

# Daniel Hale is a Hero, Not a Criminal

by *Chip Gibbons*, published on *The Jacobin*, April 10, 2021

Former intelligence analyst Daniel Hale is being prosecuted for blowing the whistle on America's drone program. It's the latest in the topsy-turvy world of national security whistleblowers, who reveal illegal and immoral conduct by the US military yet face prison time as if they committed the real crimes.

On Wednesday, March 31, Daniel Hale pled guilty to one count of violating the Espionage Act. On its face, the Espionage Act may sound like a law dealing with spies and saboteurs who injure the United States by furnishing military secrets to foreign enemies. But, from its inception, the act has been principally used to silence dissent. In recent decades, the law has become the government's go-to weapon against whistleblowers and journalists who challenge the US national security state.

Hale conceded to giving documents about the US drone program to an investigative journalist (unnamed in court documents, but clearly Jeremy Scahill of the *Intercept*) and anonymously authoring a chapter in *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program*. Far from a spy, Hale is a whistleblower – and a courageous one at that – whose actions have given us key insights into the unjust nature of US imperial power in the twenty-first century.

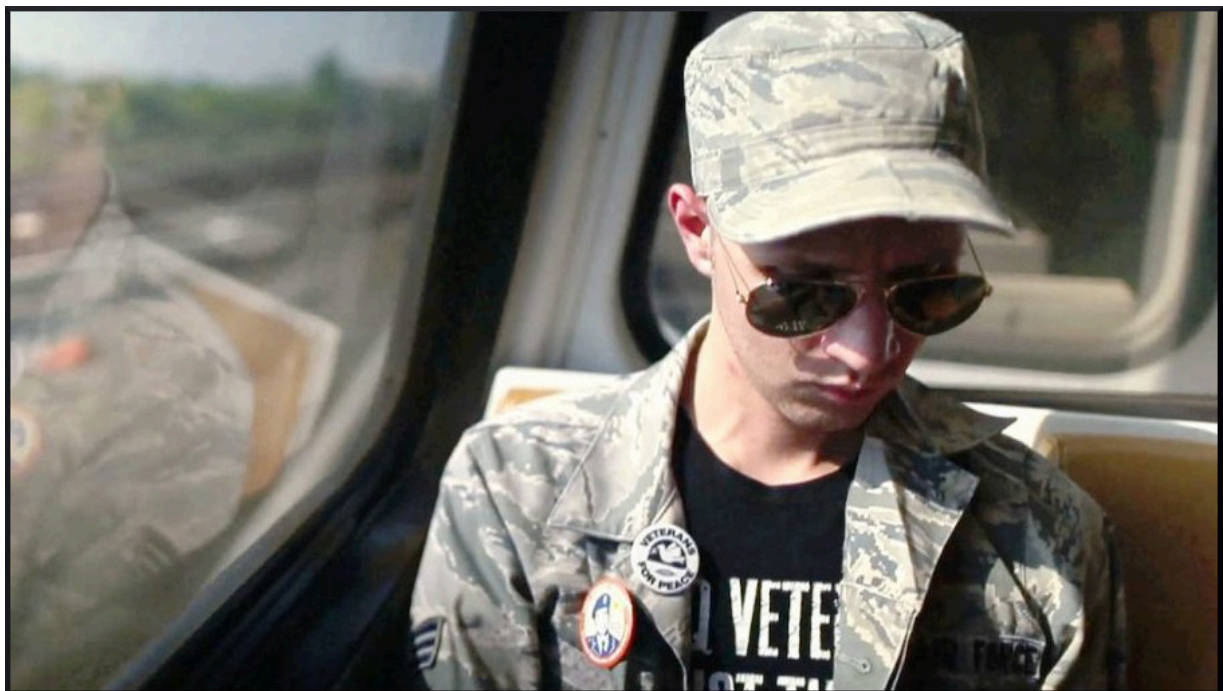
## **"There's No Way of Knowing" Who's Being Killed**

From 2009 to 2013, Hale served in the US Air Force as an intelligence analyst. His motivations for enlisting were not based on an ideological affinity for US foreign policy. By Hale's own admission, he was deeply critical of it, but he was

suffering from homelessness and had few other options. While in the Air Force, Hale was assigned to work with the National Security Agency (NSA) and was even stationed at Bagram air force base in Afghanistan as part of the Department of Defense's Joint Special Operations Task Force.

