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A “HUMAN ENDEAVOR”: KILLING IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. COMBAT NARRATIVES

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

By

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ABSTRACT

Military officers and psychologists have argued that the human experience of killing in combat is directly related to physical proximity between combatants. With the advent of remote controlled weapons and advanced optics, that argument has proven untrue. This thesis, through analysis of contemporary war literature and film, proposes that a better paradigm for understanding and anticipating the human experience of killing in combat is the view the soldier maintains of him/herself and of the other as similarly human. The contemporary soldier may view both the enemy and him/herself as human, subhuman, or inhuman; this view is closely tied to constructed narratives. Unfortunately, the contemporary warrior narrative encourages a dehumanization of the enemy and the “numbing” of the soldier, simultaneously hindering the soldier’s ability to process traumatic experiences in war and opening the door to unethical action. Today, technologies greatly influence the soldier’s perception of the enemy and are commonly the mediums through which the enemy is encountered, but the technologies are ambivalent to the soldier’s mindset and experience. This thesis argues that soldiers must be intentional about the narratives they construct in order to see both themselves and the enemy as similarly human. This approach, while acknowledging that war will always be traumatic, encourages an ethical and moral execution of war and simultaneously aims to limit moral injury inflicted by a “betrayal of what’s right” or “soul wound.”

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COP	Combat Outpost
FDC	Fire Direction Center
FO	Forward Observer
FOB	Forward Operating Base
GCS	Ground Control Station
HVT	High Value Target
IR	Infrared
PB	Patrol Base
PID	Positive Identification
RPA	Remotely Piloted Aircraft
RPG	Rocket Propelled Grenade

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INTRODUCTION

A “HUMAN ENDEAVOR”: KILLING IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. COMBAT NARRATIVES

War is a human endeavor—a fundamentally human clash of wills often fought among populations. It is not a mechanical process that can be controlled precisely, or even mostly, by machines, statistics, or laws that cover operations in carefully controlled and predictable environments. Fundamentally, all war is about changing human behavior. It is both a contest of wills and a contest of intellect between two or more sides in a conflict, with each trying to alter the behavior of the other side. *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0* (2)

With the fighting over, the marines were suddenly not so buoyant anymore. They had taken off their war paint and they were no longer joking. “It’s a little sobering,” Captain Sal Aguilar told me, looking at the field full of dead Iraqis. “When you’re training for this, you joke about it, you can’t wait for the real thing. Then when you see it, when you see the real thing, you never want to see it again.” Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (93)

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies.” Matthew 5:43-44

In March 2003, America invaded Iraq; that summer I entered West Point. Over the next four years, I watched that war and, to a lesser extent, the war in Afghanistan as well with great interest. War loomed on the horizon. I wondered what it would be like. Would I have what it took to be a soldier and – more importantly – a leader in combat?¹ I spent a lot of time thinking about those questions. At the time, relatively few people talked about what it was like to kill in combat, perhaps because it had been more than ten years since the Gulf War, perhaps because those who had been to Afghanistan were only slowly rotating out of the units with which they had deployed, and perhaps mostly because it’s a difficult subject and therefore largely avoided.² Plenty of people talked about *combat*, but not *killing*. One of the few contemporary voices on the topic was Dave Grossman, who in 1995 published *On Killing: The*

¹ Throughout this study, I will use the term “soldier” to encompass all service members, recognizing that it denotes a land-based, army service member. This is not done in prejudice, but out of convenience – “service member” is a bulky term which at times distracts attention unnecessarily from my argument. When distinctions are made in the texts I will distinguish as well between “Marine” or “Airman” and “Soldier.”

² Dave Grossman labels this avoidance the “taboo of killing” which prevents soldiers from talking openly about it (*On Killing* xxxi). Edward Tick comments that more widely “we do not even know how to think about war” (*War and the Soul* 3).

Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society. That Grossman was both an Army Ranger and a West Point psychology professor lent his theories significant credibility. His book was displayed prominently in the Army Post Exchanges, and I – along with hundreds of others – read it in individual preparation for combat. Yet it was ultimately just that – individual preparation, not a fundamental element of education or training. So much of military training is focused on the unit, on rehearsals, on battle drills and collective tasks that attending to the psychological and intellectual preparation of the individual is easily overlooked.³ Preparing my soldiers to deploy to Iraq in 2008 as a young infantry platoon leader, I did not know what to think about killing, much less how to talk about it to soldiers. So we did not talk about it maturely. Instead, bravado and pop culture portrayals of killing filled that vacuum where open and thoughtful dialogue ought to have been. This was nothing new; images of John Wayne killing without emotion have shaped multiple generations’ ideas of war (Tick, *War and the Soul* 154). Needless to say, we could have done better. As a platoon leader, I should have done better. Today, four combat tours later, I am returning to my alma mater to teach literature, and this study is primarily meant to help me think about how to help my students – those next leaders of America’s youth – prepare themselves to think and talk about killing.

But why literature? Soldiers asked that of me often as I left company command in an infantry unit for graduate school. I believe literature offers a widely available conduit through which soldiers can talk about the complexities of the human experience of killing in combat, and today a growing body of acclaimed literature is emerging from veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While one might prefer to wait several generations to allow these texts to “stand the test of time,” frankly, soldiers returning from and preparing to deploy to combat do not have that kind of time available. Whereas young cadets and soldiers might be hesitant to discuss their own anxieties and fears, or returning veterans reluctant to share their burdens in public, war literature written by veteran authors provides a credible medium through which both cohorts can engage in dialogue with others openly. It is no small wonder that

³ Karl Marlantes, author of *What It Is Like To Go To War*, in fact, insists that this aspect of preparation for war must be individually undertaken (xii).

in the last few years so many new literary projects and journals have emerged for veterans across the country.⁴ Storytelling – through poetry, fiction and nonfiction – continues to be an indispensable part of how we conceive of and cope with warfare and our humanity. This project, then, through the study of contemporary war literature, aims to equip military leaders to think and speak in an informed manner on the “taboo” topic of killing in today’s combat, to advocate for an ethical approach to it, and ultimately to illuminate the incorrect ways in which we have spoken about the experience of killing in the past.

Throughout this thesis, I will argue that the soldier’s perception of shared humanity with the enemy is the most crucial factor in the soldier’s experience of contemporary killing in combat. As this chapter’s epitaph demonstrates, the Army itself declares that war is a “human endeavor [...] not a mechanical process” but a “fundamentally human clash of wills” (*ADP 3-0*, 2). Yet today the technology, training, metaphors and language employed for war all too often elide that warfare is fundamentally human. To the contrary, we describe war as inhuman. This failure of representation hinders the soldier’s ability to prepare for and recover from killing. We claim war and killing is “indescribable” or “bestly,” for example, or advise the soldier to become “numb.” None of these approaches prepares the soldier to make sense of his or her experiences of killing, yet all of them can become self-fulfilling prophecies. So, this thesis reintroduces the soldier to the human aspect of war. The contemporary soldier may view both the enemy and him/herself as human, subhuman, or inhuman; this view of the other stems greatly from the soldier’s perception of self-likeness in that other. Today, technologies greatly influence that perception and are commonly the media through which the enemy is encountered. Further, I will argue that perceived risk presented by the enemy to the soldier and others is also instrumental in the perception of the other and self. Finally, the narratives soldiers create about war and killing – along with the

⁴ The D.C.-based Veterans Writing Project for example launched in May of 2012 and publishes *O-Dark-Thirty*. Likewise, the Veterans Writing Workshop in New York began in 2010. *Proud to Be* has been published annually by Southeast Missouri State University Press since 2012. Since 2015, The Military Writers’ Society of America has quarterly published *Dispatches*. *Line of Advance* began online publishing in 2015. *Military Experience and the Arts* publishes several journals for veterans and *War, Literature and the Arts*, though older, continues annually to publish veteran poetry and prose in Colorado Springs. *The Warrior Writers* has published four book compilations. Lastly, *Words After War*, *The Telling Project*, and numerous other blogs have been established to feature veteran writing.

language and metaphors used – also greatly affect the experience of combat and killing. These factors and others combine to form the soldier’s view of him/herself and the enemy.

