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Hunting the Taliban in Las Vegas

In trailers just minutes away from the slot machines, Air Force pilots control Predators over Iraq and Afghanistan. A case study in the marvels—and limits—of modern military technology

by Robert D. Kaplan

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To embed on some of the niftiest air missions over Iraq and Afghanistan, I had to fly to Las Vegas. I drove out of town past the MGM Grand, the Bellagio, and Caesar's Palace and checked in at a low-end hotel-casino complex in Las Vegas for $59 a night. It was crowded with obese people in sweat suits and seniors driving motorized wheelchairs, yanking one-armed bandits in a masturbatory frenzy, and smelling of whiskey, cigarettes, and popcorn. Ten minutes away, at Nellis Air Force Base, I found a cluster of camouflaged trailers.

"Inside that trailer is Iraq; inside the other, Afghanistan," explained Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Plamp, of Louisville, Kentucky. "Either way, you go in there and you enter the CENTCOM AOR [Area of Responsibility]."

That is, inside those trailers you leave North America, which falls under Northern Command, and enter the Middle East, the domain of Central Command. So much for the tyranny of geography.

The MQ-1B Predator drone, or the "Pred," as its crews call it, is flown from here. Underground and underwater fiber-optic cables link these trailers—ground-control stations, really—to Europe, where a satellite dish makes the connection directly to every Predator in the air over Baghdad, and along the Afghan-Pakistani border, and wherever else they are needed. Local airfields get them into the air, then Las Vegas takes over.

The Predator is the most famous of several dozen UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) that the military operates. It was first deployed in the 1990s in the Balkans, but made its bones in November 2002 in Yemen, when a Predator-fired AGM-114P armor-piercing Hellfire missile incinerated a car in which an al-Qaeda leader, Abu Ali al-Harithi, was traveling with five others through the desert. And a Predator tracked Iraqi insurgency leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi during the last days of his life.

Most people, when they hear of an unmanned drone, probably picture a model airplane. Actually, the Predator looks like a big glider. With its twenty-seven-foot length and an almost fifty-foot wingspan, it is comparable in size to a Cessna Skyhawk. Because the Predator's outer skin is made of composites that contain almost no metal, it weighs only 1,130 pounds without fuel or bombs, and it can stay aloft for twenty-four hours on its four-cylinder engine. It is so light that I was able to lift the tail of a training model off the ground with one arm. Requiring no life support for a pilot and no redundant safety systems, it costs only $4.2 million: for the price of one F-22, you can build more than forty Predators. One-quarter of that $4.2 million is spent on "the ball," a rotating sphere on the plane's belly, where the optics, lasers, and video cameras are housed.

But the most impressive thing about the Predator is that it flies slow. That's right, in counterinsurgency operations, where the goal is to hunt and kill individuals or small groups of fighters—rather than to attack mass infantry formations—the slower a plane flies, the better. Also, the slower it flies, the less wear and tear it sustains, which is why the Predator needs less maintenance than many other aircraft.

Slow-flying manned planes like the A-10 and the AC-130 have been particularly useful in places like Fallujah. Because these planes can hover over complex urban battle spaces, their pilots have "situational awareness"—they can see and understand the local facts on the ground—and are therefore trusted by Marine platoon commanders and Special Forces team sergeants engaged in tactical operations. But while those manned planes still must fly at 180 knots, the unmanned Predator can remain airborne at a mere 75 knots. And while many other UAVs have to fly low, drawing attention with their trademark lawn-mower or snowmobile sound, a Predator flies at 15,000 feet—almost three miles up—where no one on the ground can hear it or see it. Picture a satellite that does not need to remain in a fixed orbit, and is armed with two Hellfire missiles.

I've been traveling to Iraq and Afghanistan for a quarter century, and yet some of the most illuminating moments I've experienced in those countries occurred here in Las Vegas. Each day began with a pilots' briefing, no different from those I've attended with Air Force pilots elsewhere, with a similar nervous edge to it. To wit, the brief began with "Motherhood"—that is, the idiot-proof basics. Then came an intelligence backgrounder, followed by a detailed weather report (for Iraq and Afghanistan, not Nevada), and concluding with the "Brevity," or code words for the day. The wall clocks focused on three time zones: Iraq's, Afghanistan's, and Zulu. (Zulu Time, or Z Time, is Greenwich Mean Time not adjusted to daylight saving time; the U.S. military uses Z Time worldwide to prevent confusion.)

Those who "fly" Predators are indeed pilots, not operators, even though they don't have to leave the ground. They wear flight suits. Each is a veteran of an A-10, an F-15, a B-1 bomber, a B-52, or any of a host of other aerial platforms. The scrappy, lumbering, low-tech A-10 Warthog may give pilots the best preparation for flying the high-tech Pred. Both Warthogs and Predators are about hitting small targets and gunning down individuals in confined spaces. "If you want to pull the trigger and take out bad guys, you fly a Predator," one Pred pilot told me.