In this role as a signals analyst, Hale was involved in the identifying of targets for the US drone program. Hale would tell the filmmakers of the 2016 documentary ***National Bird*** that he was disturbed by *"the uncertainty if anyone I was involved in kill[ing] or captur[ing] was a civilian or not. There's no way of knowing."*

After leaving the military, Hale would work as a contractor with the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. He also began speaking out against US drone policy. In 2013, he met journalist Jeremy Scahill at a bookstore in Washington, DC, where Scahill was talking about his book *Dirty Wars: The World Is A Battlefield*. Later that year, Hale appeared on stage alongside Scahill at another book event.



Daniel Hale in the 2016 documentary *National Bird*.  
(Independent Lens / PBS)

Hale shows up alongside a number of other drone whistleblowers in *National Bird*. Throughout the film, his politics are on full display. Hale wears a button in support of whistleblower Chelsea Manning, a Black Panther Party poster can be seen adorning his home, and he is pictured attending an antiwar protest wearing pins for the group Veterans for Peace.

During filming in 2014, Hale's home was raided by the FBI in connection to an Espionage Act investigation. The early fallout of the raid is depicted in the film, showing yet another pitfall national security whistleblowers face. Hale explained that he thought he was being targeted in part for being a former intelligence analyst now involved in political activism.

## **Exposing the Kill Chain**

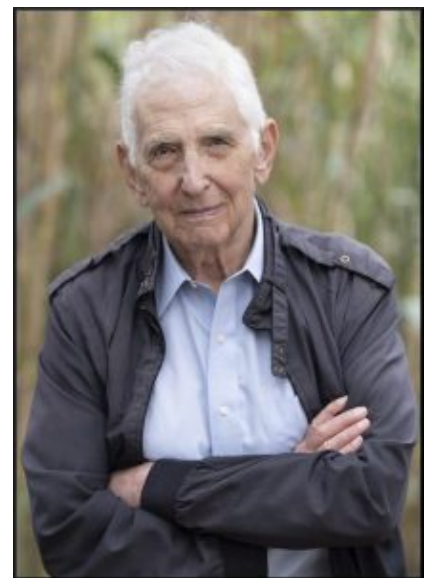
In 2015, one year after the search, the *Intercept* published an eight-part series titled "*The Drone Papers*," a groundbreaking exposé based on "*a cache of secret documents detailing the inner workings of the U.S. military's assassination program in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia.*"

"*The Drone Papers*" featured a number of startling revelations, depicting in full detail for the first time the "*kill chain*," the bureaucratic process by which targets are selected to be summarily executed. These targets are culled from secret terror watch lists, which include US citizens. Information about potential targets is transformed into "*baseball cards*" given to the president, who then has the option to sign what is essentially a death warrant. If the president signs off, the military has sixty days to carry out a lethal strike against the target.

Signals intelligence and metadata taken from phone intercepts played a heavy role in targeting. Yet the *Intercept's* reporting reveals that such methods were far from reliable and led to the killing of civilians. The source, now known to be Hale, was quoted as saying, "*It requires an enormous amount of*

*faith in the technology that you're using. There's countless instances where I've come across intelligence that was faulty."* And while these assassinations are often referred to by governments as *"targeted killings,"* during one five-month period, more than 90 percent of those killed by US airstrikes were not the intended targets. Yet even when the US government killed unintended targets, it labeled them as *"enemies killed in action"* unless proven otherwise. Then in 2019, a full five years after the initial FBI raid and four years after the publishing of *"The Drone Papers,"* the US Department of Justice indicted Hale on four counts of violating the Espionage Act and one count of theft of government property. Similar charges had historically been brought against Pentagon papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg and more recently Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and Reality Winner.

**An Act to Quash Dissent** The Espionage Act has a loathsome history. Passed during World War I and used to criminalize opposition to the war, the act was most infamously used to jail socialist standard-bearer Eugene Debs, as well as members of the Socialist Party and Industrial Workers of the World.



Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon papers, in 2002. (Christopher Michel)

When Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo liberated the US government's secret history of the Vietnam War, the Pentagon

papers, the Nixon administration, seeking to make an example of leakers, charged them under the Espionage Act. Given the flagrant misconduct of the Nixon administration (Richard Nixon's "*plumbers*" had burglarized Ellsberg's psychiatrist hoping to find salacious evidence to use to discredit Ellsberg), the charges were dismissed.

When it came to journalists and their sources, the Espionage Act was occasionally invoked as a threat, but lay largely dormant until the twenty-first century. One exception was the Reagan-era prosecution of Samuel L. Morison for giving information to *Jane's Defense Weekly*. Yet the case was considered such an anomaly that Bill Clinton granted a full and unconditional pardon to Morison.

This changed with the Obama administration, which normalized the practice of indicting journalists' sources under the Espionage Act. Obama's Department of Justice chose to continue or, in some cases, reopen Bush-era cases against national security whistleblowers, bringing an unprecedented number of Espionage Act indictments. These included indictments against NSA whistleblower Thomas Drake and CIA whistleblower John Kiriakou.

Drake had raised concerns internally about NSA mass surveillance before later going to a *Baltimore Sun* reporter with unclassified information about waste, fraud, and abuse. The government dropped the Espionage Act charges against him on the eve of the trial as its case unraveled.

Kiriakou exposed CIA torture by bringing information to journalists, and was indicted under the Espionage Act. He pled guilty to violating the Intelligence Identities Protection Act, and was sentenced to thirty months in prison – making him, perversely, the only person to go to jail over CIA torture. While both of these cases had their origins in the Bush era, when Chelsea Manning exposed US war crimes and Edward Snowden revealed the NSA's illegal surveillance, they

both were indicted by the Obama Department of Justice under the Espionage Act.

These were not the only victims of Obama's war on whistleblowers. By the end of his administration, Obama had indicted more whistleblowers under the Espionage Act than all previous administrations combined.

Trump picked up the baton Obama handed him, escalating the use of the Espionage Act and seeking longer and harsher sentences, including in the cases of FBI whistleblower Terry Albury and NSA whistleblower Reality Winner. Trump's Department of Justice also went a step beyond Obama, and, in the case of Australian journalist Julian Assange, indicted a publisher of truthful information for the first time. It was under the Trump presidency that Hale was at last indicted.

### **Prosecuted for Criticism**

A whistleblower indicted under the Espionage Act has virtually zero chance at a fair defense. The law allows for no public interest defense. More disturbingly, whistleblowers are gagged from explaining their actions. Defense attorneys are barred from uttering the words "*whistleblower*" or "*First Amendment*" within earshot of the jury. Since all that matters for sustaining a conviction is that a defendant gave classified information to someone not entitled to receive it, that's all the jury is allowed to hear.

In the run-up to the potential trial, Hale's defense made a number of arguments as to why the indictment should be dismissed. Hale's attorney argued that the intelligence analyst turned antiwar activist was the victim of a prosecution both vindictive and selective. Government officials leak information about the US drone program all the time without prosecution. The difference is that they are feeding information to gullible reporters about the program's efficiency, whereas Hale's disclosures exposed the

government's official claims as false.

The government decided to target Hale not because he leaked information on the drone program, which is a standard course of action in official Washington, but because he criticized the drone program. The defense urged the judge to order prosecutors to release its reasons for initiating the prosecution, and whether any initial decision not to prosecute had been made and reversed. After all, this prosecution was brought half a decade after the investigation started and four years after the publication of *"The Drone Papers."* Such information could show whether the delayed prosecution was the result of a new administration's vindictiveness toward press freedom.

Additionally, Hale's attorneys brought First Amendment challenges to the indictment. They argued that the conduct central to the government's accusations against Hale, assisting a journalist in newsgathering, touched on core First Amendment protected freedoms. The defense pointed out that the Espionage Act was passed before the courts adopted their contemporary expansive interpretation of First Amendment press freedoms. They also argued that the record showed that Congress never intended the act to criminalize giving information to the public. While an appellate court had dealt with similar issues in the 1980s, the defense reasoned that as that case predated the government's widespread use of the Espionage Act to stifle newsgathering, the situation had changed. Hale was supported in this motion by a brief filed by Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press.