Soldiers are at risk of moral injury when they kill in battle without an ethical narrative approach to the event.⁵ Moral injury is a term commonly used among psychiatrists when treating war related post-traumatic stress disorder; it is most commonly conceived of as an injury to one’s moral conscience through an act of moral transgression. My particular use of the term is primarily influenced by two psychiatrists: Jonathan Shay, author of *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994), and Edward Tick, author of *War and the Soul* (2005) and *Warrior’s Return* (2014). According to Shay, the psychological moral injury is more difficult to recover from than the experience of horror, fear, and grief, which is to say that Shay distinguishes between a simply traumatic war experience and one that also violates “what’s right” and therefore results in moral injury (20). I will insist on this distinction as well throughout this study. For Shay, the “betrayal of what’s right” and the ensuing moral injury can lead the soldier to go “berserk” and lose “human restraint” (84). Thus Shay reads Homer’s *Iliad* as the tragedy of Achilles’ moral undoing, not his glorification as a bold warrior. Tick’s work centers on the existence of the “soul,” which he broadly defines in part as “the awareness of oneself as a discrete entity moving through space and time” (*War and the Soul* 17). Thus Tick prefers to call moral injury a “soul wound” (*Warrior’s Return* 151). For Tick, “wound” also implies that the damage is inflicted and not accidental (*Warrior’s Return* 152). Throughout this study I will reference Tick’s extensive work on the warrior’s “soul.”

When presented with a requirement to kill, soldiers weigh the cost of action against that of inaction. One can never be sure which will be worse: to kill and shoulder the moral burden of having killed, or not to kill and perhaps then be responsible for the death of others and military failure. Either way trauma and/or moral injury threatens. Yet Vietnam veteran and author Karl Marlantes explains that the “basic psychology of the warrior” is to believe oneself to be a protector (150), which necessitates

⁵ For example, in Matt Martin’s memoir *Predator*, he kills an insurgent who had killed countless soldiers and Iraqi civilians. Unfortunately, he also injured or killed an elderly man. Writing about the event, he says: “The Rocket Man had it coming. The old man did not” (54).

killing rather than inaction. To avoid the risk of trauma and/or moral injury, many soldiers create a mental narrative in which one or both of the combatants are not human. As Marlantes explains, “killing someone without splitting oneself from the feelings that the act engenders requires an effort of supreme consciousness that, quite frankly, is beyond most humans” (26). Thus, very few soldiers create a mental narrative in which both combatants are equally human.⁶ Even so, I advocate that all soldiers should strive towards this “effort of supreme consciousness” to respect the humanity of both themselves and the enemy. As will be shown, most soldiers either intentionally or passively fashion themselves and/or the enemy into something other than fully human (machines, savages, beasts, animals, deviants, various racial slurs, and other dehumanizing terms will often surface in this study). This view, however, only defers the trauma and/or moral injury until after the fact when such a construct is no longer tenable.⁷ As Marlantes writes forty years after his experience, “I now think of what was ‘the enemy’ as human beings” (41). Thus the soldier’s dilemma: military training equips one to kill, but not to think about it.

My call for a more reflective soldier might be met by the criticism that such a soldier will decrease military effectiveness by being less willing to kill in combat. How can such a soldier kill? This is a valid concern, which I will address by four counterarguments. First, Americans who are unwilling to kill under any circumstance should not be in military positions which require killing in the first place – the classification conscientious objector exists for a good reason.⁸ I am advocating for a soldier who is reluctant to kill but ultimately willing to do so, which is not to say a soldier who hesitates to kill when necessary, but simply one who is not eager to kill. Second, regardless of the soldier’s view of killing, once moral injury leads to post-traumatic stress disorder in a soldier, then military effectiveness is already hampered because that soldier must be treated and healed, which often leads to medical discharge. The

⁶ WWII veteran and philosopher Glenn Gray in fact will note that this “image” of the enemy creates a “deep contradiction” for the soldier and makes it “nearly impossible for a combat soldier to prepare himself psychologically for bloody combat with a will to victory” (*The Warriors* 160).

