

Washington's Civilian "Kill List" in Afghanistan: Drone Whistleblowers Step Out of the Shadows

In Washington's Drone Wars, Collateral Damage Comes Home

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In a trio of recent action-packed movies, good guys watch terrorists mingling with innocent women and children via real-time video feeds from halfway across the world. A clock ticks and we, the audience, are let in on the secret that mayhem is going to break loose. After much agonized soul-searching about possible collateral damage, the good guys call in a missile strike from a U.S. drone to try to save the day by taking out a set of terrorists.

Such is the premise of Gavin Hood's [Eye in the Sky](#), Andrew Niccol's [Good Kill](#), and Rick Rosenthal's [Drones](#). In reality, in Washington's drone wars neither the "good guys" nor the helpless, endangered villagers under those robotic aircraft actually survive the not-so secret drone war that the Obama administration has been waging relentlessly across the Greater Middle East — not, at least, without some kind of collateral damage. In addition to those they kill, Washington's drones turn out to wound (in ways both physical and psychological) their own operators and the populations who live under their constant surveillance. They leave behind very real victims with all-too-real damage, often in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder on opposite sides of the globe.

"Sometimes I am so sad that my heart wants to explode," an Afghan man says, speaking directly into the camera.

"When your body is intact, your mind is different. You are content. But the moment you are wounded, your soul gets damaged. When your leg is torn off and your gait slows, it also burdens your spirit."

The speaker is an unnamed victim of a February 2010 drone [strike](#) in Uruzgan, Afghanistan, but he could just as easily be an Iraqi, a Pakistani, a Somali, or a Yemeni. He appears in [National Bird](#), a haunting new documentary film by [Sonia Kennebeck](#) about the unexpected and largely unrecorded devastation Washington's drone wars leave in their wake. In it, the audience hears directly from both drone personnel and their victims.

"I Was Under the Impression That America Was Saving the World"

"When we are in our darkest places and we have a lot to worry about and we feel guilty about our past actions, it's really tough to describe what that feeling is like," says Daniel, a whistleblower who took part in drone operations and whose last name is not revealed in *National Bird*. Speaking of the suicidal feelings that sometimes plagued him while he was involved in killing halfway across the planet, he adds, "Having the image in your head of

taking your own life is not a good feeling.”

National Bird is not the first muckraking documentary on Washington’s drone wars. Robert Greenwald’s [Unmanned](#), Tonje Schei’s [Drone](#), and Madiha Tahrir’s [Wounds of Waziristan](#) have already shone much-needed light on how drone warfare really works. But as Kennebeck told me, when she set out to make a film about the wages of the newest form of war known to humanity, she wanted those doing the targeting, as well as those they were targeting, to speak for themselves. She wanted them to reveal the psychological impact of sending robot assassins, often operated by “pilots” halfway around the world, into the Greater Middle East to fight Washington’s war on terror. In her film, there’s no narrator, nor experts in suits working for think tanks in Washington, nor retired generals debating the value of drone strikes when it comes to defeating terrorism.

Instead, what you see is far less commonplace: low-level recruits in President Obama’s never-ending drone wars, those Air Force personnel who remotely direct the robotic vehicles to their targets, analyze the information they send back, and relay that information to the pilots who unleash Hellfire missiles that will devastate distant villages. If recent history is any guide, these drones do not just kill terrorists; in their target areas, they also create anxiety, upset, and a desire for revenge in a larger population and so have proven a powerful weapon in spreading terror movements across the Greater Middle East.

These previously faceless but distinctly non-robotic Air Force recruits are the cannon fodder of America’s drone wars. You meet two twenty-somethings: Daniel, a self-described down-and-out homeless kid, every male member of whose family has been in jail on petty charges of one kind or another, and Heather, a small town high school graduate trying to escape rural Pennsylvania. You also meet Lisa, a former Army nurse from California, who initially saw the military as a path to a more meaningful life.

The three of them worked on Air Force bases scattered around the country from California to Virginia. The equipment they handled hovered above war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Pakistan and Yemen (where the U.S. Air Force was supporting assassination missions on behalf of the Central Intelligence Agency).

“That is so cool, unmanned aircraft. That’s really bad-ass.” So Heather thought when she first saw recruitment posters for the drone program. “I was under the impression,” she told Kennebeck, “that America was saving the world, like that we were Big Brother and we were helping everyone out.”

Initially, Lisa felt similarly: “When I first got into the military, I mean I was thinking it was a win-win. It was a force for good in the world. I thought I was going to be on the right side of history.”