Daniel Hale in the documentary National Bird. (Independent Lens / PBS)

The government made its own pretrial motions, urging a judge to preemptively bar the defense from making a wide range of arguments – for example, to challenge whether the documents were misclassified, arguing that such classification was the sole authority of the executive branch and therefore could not be challenged. They even went so far as to argue that whether the information was improperly classified was irrelevant, as an Espionage Act prosecution did not require the information to be properly classified, just classified. Classification, which postdates the Espionage Act, is supposed to be used to protect legitimate secrets, not conceal information that casts the government in a negative light. “*Overclassification*,” classifying information that should not be kept from the public, is a growing problem within the executive branch.

The government also moved to have the defense barred from mentioning the “*good motives*” of the defendant (i.e., his entire reasoning for making the disclosure) and argued that other government officials routinely leak information. The government even sought to bar the defense from arguing that an “*alternative perpetrator committed the charged crimes, absent some non-speculative evidence of that individual’s (a) connection to a particular reporter, and (b) knowledge of, or*



*access to the documents at issue."*

Faced with a limited ability to present any meaningful defense, Hale did what most whistleblowers indicted under the Espionage Act do after realizing how stacked the deck is against them: he pled guilty a week before the trial was to begin, pleading to one count – unlawful "retention and transmission of national defense information." But the government has not dismissed the remaining four charges, instead merely asking for the trial to be postponed. This has raised concerns that the government could, if it feels the judge has given Hale too lenient a sentence, seek a trial on the remaining charges.

### **Official American Drone Policy Is Criminal**

Speaking anonymously to Scahill at the time *"The Drone Papers"* were published, Hale explained why he chose to go to the American people with information its government had kept from them. *"This outrageous explosion of watch-listing – of monitoring people and racking and stacking them on lists, assigning them numbers, assigning them 'baseball cards,' assigning them death sentences without notice, on a worldwide battlefield – it was, from the very first instance, wrong."*

Drone strikes are a form of extrajudicial execution that is illegal under international law. They are a moral travesty. These assassinations are also part of larger foreign policy that is itself troubling. Enemies of whistleblowers often prattle on about the need to go through *"official channels."* But when the crime itself is official policy, what better check exists than the democratic process itself?

Yet from the Pentagon papers to *"The Drone Papers,"* the US government has worked to conceal the realities of its war-making from the US public, obfuscating our ability to use our democratic process to rebuke the government. This is a pernicious conspiracy against our ability to democratically

decide our foreign policy. Presidents from both parties have helped to carry it out. Congress and the courts are both complicit.

These antidemocratic impulses of the national security state are what's actually harmful to our country – not a whistleblower who seeks to empower us to make democratic decisions about the crimes our government carries out in our name.

Hale's actions are both heroic and laudable. The fact that the government once again seeks to destroy a truth teller who exposed its crimes highlights the immorality of the system that Hale and others have exposed.

*Please go to the website “Stand with Daniel Hale” to get more information on Daniel's status and how you can help him.*  
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**\*Featured Image:** JANUARY 07: A U.S. Air Force MQ-1B Predator unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), carrying a Hellfire air-to-surface missile lands at a secret air base in the Persian Gulf region on January 7, 2016. The U.S. military and coalition forces use the base, located in an undisclosed location, to launch airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. (Photo by John Moore/Getty Images)

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# A New US Air Force Video Game Lets You Drone Bomb Iraqis and Afghans

by *Alan McLeod*, published on *MintPress News*, January 31, 2020

The United States Air Force has a new recruitment tool: a realistic drone operator video game you can play on its website. Called the Airman Challenge, it features 16 missions to complete, interspersed with facts and recruitment information about how to become a drone operator yourself. In its latest attempts to market active service to young people, players move through missions escorting U.S. vehicles through countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, serving up death from above to all those designated “*insurgents*” by the game. Players earn medals and achievements for most effectively destroying moving targets. All the while there is a prominent “*apply now*” button on screen if players would like to enlist and conduct real drone strikes all over the Middle East.

The game has failed to win over David Swanson, director of the anti-war movement World Beyond War, and the author of *War is a Lie*.