⁷ Obviously, some humans will be racist or otherwise prejudiced for perhaps all their lives and always view some subset of humanity as inferior to themselves, but for everyone else, psychiatrist Edward Tick explains that there is a “rehumanization” process after war (*Warrior’s Return* 227).

⁸ Mel Gibson’s 2016 movie *Hacksaw Ridge* explores just this very issue.

high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder among soldiers and veterans today is already reducing our military's effectiveness – early studies place the rate of PTSD in returning Army combat soldiers between 14 and 18.5 percent (Love 4). Far worse, in 2012, military suicides outpaced combat deaths (Strobel). Recognizing this problem, the Army created the “Ready and Resilient” campaign to teach “resiliency.” Yet in the Army's December 2016 *Leaders' Guide to Building Personal Readiness and Resilience*, the word “kill” is mentioned only four times and always in relation to killing oneself – never the enemy.⁹ Preventing, limiting, and/or recovering from the experience of killing others is thus a component of long-term military readiness and effectiveness which is institutionally overlooked. Third, in asymmetric or counterinsurgency warfare, more killing does not equate to more military success. Modern warfare is a contest of ideas and ideals. If the U.S. is to win such a war, then it will be because what our soldiers represent and how they represent it are more attractive than what the enemy represents, not because we have killed our way to victory. The reflective soldier, who dearly acknowledges people's humanity – even those he or she kills – is far more likely to engender respect than the “numb” soldier. Lastly, ask soldiers why they risked their lives and fought in battle and the answer is overwhelmingly “for the man/woman standing next to me.” So how can a reflexive soldier kill? If we simply replace “fight” with “kill” in the question above then we arrive at the following: soldiers kill not out of hatred of the enemy, but love of comrades. They kill because the cost of inaction is greater than the cost of action. They kill to accomplish military objectives, not out of hatred. Strong, well-led, cohesive units exemplify this, yet this is not the typical narrative presented about killing.

Of great importance to this study is the way in which new technologies change the human experience of war and in particular of killing. Previous thinkers such as Glenn Gray and Grossman have conceived of the difficulty of killing as directly related to the physical proximity of the combatants. Gray writes that “with every foot of distance there is a corresponding decrease in reality” (178). Yet today powerful optics and remote cameras and weapons (including drones) often render distance less of a factor,

⁹ Killing is not mentioned at all in *Army Regulation 350-53: Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness*, the regulation which governs the Ready and Resilient program.

and in fact may produce a sense of intimacy or proximity for the soldier which makes killing more difficult, not less. Conversely, thermal and infrared optics, which distort or blur the image of the human enemy, along with the technology of training, often distance or detach the soldier from a nearby enemy as the neural links between perception and psychology are being rewired. Physical distance, or “range,” is no longer an accurate framework for predicting the psychological effects of killing in combat. This study, in fact, suggests that it never was.

Instead, contemporary war literature reveals that the perceived shared humanity of the enemy is the single most important factor in killing today. The soldier must weigh his or her own humanity against that of the human other, and, in so doing, frequently problematizes the concept of “human,” revealing how fluidly soldiers conceive of their human status. I use “shared humanity” because soldiers regularly conceive of the enemy as subhuman if not entirely inhuman – at the very least, as a different kind of human from themselves. It is no small wonder that soldiers are more likely to attribute humanness to themselves and their comrades over the enemy when all humans “commonly attribute greater humanness to their in-groups than to out-groups” (Haslam et al 937). In war this is amplified: an enemy attempting to kill you is the ultimate out-group. The use of racial and religious slurs against an enemy in war is nothing new: both serve to dehumanize the enemy into a lesser, more killable other. Taken further, soldiers may animalize or demonize the enemy – all of this, I argue, constitutes active dehumanization, which leaders must address if they wish their units to wage war ethically. Even without active dehumanization, soldiers tend not to individuate the enemy; that is, soldiers view the enemy as an abstract, faceless object rather than a fully human individual. This passive dehumanization is a far better approach to combat than active dehumanization but still can be problematic in its own right. Often it reduces the soldier him-or-herself to a “machine-like” or “numb” being. In other words, it produces a kind of self-dehumanization. Both forms of dehumanization serve to break the shared humanity between the two combatants and render the other as less human, creating space for unethical action and long-term difficulty in processing the event.