And that was hardly surprising. After all, you’re talking about the “perfect weapon,” the totally high-tech, “precise” and “surgical,” no-(American)-casualties, sci-fi version of war that Washington has been promoting for years as its answer to al-Qaeda and other terror outfits. President Obama who has personally overseen the drone campaigns — with a [“kill list”](#) and “terror Tuesday” meetings at the White House — vividly [described](#) his version of such a modern war in a 2013 speech at the National Defense University:

“This is a just war — a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense. We were attacked on 9/11. Under domestic law, and international law,

the United States is at war with al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their associated forces... America does not take strikes to punish individuals; we act against terrorists who pose a continuing and imminent threat to the American people. And before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured — the highest standard we can set.”

That distinctly Hollywood vision of America’s drone wars (with a *Terminator* edge) was the one that had filtered down to the level of Kennebeck’s three drone-team interviewees when they signed on. It looked to them then like a war worth fighting and a life worth leading. Today, as they speak out, their version of such warfare looks nothing like what either Hollywood or Washington might imagine.

“Excuse Me, Sir, Can I Have Your Driver’s License?”

National Bird does more than look at the devastation caused by drones in far away lands and the overwhelming anxiety it produces among those who live under the distant buzzing and constant threat of those robotic aircraft on an almost daily basis. Kennebeck also turns her camera on the men and women who helped make the strikes possible, trying to assess what the impact of their war has been on them. Their raw and unfiltered responses should deeply trouble us all.

Kennebeck’s interviewees are among at least a [dozen whistleblowers](#) who have stepped forward, or are preparing to do so, in order to denounce Washington’s drone wars as morally unjustified, as in fact nightmares both for those who fight them and those living in the lands that are on the receiving end. The realities of the day-in, day-out war they fought for years were, as they tell it, deeply destructive and filled with collateral damage of every sort. Worse yet, drone operators turn out to have little real idea about, and almost no confirmation of, whom exactly they’ve blown away.

“It’s so primitive, raw, stripped-down death. This is real. It’s not a joke,” says Heather, an imagery analyst whose job was to look at the streaming video coming in from drones over war zones and interpret the grainy images for senior commanders in the [kill chain](#).

“You see someone die because you said it was okay to kill them. I was always shaking. Sometimes I would just go to the bathroom and just sit on the toilet. I mean just sit there in my uniform and just cry.”

Advocates of drone war believe, as do many of its critics, that it minimizes casualties. These Air Force veterans have, however, stepped forward to tell us that such claims simply aren’t true. In a study of what can be known about drone killings, the human rights group [Reprive](#) has confirmed this reality vividly, finding that, in Pakistan, in attempts to take out 41 men, American drones [actually killed](#) an estimated 1,147 people (while not all of the 41 targeted figures even died). In other words, this hasn’t proved to be a war on terror, but a [war of terror](#), a reality the drone whistleblowers confirm.

Heather is blunt in her criticism. “Hearing politicians speak about drones being precision weapons [makes it seem like they’re] able to make surgical strikes. To me it’s completely ridiculous, completely ludicrous to make these statements.”

The three whistleblowers point, for instance, to the complete absence of any post-strike verification of who exactly has died. “There’s a bomb. They drop it. It explodes,” Lisa says.

“Then what? Does somebody go down and ask for somebody’s driver’s license? Excuse me, sir, can I have your driver’s license, see who you are? Does that happen? I mean, how do we know? How is it possible to know who ends up living or dying?”

After three years as an imagery analyst, after regularly watching unknown people die thousands of miles away on a grainy screen, Heather was diagnosed as suicidal. She estimates — and the experiences of other drone whistleblowers back her up — that alcoholics accounted for a significant percentage of her unit, and that many of her co-workers had similarly suicidal thoughts. [Two](#) actually did kill themselves.

As Heather’s grandfather points out,

“She had trouble getting the treatment she needed. She had trouble finding a doctor because they didn’t have the right security clearance [and] she could be in violation of the law and could even go to prison for even talking to the wrong therapist about what was bothering her.”

In desperation Heather turned to her mother.

“She’d call me up and she’d cry and she’d be upset, but then she couldn’t talk about it,” her mother says. “When you hear your daughter talking to you on the phone, you can tell she is in trouble just by the emotion and inflection and the stress that you can hear in her voice. When you ask her, did you talk to anyone else about it? She’d say no, we’re not allowed to talk to anybody. I have a feeling that if someone wasn’t there for her, she wouldn’t be here right now.”

Like Heather, Daniel has so far survived his own drone-war-induced mental health issues, but in his post-drone life he’s run into a formidable enemy: the U.S. government. On August 8, 2014, he estimates that as many as 50 Federal Bureau of Investigation agents raided his house, seizing documents and his electronics.

