state of ‘peace’ and a psychological state of ‘war’. When coupled with the mental intimacy that the sensors of RPAs provide, there is a significant jarring effect for the operators as they move quickly between these states. What is needed to mitigate these effects are overt ‘rituals of war’ that traditionally marked a rite of passage between war and peace. This is necessary to counter the erosion of the special status of ‘war’ and the dilution of the privileges and obligations that accompany it. The erosion of these traditional rituals of war, which is the gateway between war and peace, may be accompanied by a significant risk of ethical or professional degradation caused by war becoming routine and ‘normal’. Strong, principled, and ethically conscious leadership is necessary to maintain a warfighting ethos, accompanied by an ethical framework for coherence in which these operators can mentally place their wartime experiences. In late 2018, Australia confirmed its acquisition of the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper under Project AIR 7003.⁸ The time to address these issues related to preparing and building resilience in the personnel caught in a state of permanent liminality is long overdue.

The dangers of liminality in the Forever War

The concept of ‘liminality’ originated from the 1909 publication *Rites de Passage* by French anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, who undertook a taxonomy of existing rites within different social groups that marked the passage of individuals from one status to another.⁹ Van Gennep identified ‘rites of passage’ as a particular type of ritual that consisted of three sub-categories of rites: rites of separation, transition rites (‘liminal rites’), and rites of incorporation.¹⁰ Van Gennep’s work was re-discovered in the 1960s by Victor Turner, who advanced the concept of liminality by examining the importance of these transitory periods, the human reaction to such experiences, and how they are shaped by liminality.¹¹ Much has been done in the field of anthropology to further this work, but is beyond the scope of this paper. The key point is the place that transitional rites or liminal rites hold as a transformative experience from one status to another. Thomassen’s paper considers ‘permanent liminality’, which occurs when the rites of incorporation do not occur and the transformative experience is not complete. He states that ‘without reintegration liminality is pure danger’.¹²

⁸ Australian Aviation, “The RAAF to get MALE – Reaper UAS Acquisition Confirmed”, *Australian Aviation*, 16 November 2018, <https://australianaviation.com.au/2018/11/the-raaf-to-get-male-reaper-uas-acquisition-confirmed/> (accessed 27 May 2019).

⁹ Bjorn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality”, *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009): 6.

¹⁰ Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality”, 6.

¹¹ Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality”, 14.

¹² Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality”, 22.

Unfortunately, Thomassen does not discuss what he considers these dangers to be. In the context of extant conflicts, when the framework of liminality is applied to the experience of RPA operators, it may be possible to obtain some insight into what these dangers may be in that particular context.

Former RAF chaplain, Dr Peter Lee, conducted research into the experience of RPA operators by spending periods of time with operators from the 39 Squadron (Royal Air Force) at Creech Air Force Base, Nevada, United States; and XIII Squadron at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire, United Kingdom. The product of the months he spent with these units is his book, *Reaper Force – Inside Britain’s Drone Wars*, which provides vivid accounts of the firsthand experiences of RPA operators of the MQ-9 Reaper RPA.¹³ A significant point that arises throughout Lee’s work is the disjointedness of their experience. The practical effect of the operators’ state of permanent liminality is that diametrically opposed ideas attempt to occupy the same psychological space at the same time. The operators can concurrently exist in a state of war and peace. Lee relates one particularly poignant example. A Mission Intelligence Coordinator (MIC) named ‘Jamie’ relates an incident from 2011 where a strike in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, resulted in civilian casualties (‘civcas’) including children.¹⁴ Jamie’s account of his thoughts as he drove home after this incident demonstrates the liminal nature of his existence:

How did I find myself in this situation? ...How did my first weapon event turn into a nightmare, an awful nightmare? What have I got myself into? Then a reality check: What time do I need to pick up Jane and the kids from the barbecue? (emphasis in original).¹⁵

Although the operators physically exist in a location far from the operations area in which the physical consequences of their actions manifest, their psychological existence occupies both war and peace. As Press identified, ‘[d]rone warriors shuttle back and forth across such boundaries every day. When their shifts end, the airmen and airwomen drive to their subdivisions alone, like clerks in an office park. One minute they are at war; the next they are at church or picking up their kids from school’.¹⁶ Existing within a state of permanent liminality probably has significant jarring effects on the mental state of these operators, as Lee attests: ‘The normality of events immediately after they exited the GCS seemed abnormal’.¹⁷

¹³ Peter Lee. *Reaper Force – Inside Britain’s Drone Wars* (London: John Blake, 2018).