Today the view of the self and other is complicated by asymmetric warfare in which the “battlefield” is indistinguishable from “civilian spaces” and the “enemy” is indistinguishable from

“civilians.” While the soldier endeavors to “win hearts and minds” he or she must all the while prepare to kill an enemy indistinguishable from the civilian population.¹⁰ This dichotomy of intentionally humanizing the civilian population while also intentionally or subconsciously dehumanizing the (often unidentifiable) enemy within the same population problematizes the soldier’s effort to prepare for and recover from killing. It presents a deep contradiction. For the soldier, preserving his or her own “heart and mind” can be the most complex battle of all.

Perceived risk or threat to the soldier also appears time and again in the literary texts I examine as an influential factor in the decision to humanize or dehumanize the other. It forms an essential part of the soldier’s efforts to make a post-killing narrative with which s/he can be at peace – which both Shay and Tick identify as an essential process in both the prevention and treatment of moral injury. Fundamentally, the nature of an enemy threat in a counterinsurgency or asymmetric war is different than in “linear” or conventional wars. In World War II, for example, an enemy unit could be defeated without killing every enemy soldier. For instance, communication nodes, supply depots, bridges or even equipment could be destroyed and render a unit incapable of meaningful resistance. In such a scenario, the individual soldier may have felt no imperative to kill a particular other, as that enemy might not have presented a perceived threat. Armies clashed against armies, not necessarily individuals against each other.¹¹ Not so in counterinsurgency: “personality charts” map the individuals within insurgent cells (the infamous “deck of cards” in Iraq is but one example) to be killed or captured. When previously unknown enemies present themselves within the civilian populace, it is usually because they are attacking – and not attacking along a battlefield, but attacking a particular small unit. The soldiers in that small unit understand the attack to be a particular threat from particular individuals to which they must respond. In counterinsurgency, individuals are the enemy, not large military units. Individuals present the threat, not armies. In counterinsurgency, too, just as quickly as an enemy presents a threat, that enemy may blend back into the

¹⁰ General Mattis, now Secretary of Defense, once famously was quoted by journalist and author Tom Richs as saying “Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everyone you meet” (*Fiasco* 313).

¹¹ Though one might note that island fighting in the Pacific had a very different character than fighting in the European theater.

civilian population. Soldiers know that waiting to kill an enemy is a dangerous gamble: it risks the lives of everyone in the unit, not just the soldier's. Thus killing in an asymmetric war is different than killing in conventional war in part because the threat or risk to individuals is manifested differently. In my view, the decision to kill appears to be more personal in counterinsurgency than in total war. Yet I am not sure we have made an effort to think about that killing as distinct.

Grossman's study *On Killing* (1995) is a sweeping analysis of the psychology and physiology of killing in combat. In the book, and in his more recent book *On Combat* (2005), he advances two revisionist claims about the nature of conflict: first, that humans are innately resistant to killing other humans, and, second, that modern militaries condition their soldiers through training so that they might overcome this psychological resistance (*On Killing* 2, 18). Grossman labels modern military training "operant conditioning," akin to Pavlovian behaviorism, which is required in order to "program" soldiers to overcome their resistance to killing (*On Killing* 35; *On Combat* 209). Grossman considers the literature and history which indicate that humans are not reluctant to kill in war a "conspiracy of silence" which is a "cultural conspiracy of forgetfulness, distortion, and lies that has been going on for thousands of years" (*On Killing* 36). The truth according to Grossman is humans resist killing one another, even in battle. Grossman's study is founded upon the controversial work of Army historian S. L. A. Marshall, who claimed that only fifteen to twenty percent of American soldiers in World War II fired their weapons at the enemy (Marshall 54). Although it appears Marshall made up this statistic, Grossman uses it as the basis of his theory and agrees with Marshall that as a result of a change in training methodology, that trend reversed in Korea to a firing rate of 55 percent and finally over 90 percent in Vietnam (*On Killing* 35).¹² He concludes that American military training after World War II has been designed to condition