*“It is truly disgusting, immoral, and arguably illegal in that it is recruitment or pre-recruitment of underage children to participate in murder. It is part of the normalization of murder that we have been living through,” he told MintPress News.*

Tom Secker, a journalist and researcher into the influence of the military on popular culture was similarly unimpressed by the latest U.S.A.F. recruitment strategy, telling us,

*The drone game struck me as sick and demented... On the other*

*hand, many drone pilots have described how piloting drones and killing random brown people is a lot like playing a video game, because you're sat in a bunker in Nevada pushing buttons, detached from the consequences. So I guess it accurately reflects the miserable, traumatised, serial killing life of a drone pilot, we can't accuse it of inaccuracy per se."*

## Game Over

Despite the fact that they are rarely, if ever in any physical danger, the military has considerable difficulty recruiting and retaining drone pilots. Nearly a quarter of Air Force staff who can fly the machines leave the service every year. A lack of respect, fatigue and mental anguish are the primary reasons cited. Stephen Lewis, a sensor operator between 2005 and 2010 said what he did *"weighs on your conscience. It weighs on your soul. It weighs on your heart,"* claiming that the post traumatic stress disorder he suffers from as a consequence of killing so many people has made it impossible for him to have relationships with other humans.

*"People think it is a video game. But in a video game you have checkpoints, you have restart points. When you fire that missile there's no restart,"* he said. *"The less they can get you to think of what you're shooting at as human the easier it becomes to you to just follow through with these shots when they come down,"* said Michael Haas, another former U.S.A.F. sensor operator. The Airman Challenge game follows this path, using red dots on the screen to represent enemies, sanitizing the violence recruits will be meting out.

*"We were very callous about any real collateral damage. Whenever that possibility came up most of the time it was a guilt by association or sometimes we didn't even consider other people that were on screen,"* Haas said, noting that he and his peers used terms like *"fun sized terrorist"* to

describe children, employing euphemisms like *"cutting the grass before it grows too long,"* as justifications for their extermination. The constant violence, even from afar, takes a heavy toll on many drone operators, who complain of constant nightmares and having to drink themselves into a stupor every night to avoid them.

Others, with different personalities, revel in the bloodshed. Prince Harry, for example, was a helicopter gunner in Afghanistan and described firing missiles as a *"joy."* *"I'm one of those people who loves playing PlayStation and Xbox, so with my thumbs I like to think I'm probably quite useful,"* he said. *"If there's people trying to do bad stuff to our guys, then we'll take them out of the game."*

## **A Nobel Cause**

Drone bombing is a relatively new technology. Barack Obama came into office promising to end President Bush's reckless aggression, even being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. While he slashed the number of American troops on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, he also greatly expanded U.S. wars in the form of drone bombings, ordering ten times as many as Bush. In his last year in office, the U.S. dropped at least 26,000 bombs – around one every twenty minutes on average. When he left office, the U.S. was bombing seven countries simultaneously: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan.



Photo of a young boy killed by a drone strike in Waziristan Pakistan in 2010, ~Noor Behram

Up to 90 percent of reported drone casualties were “*collateral damage*,” i.e. innocent bystanders. Swanson is deeply concerned about the way in which the practice has become normalized: “*If murder is acceptable as long as a military does it, anything else is acceptable*,” he says, “*We will reverse this trend, or we will perish.*”

History did not exactly repeat itself with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, but it did rhyme. Trump came to power having made multiple statements perceived as anti-war, strongly criticizing Obama and the Democrats’ handling of the situation in the Middle East. Egged on even by so-called “*resistance*” media, Trump immediately expanded drone bombings, increasing the number of strikes by 432 percent in his first year in office. The president also used a drone attack to kill Iranian general and statesman Qassem Soleimani earlier this month.

## **Killing in the Game of**

In 2018, the armed forces fell well short of their recruitment targets, despite offering a package of benefits very

attractive to working-class Americans. As a result, it totally revamped its recruitment strategy, moving away from television and investing in micro-targeted online ads in an attempt to reach young people, particularly men below the age of thirty, who make up the bulk of the armed forces. One branding exercise was to create an Army e-sports team entering video game competitions under the military brand. As the gaming website, *Kotaku* wrote, *"Positioning the Army as a game-friendly environment and institution is crucial, or even necessary, to reach the people the Army wants to reach."* The Army surpassed its recruitment goal for 2019.