¹⁴ Lee, *Reaper Force*, 93-113.

¹⁵ Lee, *Reaper Force*, 107.

¹⁶ Press, “The Wounds of the Drone Warrior”.

¹⁷ Lee, *Reaper Force*, 106.

Another aspect of RPA operations can exacerbate the mental effects of permanent liminality is what Lee calls the ‘distance paradox’. This concept refers to the RPA crews significant physical distances from their targets, but being able to witness harrowing events in the operational area at an effective distance of 100 yards when the sensors were at maximum camera resolution.¹⁸ Dave Blair and Karen House refer to this as ‘cognitive combat intimacy’, which they define as:

a relational attachment to a human target mediated by sensor resolution and dwell time, or duration of observation. In layman’s terms, resolution is the clarity with which a hunter can see a target, and even from a great distance, the hunter is exposed to very human factors such as the color (sic) of their clothing, the target’s interaction with others, and the activities of their daily life. Dwell time can be hours, days, and often weeks, during which the hunter has the opportunity to further develop the empathetic bond with the target.¹⁹

The ‘cognitive distance’ of RPA operators from events such as killing and death – whether by their own actions or the actions of others – torture, and rape in the operational area creates a level of close mental or cognitive with these events. This cognitive intimacy with the target and people associated with the target, coupled with loiter time – hours, days, weeks – creates a situation where the operators may develop an empathetic connection with the target, as one Reaper pilot conveyed:

[We] may see ‘Target A’ for weeks, building up a pattern of life for the individual... what we also see is the individual interacting with his family – playing with his kids and helping his wife around the compound. When a strike goes in, we stay on station and see the reactions of the wife and kids when the body is brought to them. You see someone fall to the floor and sob so hard their body is convulsing. A conventional aircraft often doesn’t have the endurance [in the air] to witness this.²⁰

The complex interplay between the concepts of ‘permanent liminality’ and the ‘distance paradox’ creates a situation for the RPA operators where they can form an empathetic and mentally intimate connection with their targets and others in the operational area prior to killing them, and then having to deal with the routine tasks of home life. There is an opportunity for the operators to mentally juxtapose or overlay what they have seen in war within the operational area, with their ‘peaceful’ existence at home. As Lee concedes, more research is required to comprehend the link between empathy and the ability conduct lethal remote operations.²¹ Further research is also necessary to understand whether there is any degradation of ethical or professional standards caused by the psychological effects of ‘routine’ warfare, while physically existing in relative ‘peace’ ‘at home’. In the meantime,

¹⁸ Peter Lee. “The Distance Paradox: Reaper, The Human Dimension of Remote Warfare, and Future Challenges for the RAF”. *Air Power Review* 21, no. 3 (Autumn / Winter 2018) 113-114.

¹⁹ Dave Blair and Karen House, “Avengers in Wrath: Moral Agency and Trauma Prevention for Remote Warriors”, 12 November 2017 <https://www.lawfareblog.com/avengers-wrath-moral-agency-and-trauma-prevention-remote-warriors> (accessed 29 May 2019).

²⁰ Lee, “The Distance Paradox”, 114.