“The government suspects that he is a source of information about the [drone] program that the government doesn’t want out there,” says [Jesselyn Radack](#), his lawyer and herself a former Department of Justice whistleblower. “To me, that’s simply an attempt to silence whistleblowers, and it doesn’t surprise me that that happens to the very few people who have been brave enough to speak out against the drone program.”

If that was the intention, however, the raid — and the threat it carries for other whistleblowers — seems not to have had the desired effect. Instead, the number of what might be thought of as defectors from the drone program only seems to be growing. The [first](#) to come out was Brandon Bryant, a former camera operator in October 2013. He was [followed](#) by Cian Westmoreland, a former radio technician, in November 2014. Last November, Michael Haas and Stephen Lewis, two imagery analysts, joined Westmoreland and Bryant by [speaking out](#) at the launch of Tonje Schei’s film [Drone](#). All four of them also published an open letter to President Obama warning him that the drone war was escalating terrorism, not containing it.

And just last month, Chris Aaron, a former counterterrorism analyst for the CIA’s drone program, [spoke out](#) on a panel at the University of Nevada Law School. In the relatively near

future, Radack recently [told](#) *Rolling Stone*, four more individuals involved in America's drone wars are planning to offer their insights into how the program works.

Like Heather and Daniel, many of the former drone operators who have gone public are struggling with mental health problems. Some of them are also dealing with substance abuse issues that began as a way to counteract or dull the horrors of the war they were waging and witnessing. "We used to call alcohol drone fuel because it kept the program going. Everyone drank. There was a lot of coke, speed, and that sort of thing," imagery analyst Haas [told](#) *Rolling Stone*. "If the higher ups knew, then they didn't say anything, but I'm pretty sure they must have known. It was everywhere."

"Imagine If This Was Happening to Us"

In recent months, something has changed for the whistleblowers. There is a new sense of camaraderie among them, as well as with the lawyers defending them and a growing group of activist supporters. Most unexpectedly, they are hearing from the families of victims of drone strikes, thanks to the work of groups like [Reprive](#) in Great Britain.

In mid-April, for instance, when Cian Westmoreland was visiting London, he met with Malik Jalal, a Pakistani tribal leader who [claims](#) that he has been targeted by U.S. drones on multiple occasions. Clive Lewis, a member of Parliament and military veteran, released a photo on Facebook of the meeting. "It's possible that one of the two men I'm [standing] between in this picture, Cian Westmoreland, was trying to kill the man on my right, Malik Jalal — at some stage in the past seven years," Lewis [wrote](#).

"Their story is both amazing and terrifying. At once it shows the growing menace and destructive capability of unchecked political and military power juxtaposed with the power of the human spirit and human solidarity."

As that sense of solidarity strengthens and as the distance between the former [hunters](#) and the hunted begins to narrow, the whistleblowers are beginning to confront some distinctly uncomfortable questions. "We often hear that drones can see everything by day and by night," a different drone victim of the February 2010 [strike](#) in Uruzgan told filmmaker Kennebeck. "You can see the difference between a needle and an ant but not people? We were sitting in the pickup truck, some even on the bed. Did you not see that there were travelers, women and children?"

When the president and his key officials look at the drone program, they undoubtedly don't "see" women and children. Instead, they are caught up in a Hollywood-style vision of imminent danger from terrorists and of the kind of salvation that a missile launched from thousands of miles away provides. It is undoubtedly thanks to just this thought process, already deeply embedded in the American way of war, that not a single candidate for president in 2016 has rejected the drone program.

That is exactly what the whistleblowers feel needs to change.

"I just want people to know that not everybody is a freaking terrorist and we need to just get out of that mindset. And we just need to see these people as people — families, communities, brothers, mothers, and sisters, because that's who they are,"

says Lisa.

“Imagine if this was happening to us. Imagine if our children were walking outside of the door and it was a sunny day and they were afraid because they didn’t know if today was the day that something would fall out of the sky and kill someone close to them. How would we feel?”

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Note:

Sonia Kennebeck’s *National Bird* premieres this month at New York’s [Tribeca Film Festival](#) and at the [San Francisco](#) Film Festival. It will open in theaters this [fall](#).

Correction:

Cian Westmoreland was in London in mid-April for a speaking engagement. While in London, he met with several members of the British Parliament to inform them about his perspective on the drone war. Malik Jalal met with Parliament on the same day, resulting in the photo Clive Lewis posted on Facebook. The event was not a meeting between Westmoreland and Jalal as the original article stated.

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