Although the Airman Challenge game is a new attempt at recruitment, the armed forces have a long history being involved in the video game market, and the entertainment industry more generally. Secker's work has uncovered the depths of collaboration between the military and the entertainment industry. Through Freedom of Information requests, he was able to find that the Department of Defense reviews, edits and writes hundreds of TV and movie scripts every year, subsidizing the entertainment world with free content and equipment in exchange for positive portrayals. *"At this point, it's difficult to effectively summarise the US military's influence on the industry, because it's so varied and all-encompassing,"* he said.

*The US Army spends tens of millions a year on the Institute for Creative Technologies, who develop advanced tech for the film and gaming industries, as well as in-house training games for the Army and – on occasion – the CIA. The Department Of Defense has supported a number of major game franchises (Call of Duty, Tom Clancy games, usually first or third-person shooters). Military-supported games are subject to the same rules of narrative and character as movies and TV, so they can be rejected or modified if they contain elements the Department Of Defense deems controversial."*



The video games industry is massive, with hyper-realistic first person shooters like Call of Duty being among the most popular genres. Call of Duty: WWII, for example, sold \$500 million worth of copies in its opening weekend alone, more money generated than blockbuster movies *“Thor: Ragnarok”* and *“Wonder Woman”* combined. Many people spend hours a day playing. Captain Brian Stanley, a military recruiter in California said, *“Kids know more about the army than we do... Between the weapons, vehicles, and tactics, and a lot of that knowledge comes from video games.”*



th Attack Squadron MQ-9 Reaper pilot, and TSgt Trevis, 49th  
up MQ-9 sensor operator (last names omitted due to operational  
ns) fly an MQ-9 Reaper training mission from a ground control

Holloman Air Force Base, N.M., Oct. 3. The Reaper is a multi-functional aircraft that supports both reconnaissance and combat roles. Holloman trains all Predator and MQ-9 Reaper pilots. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class [name redacted]/Released)

Young people, therefore, spend huge amounts of time effectively being propagandized by the military. In *Call of Duty Ghosts*, for instance, you play as a U.S. soldier fighting against a red-beret wearing anti-American Venezuelan dictator, clearly based on President Hugo Chavez, while in *Call of Duty 4*, you follow the U.S. Army in Iraq, shooting hundreds of Arabs as you go. There's even a mission where you operate a drone, which is distinctly similar to the *Airman Challenge*. U.S. forces even control drones with Xbox controllers, blurring the lines between war games and *war games* even further.

## Cyber Warfare

Although the military industrial complex is keen to advertise opportunities for pilots, they go to great lengths to hide the reality of what happens to the victims of airstrikes. The most famous of these is likely the "*Collateral Murder*" video, leaked by Chelsea Manning to Wikileaks co-founder Julian Assange. The video, which made worldwide news, laid bare the callousness towards civilian lives Haas described, where Air Force pilots laugh at shooting dead at least 12 unarmed civilians, including two *Reuters* journalists. While those commanders ultimately in charge of military operations in the Middle East appear on television constantly, trying to sanitize their actions, Manning and Assange remain in prison for helping to expose the public to an alternative depiction of violence. Manning has spent the majority of the last decade incarcerated, while Assange awaits possible extradition to the United States in a London prison.

The *Airman Challenge* video game, for Secker, is merely "*the*

latest in a long line of insidious and disturbing recruitment efforts by the US military.” “If they feel they have to do this just to recruit a few hundred thousand people to their cause, maybe their cause isn’t worth it,” he said.

Feature photo | A screenshot from the US Air Force’s latest recruitment tool, a video game called the Airman Challenge

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## Drone Operator Issues

***Former Drone Operators Say They Were “Horrificed” By Cruelty of Assassination Program, ~The Intercept***

by **Nick Mottern**, published on **KnowDrones.com**

At the beginning of 2017 there were about 1,350 U.S. Air Force drone operators, most of them assigned to operations and training centers inside the United States. In this section we will discuss what we know about the issues confronting these women and men and then list organizations and individuals offering help to those operators who are moved by conscience to want to stop working in the drone program.  
<http://www.gao.gov/products/GA0-14-316>

# Drone Operator Issues

Public knowledge of the lives and issues of drone operators is sketchy because of government secrecy.