Air Force pilots usually work in twenty-month cycles—sixteen months of training followed by four months on deployment. Here, it's twenty months of combat. The fact that pilots need no new training means enormous savings for the taxpayer. For the pilots, the gruelingly long combat cycle affords enough time to build up high levels of visual familiarity and expertise. Predator pilots know the telltale signs of an IED (Improvised Explosive Device), they can read the wadis (dry riverbeds) and other egresses, and they recognize the entrances to the mud-walled compounds and the look of the Afghan "jingle" trucks (the colorfully decorated trucks one sees all over the Indian subcontinent and its environs). They talk to troops on the ground throughout the day and can offer them advice.

Yet despite their part in directing warfare, Predator pilots face absolutely no danger. In fact, as one pilot told me, the Predator raises a moral issue, by enabling you to kill someone without ever putting yourself at risk. Inside the trailers, crews don't get even the sensation of flying that one gets in a flight simulator. The real tension for these pilots comes from the clash with everything outside the trailers.

Nellis Air Force Base is full of the same stuffy regulations—on driving, dress codes, inspections, saluting, and so forth—that are common to other bases far removed from war zones. (In war zones—inside those trailers—informality reigns because *the mission is everything*.) But beyond Nellis is the banal world of spouses, kids, homework, and soccer games—not to mention the absurdity of a city where even the gas stations have slot machines. Simply entering or leaving one of the trailers is tremendously disorienting.

In preparing to embed with Predator pilots, I obtained a "secret" clearance, but not a "top-secret" one.

Thus, I was barred from the best or "high-side" missions, and had to settle for the "low-side" ones. The first trailer I went into was working in Afghanistan. I felt as if I was back in a submarine, where I had spent several weeks the year before. There were grim, colorless computer bays in freezing, pulsing darkness—a three-dimensional world of flashing digits from light-emitting diodes. Like sub drivers, Pred pilots fly blind, using only the visual depiction of their location on a map and math—numerical readouts indicating latitude, longitude, height, wind speeds, ground elevation, nearby planes, and so forth. The camera in the rotating ball focuses only on the object under surveillance. The crew's situational awareness is restricted to the enemy on the ground. Much of the time during a stakeout, the Pred flies a preprogrammed hexagon, racetrack, bow tie, or some other circular-type holding pattern.

Each trailer holds a two-person crew: a pilot and a "sensor," who operates the ball. Both face half a dozen computer screens, including map displays and close-up shots of the object under surveillance. As in any plane, the pilot uses a flight stick with various buttons. Though it was nighttime in Afghanistan, two small mud-walled compounds near Kandahar were easily visible thanks to infrared sensors, which rendered the image on the pilot's screen in the darker and lighter tones of a photographic negative.

Nevertheless, the screens swept me back into a familiar world: of dramatic, wind-carved hillsides terraced with fields of rice, alfalfa, and cannabis, and sectioned by poplar trees on raised banks; and of courtyarded compounds where, in the intense heat and dust of late spring in southern Afghanistan, people sleep on roofs under magnificent starscapes. The alley between these two compounds, I knew from experience, would be just wide enough for a pickup truck.

The pilot and sensor were waiting for a vehicle to emerge, which they would then follow. At least, that's what the "customer" had told them. The customer, in this case, was the Canadian military, which now has a significant presence in southern Afghanistan. Because the Predator is in such demand, its crews take for granted that every mission assigned is important. Often, the more high-value the target, the duller the aerial stakeout: the top echelons of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or the Iraqi insurgents are the most likely to practice good operational security (or OPSEC), and thus go to extreme lengths not to be observed. Predators can go days watching one compound where nothing seems to be happening. This vigil was like going on a reconnaissance mission with a sniper unit, except that the boredom here was not worsened by heat or cold or the need to hide behind a rock.

Of the two keyboards in front of the pilot, the one he used most was the chat keyboard. He was writing messages to others involved in the mission, while talking into his mouthpiece to the JTAC (Joint Terminal Air Controller), usually a staff sergeant near the site under surveillance.

The Pred that was now watching the two compounds had only one remaining Hellfire missile. The other had been fired some hours earlier, taking out a nearby vehicle that turned out to be loaded with explosives; the immense blast had filled the screen.

The pilot beside me remarked, "Sometimes you get spun up, you fly to a site, you wait for the A-10s to arrive on scene, ready for a kill. Then the whole thing gets called off, and you wind up watching a house for hours, and all you see is a guy walk into the courtyard at night to take a crap, registered by the heat signature picked up on the ground after he gets up from his squat."