²¹ Lee, “The Distance Paradox”, 122.

military leaders can use overt rituals and create a framework for ethical action to ensure the preservation of the ‘exceptional’ nature of war, the ‘privileged’ status of combatants and the maintenance of accompanying ethical obligations,

Warfighting ethos and ethical frameworks essential

The acquisition of military technology such as the MQ-9 Reaper has provided states with the ability to project force into the relevant operational area, well beyond their the geographic boundaries. However, the human cost of the capability must be brought to the forefront of the minds of military and civilian leaders. From a purely capability perspective, preserving the force that operates the Reaper is just as important as routine maintenance on the RPA system itself. Most importantly, however, the state is under a moral obligation to look after the very citizens in the military forces that are the means for protecting itself or advancing its strategic interests. As Phil Klay commented, ‘[j]oining the military is an act of faith in one’s country – an act of faith that the country will use your life well.’²² The permanent liminality that RPA operators are subjected to also means that their families are relatively more affected by the daily duties of RPA operators than other types of traditional military service, as highlighted by Lee:

Wives, and more recently husbands, of soldiers, sailors and airmen have always had to deal with the fact that the person they are married to could be killing other human beings when they are off at war. Historically, however, that killing happened elsewhere. Physically and metaphorically, that part of military life has usually been separated from home life. ‘What did you do at work today?’ is a risky question to ask – or answer – if the ending of another human life is likely to become dinner conversation.²³

To discharge this obligation to the operators and their families, commanders take action in two ways: (1) use overt rituals to mitigate the effects of permanent liminality and establish a strong military ethos in the unit; and (2) create an ethical framework that can form the foundation on which the operators can situate their experience, and form an anchor for military professionalism and ethical decision-making.

As previously discussed, the idea of liminality is based on rites of passage and ritual that mark the passage of a person from one state of being to another. Perhaps the effects of permanent liminality can be mitigated by creating overt rituals around RPA units at the time individuals join and leave the unit, and also on a daily basis as part of shift change. The purpose of these rituals is to prepare the operators for the most extreme aspect of their duty – to take human life. These rituals are important to mark the transition from ‘peace’ to ‘war’ and back, in order

²² Phil Klay. ‘The Citizen-Soldier. Moral Risk and the Modern Military’, *The Brookings Essay*, 24 May 2016 <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2016/the-citizen-soldier.html> (accessed 28 May 2019).

²³ Lee, *Reaper Force*, 50-51.

to emphasise the privileged position of these military personnel who have a legitimate authority from the state to kill in war.²⁴ Rosa Brooks provides examples of human societies that have specific rituals to prepare ‘warriors’ – from the Norse berserkers, Native American groups, Zulu warriors, and the Jibaro Indians of Ecuador and Peru.²⁵ She describes the importance of these rituals:

Leaving definitional efforts to one side, nearly every human society has sought ways to mark the distinction between war and not-war – between acceptable and socially sanctioned violence and unacceptable forms of violence. Societies have made use of a very wide range of rules and rituals to draw spatial and temporal lines between war and not-war, and between those who participate in wars and those who do not.²⁶

There is little publicly available material regarding the induction training for individuals joining RPA units, and whether this involves detailed, conscious conversations about the act of killing of the target, or unintentionally causing the death of civilians; and the ethical challenges that operators are likely to face on a routine basis as part of their daily duties. Thomassen emphasises the importance of leadership during moments of liminality, to ensure that such transitory periods are not led to ‘dangerous directions’.²⁷ Commanders and leaders can use ‘ritual’ as a means of mitigating the effects of permanent liminality in the Forever War, by becoming what Thomassen refers to as the ‘ceremony masters’ who guide individuals through rites of passage rituals.²⁸ Strong leadership that includes emphasis on the warrior mindset is important to create mental separation so that killing does not become normalised. It must remain the exception rather than the rule and leadership is central to preserving this separation.²⁹

Codes of behaviour have been a significant part of any profession, including the profession of arms. These codes are generally the foundation for ethical conduct of the fighting classes throughout history and form the starting point for guiding ethical conduct.³⁰ However, more is needed for those caught in a state of permanent liminality and who have a psychologically intimate connection with the individuals they see and kill via RPA capabilities. When these operators are on duty, they require strong anchors to the world of war as a means to preserve it as an extraordinary space that sits outside the ordinary world that awaits the operator at the

²⁴ A detailed discussion of the status of combatants can be found in Kenneth Watkin. *Warriors Without Rights? Combatants, Unprivileged Belligerents, and the Struggle over Legitimacy*. Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research – Harvard University – Occasional Paper Series No. 2, Winter 2005.