The Government Accountability Office's 2014 Actions Needed to Strengthen Management of Unmanned Aerial System Pilots is the most comprehensive public report on the working conditions and emotional challenges experienced by U.S. drone operators. <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/662467.pdf>

The report, based to a significant degree on focus group interviews with drone operators at three key U.S. drone control centers – Creech, Cannon and Beale AFBs, said that eight out of 10 focus groups “found it to be rewarding to be able to contribute every day through the RPA (remotely piloted aircraft) mission”.

This finding means, of course, that 20 percent of those interviewed did not find their assignments rewarding. And, perhaps more significantly, half of the focus groups objected to being kept in drone duty longer than a normal length of assignment.

The operators in all focus groups said “they face multiple challenging working conditions including: long hours, working shifts that frequently rotate, and remaining in assignments beyond typical lengths”.

Another GAO report, Unmanned Aerial Systems – Action Needed to Improve DOD Pilot Training, published in 2015, noted that:

*... “Air Force officials stated that they think the current number of UAS pilots that the Air Force has approved for its UAS units is not enough to accomplish the workload of UAS units. As a result, workloads for Air Force UAS units are high, and in January 2015, the Secretary of the Air Force said that on average Air Force UAS pilots fly 6 days in a row and work 13- to 14-hour days.”*

The Air Force told the GAO it “could not conduct training in units because their units had shortages of UAS pilots”, and the Army “does not know the full extent to which pilots have been trained and are therefore ready to be deployed.”

Possibly one of the most important things affecting the lives of most drone operators, who are in the Air Force, is being what is called “deployed-on-station”. This effectively means they are assigned to undertake drone killing during their work shifts and then to return to their personal lives in civilian communities during off hours. The 2014 GAO Actions Needed to Strengthen Management of Unmanned Aerial System Pilots, cited above, says that “their dual role juxtaposes stress related to supporting combat operations with the strains that can occur in their personal lives.”

The report said that every focus group said that being deployed-on-station “negatively affected their quality of life, as it was challenging for them to balance their war-fighting responsibilities with their personal lives for extended periods of time.”

“War-fighting”, according to the report, means that drone operators:

*“(1) experience a justifiable risk of being the target of hostile adversary attacks because they are combatants and their bank accounts, reputations, or physical safety could be targeted; (2) operate in contact with and sometimes kill adversaries, although operations they conduct are out of direct risk from combat; (3) must act with urgency to sometimes kill adversaries and take other time-pressured actions to help ensure combatants they support do not lose their lives; (4) work on a wartime rhythm that includes 24/7 operations 365 days a year; and (5) are required to conceal information from friends and family about their work because their missions are often classified.”*

In January 2017, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) examined the experience of drone operators being deployed-on-station at Creech AFB outside Las Vegas, NV, concluding the report <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-38506932> with:

*“As we get ready to leave the base, the moon rises over the mountains and darkness falls quickly. There’s a long traffic jam as some of the 3,500 air staff wait at the gates to leave the base – a snake of red tail lights heading back to Vegas and the warmth of their families.*

“And when they get home? Well, friction can stem from one simple question: ‘How was your day?’” (The “air staff” referred to in the above quote includes the back-up teams for drone flights as well as the drone operators themselves.)

The GAO found that in spite of the unique stresses of deployment on station, the Air Force at that the time the report was written “does not have the information it needs to determine whether being deployed-on-station has a negative effect on the quality of life of RPA pilots...and what steps might be needed to reduce those effects.”

As noted elsewhere on this website (“Drone Attacks Rising), the Air Force announced a “get well” plan in 2016 that is intended to stop the departure of drone operators from the drone attack program. The plan includes reducing work hours for drone operators, according to Air Force Magazine <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2016/February2016/Don%27t-Fear-the-Reaper.aspx>. But there is no evidence that the Air Force is adequately addressing two critical operator issues: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and “moral injury”.

(PTSD is defined by the Veterans Administration (VA) as “a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, like combat, a natural disaster, a car accident or sexual

assault."http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/what-is-ptsd.asp

Moral injury, according to the VA, results from a person being involved in "an act of transgression, which shatters moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs, or culture-based, organizational, and group-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth."

http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/moral\_injury\_at\_war.asp)

The emotional pressures of drone killing are discussed very honestly, deeply and movingly by three former members of the drone program in the film National Bird. One of the drone whistleblowers says in the film that she was required to continue to participate in drone attack missions even though her superiors knew she was experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because the Air Force was short-staffed. She says also that three of her former colleagues in the program have committed suicide. The film suggests that alcoholism is common among operators in the drone program.