I walked into the trailer next door and entered Iraq. An African American woman—an Army brat from Texas—was operating the ball over a big oil complex west of Kirkuk. Insurgents were thought to be laying IEDs or larger bombs inside it during the night. She saw three suspicious trucks and zoomed in. But there was no heat signature, so she knew that the vehicles had been there for many hours without using their engines, and she rotated the ball elsewhere. As she explained to me, the heat signature allows you a view back in time several hours—information that a good sensor can use to establish a narrative.

Yet the real value of UAVs is something that is still developing, and that hardly anyone outside the military has noticed: these assets are merging with, and thus expanding, the tactics of bread-and-butter elements like Marine infantry platoons and A-10 attack planes. With more and smaller UAVs, platoons will be able to see behind enemy lines and consequently find safer ways to defeat an ambush rather than charge directly into it. Because the Predator can "sparkle" a target at night—mark it in infrared so that A-10 pilots and grunts on the ground can see it with their night-vision goggles—it opens up a range of options that pilots and infantry never had before.

Keep in mind that CAS (Close Air Support), in which a Special Forces team on the ground can call in an air strike on a target only a hundred yards away, can merge twenty-first-century technology with nineteenth-century-style units. CAS was a breakthrough tactic crucial to toppling the Taliban regime in late 2001, when the Green Berets moved around Afghanistan on horseback. A video of a Hellfire attack that had occurred several days before I arrived demonstrated another way of combining the new Predator technology with old-fashioned tactics. Some Army helicopters had been brought in to fly menacingly over a building in eastern Afghanistan: nothing fancy. About a dozen Taliban escaped into a field—which was exactly what U.S. forces had been looking for. The helicopter visit was a feint, designed to flush the Taliban out into the open, where the missile from the Predator killed them without the collateral damage that would have ensued had the building been fired on.

Future Predators will be able to deliver bigger and heavier ordnance than the Hellfire, and to fly higher—above the weather, at 30,000 feet. But the Predator, especially as it is improved, may also interfere with decision making. As one pilot told me: "No general will want to attack something without visual confirmation from a Predator. It's the old story—by the time you have all the evidence, it's too late to affect the outcome." Rather than expanding the opportunities for operations, the Predator could end up restricting them, even as we fight enemies who have no compunction about waging total war.

In fact, the more missions I watched, the more I realized what the Predator could not do. The Pred can fill only a small part of the gap resulting from our abysmal shortage of human intelligence. One nighttime mission (it was morning in Las Vegas) provided a telling case in point.

We were flying (virtually, that is) over Sangin, northwest of Kandahar. The pilot was given the GPS coordinates for the town hall, supposedly besieged by 450 Taliban. A B-1 Lancer, the heaviest and highest-tech bomber in the Air Force arsenal (save for the B-2 Spirit), was about to do a flyover as a show of force. But the Pred pilot saw nothing "except a few guys on the roof chilling out" in what we knew from the instruments was almost 100-degree heat, though it was near midnight there. "We're seeing life, just not seeing anything unusual," the sensor reported. "You sure you got the right grids?" He then moved the camera to observe the police station nearby. Still nothing.

The pilot spoke through his headset: "This is crazy—450 Taliban! Are you high or something? And they're sending in a B-1. To impress whom? These dudes chilling on the roof?"

Watching the three robed figures moving on the roof, I could imagine the scene: the heat, the tea they were likely brewing, the desultory chitchat. And here we were, about half a dozen people—the JTAC, the pilot and sensor in the trailer, the image specialists in Qatar and at Langley Air Force Base in Norfolk, Virginia—talking to one another using the latest and greatest technology, and yet no one seemed to know what was going on. It was likely that the very number of people with electronic access further confused the mission. Circles were being run around them by guys with turbans and AK-47s, who could melt into the landscape.

Scanning the area, the Pred still found nothing. Then we were ordered to another detail: provide force protection for a convoy of jingle trucks delivering food and supplies, just to the west of Kandahar. We did that for a bit, inspecting the wadi egresses where an ambush might be laid and checking ruts in the road ahead that might be IEDs. Finally we were told to search for a specific "g-truck" (no one in Las Vegas knew what that

meant); that led the Predator to a line of trees that seemed to be concealing a number of trucks. But it was impossible to know what, or who, was inside them, or what their drivers intended.

I had had days like this, embedded with Green Berets in the same area near Kandahar. Such days always ended with sergeants muttering, "Nobody knows what the fuck's going on."

"Yeah," said Lieutenant Colonel Plamp, as we spoke in Las Vegas. "We're in the thick of these ground missions, and as a result we're just as confused as anyone sometimes. It's the typical fog of war."

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