²⁵ Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, 172-182.

²⁶ Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, 172.

²⁷ Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality”, 23.

²⁸ Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality”, 21.

²⁹ See Lee, “The Distance Paradox”, 118-120.

³⁰ See Shannon E. French. *The Code of the Warrior. Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); and Nathan K Finney and Tyrell O. Mayfield (eds). *Redefining the Modern Military. The Intersection of Profession and Ethics* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

end of shift, beyond the GCS door. Operators require ongoing, focused, education in the fundamental philosophies, values and ethical frameworks of the profession of arms that are for a number of important reasons: to gain a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of their privileged status as combatants, that they are imbued with this privilege for the purposes of their duty to the nation and not for their personal reasons; and the reasons why they must kill others as part of their duty. These provide the operators with a strong framework in which to nest their professional ethics and personal values, which are likely to guide their decisions while on duty. This framework for ethical decision making can be combined with personal philosophies or spiritual beliefs to create a shield against the likely eroding effects of permanent liminality.³¹ This philosophical grounding also provides a place for operators to nest their personal experiences and to provide it with a solid context that emphasises the extraordinary nature of their experience of war. This is an important way to create a clear delineation from their existence in a world of ‘peace’ when they leave the GCS on shift completion and return to their families at home.

Conclusion

...the Reaper personnel exist in a form of suspended reality: never fully away, and never fully at home.

Peter Lee³²

People are a significant part of, what Cockburn calls, ‘a very efficient kill chain’ that sits within RPA systems such as the MQ-9 Reaper.³³ The Forever Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may move into their third decade, as RPAs offer an effective capability to a nation’s military force that allows for these prolonged wars to be waged from home. Such systems enable the people who operate it to experience a state of permanent liminality as they move effortlessly between war and peace on a daily basis. The blurring of the distinction between ‘war’ and ‘peace’ places an obligation on military leaders to ensure that warfare is not normalised, and to preserve the status of warfare as ‘special’ or ‘sacred’. This can be achieved by the creation of rituals that form rites of passage to ease the transition of operators between war and peace as they conduct their daily duties. The inculcation of a practical understanding of the philosophical foundations of warfare via professional military education programs and

³¹ Michael Evans argues that stoicism provides a useful and effective starting point for commanders and leaders who want to create these important mental and philosophical anchors for RPA operators. Stoicism proposes that all life is an unending struggle ‘that must be confronted and mastered if one is to overcome fortune and fate’ and that its virtues may out of reach, but provide a means of ennoblement. See Michael Evans. “Captains of the Soul, Stoic Philosophy and the Western Profession of Arms in the Twenty-first Century” *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 31-58.

³² Lee, *Reaper Force*, 276.

³³ Andrew Cockburn. *Kill Chain. The Rise of the High-Tech Assassin* (New York: Picador, 2015): 15

mission specific training can be a means for preserving the status of war as being 'extraordinary'. The act of killing is no longer reserved for those combatants who are physically proximate to the enemy and are more able to close with and kill them. In the Forever War more people actively participate in, or are exposed to, the act of killing through the use of technology, even if they are not physically in the operational area. Building resilience against ethical erosion and the maintenance of professional standards via philosophical anchors to war (versus peace) are therefore vital.

The ideas presented here are merely primers for further comprehensive research effort by the relevant experts that is directed at understanding both the immediate and longitudinal combined effects of 'permanent liminality' and the 'distance paradox' on the psychological welfare of RPA operators and their families. The nation owes these citizens the effort and resources to understand these issues, particularly if the nation is to use their lives well in the national interest, in a war that seems to have no end.

Word count: 3,035 (not including footnotes or bibliography)

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