Since 2012, at least eight former military personnel who have participated in various ways in the U.S. killer drone program have come forward to speak out about the failings of the program and their personal suffering resulting from the work.

Only two of the eight continue to speak out publicly. One, and possibly more, have moved out of the United States.

Jesselyn Radack, a lawyer representing drone and other whistleblowers including Edward Snowden, said at a screening of National Bird in November 2016 that several of the drone whistleblowers had been intimidated to stop speaking out by calls from the Air Force saying that they had been placed on a kill list by terrorists.

The U.S. Air Force and the CIA, the two entities controlling the vast majority of killer drone attacks, have released no



reports detailing the emotional suffering incurred by drone operators. In fact, in June 2015, the Air Force appears to have acted to cover up an official report that might have exposed the extent to which drone operators are psychologically damaged by their participation in the program.

The apparent cover-up came during courts martial proceedings in the case of Staff Sgt. Shane Owens, a drone sensor operator working at Creech AFB drone control and training center just outside Las Vegas, NV. A sensor operator controls the drone camera for surveillance and targeting.



Former U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Shane Owens. *Source Las Vegas Journal Review*

Owens was arrested on March 5, 2015, charged with domestic violence, drug use and disobeying orders. A court filing by his attorney, Craig Drummond, said that Owens was being treated for PTSD at the time of his arrest. Based on another source, it appears that Owens was on duty flying drone attack missions while he was being treated for PTSD.

In preparing for Owens' defense, Drummond petitioned the military court judge for data that the Air Force had gathered on "stressors" experienced by killer drone operators who live at home rather than being deployed overseas. The existence of the data in question was disclosed by the Air Force in responding to a study of killer drone manning problem by the Government Accountability Office.

Drummond told the Review-Journal newspaper in Las Vegas that the “‘data’ was denied (to him and Owens) by the (Air Force military) prosecutors and we were in the process of litigating the issue with the military judge as to whether they would be required to disclose the data and analysis to the defense.”  
<http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/military/charges-dropped-against-creech-drone-sensor-operator-ptsd>

During this process, the Air Force dropped all charges against Owens, released him from military jail and gave him an administrative discharge. This freed him of any finding of criminality but gave the Air Force the discretion of deciding what if any benefits he would receive, thus giving them leverage to seal his lips.

In a sad coincidence of timing, about a month after Owens was arrested in March, Air Force Master Sgt. Travis Kent Navarro Parkhurst, another Creech sensor operator, committed suicide. His body was found on April 4 in Mount Charleston, just south of Creech. Then on April 19, Technical Sgt. Mike Johannsen, also a sensor operator at Creech, was killed when his car was hit head-on by a driver going the wrong way.

## **Support for Conscience**

One avenue open to drone operators who are experiencing PTSD and/or moral injury is to seek transfer out of the killer drone program, and there is evidence that some have done this.

While this may remove the person from the cause of her or his suffering, they are likely to need help in dealing with their emotional injury. This help may be available to them at the Veterans Administration or through religious institutions. It is not clear that they will get adequate help from military chaplains because they are under pressure to counsel military personnel in ways that will enable them to continue on their duties.

### ***Vet Centers***

Vet Centers are in a special branch of the VA that offers counseling to former and current members of the military and their families. The Vet Centers offer a greater degree of confidentiality than the VA, and there are centers in every state and territory.

The VA description of the Vet Centers <http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/Eligibility.asp> makes a special point of offering help to anyone who has:

“Served as a member of an unmanned aerial vehicle crew that provided direct support to operations in a combat zone or area of hostility.”

### ***WHISPeR***

There may also be drone operators who decide to speak out, and they can find legal support from the Whistleblower and Source Protection Program (WHISPeR) at ExposeFacts, an organization that is currently giving legal representation to about 12 drone operators. <https://whisper.exposefacts.org>



Kathleen McClellan and Jesselyn Radack of WHISPeR at ExposeFacts.org

In addition, Veterans for Peace has offered to assist U.S. drone operators who refuse to fly.

<https://www.veteransforpeace.org/pressroom/news/2015/03/04/message-us-veterans-drone-operators-and-support-personnel-cr>