¹² Marshall's findings from WWII and the Korean War have been often criticized as unscientific and rejected as not credible – some scholars directly question Grossman's use of the statistics (Engen 121; Chambers 113). Glenn Russel even writes in his introduction to the 2000 edition of Marshall's book *Men Against Fire* that "evidence indicates that [Marshall] invented his ratio-of-fire values" and that the "most influential element of his many writings appears to be a fabrication" (4). Recently, Robert Engen actually uncovered Canadian WWII data which directly contradicts Marshall's findings (126). Grossman himself writes that "Marshall's findings have been largely ignored by academia and the fields of psychology and psychiatry" (35). Despite this, Marshall's findings are the foundation of Grossman's study and theories.

soldiers to shoot reflexively at pop-up targets shaped like people so that they will overcome this resistance to killing and kill in combat when given the same “conditioned stimulus” (*On Killing* 254). Despite his argument’s reliance on questionable data, Grossman’s work remains widely influential in the military and police forces: he now travels the country teaching the “Bulletproof Mind.”

Grossman further argues that the physical distance between combatants is directly linked to a soldier’s resistance to killing: the farther apart two combatants are, the easier both will find it to kill the other. In 1995 Grossman claimed that “there is a direct relationship between the empathic and physical proximity of the victim, and the resultant difficulty and trauma of the kill” (*On Killing* 97). Thus, Grossman evaluates killing from nine different ranges: “Sexual Range” as the closest proximity and “Max Range” (bombers and artillery) as the farthest combatants can be apart, presenting resistance to killing in a much cited graph of a descending curve as combatants move from close together to far apart (*On Killing* 98). Yet, in his analysis of killing at “Bayonet Range,” Grossman concedes that bayoneting is easier done from behind, and thus that “the essence of the whole physical distance spectrum may simply revolve around the degree to which the killer can see the face of the victim” (*On Killing* 128). Despite this apparent self-criticism, in 2005 Grossman strongly reaffirmed his distance theory: “simply stated, the farther away you are the easier it is to kill” (*On Combat* 203).

Grossman inadvertently invokes the ethics of ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his reference to the capacity to see the face of the “victim.” Levinas proposes an ethics which derives from face-to-face human encounters. For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter creates an ethical “call” to which the human is answerable and responsible, yet which “exceeds the confines of understanding” (*Entre Nos* 4). This responsibility demands the “taking upon oneself of the fate of the other. That is the ‘vision’ of the Face” (*Entre Nos* 103). Levinasian ethics emphasizes a welcoming demeanor toward the other, as the face of the other compels a responsibility for the other’s welfare (*Totality and Infinity* 82). Most importantly for this study, the face of the other reveals the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” (*Entre Nos* 104). Levinas places the encounter with the face before symbolic language, prioritizing it over logic, philosophy and representation, and states that it is the beginning of ethics. This study will examine ways

in which soldiers must address the “call” of the face and confront the “commandment” not to kill – and how training, language and technologies can alter the encounter with the other’s face, often occluding or distorting the face of the other. Yet it will also complicate Levinas’ claims in that, when targeting a particular individual with a known face, the face of the enemy often compels the soldier to harm, not preserve the other’s welfare.

The competing “commands” of the other’s face – to protect and to kill – highlight the humanizing/dehumanizing dichotomy of asymmetric warfare. How can a soldier kill given such a dilemma? My personal experience and study of contemporary war literature corroborate Grossman’s emphasis on training as something that “kicks in” during intense combat (Klay 30). Over and over, the literary texts in this study reinforce the notion that soldiers do what they have been trained to do, at times performing like “war machines.” Yet, the texts in this study do not corroborate Grossman’s claim that humans are innately resistant to killing other humans, even in war. Instead they clearly demonstrate that if such resistance exists, it only occurs when there is perceived shared humanity, or likeness.¹³ This adds to Grossman’s own criticism of his distance theory regarding the face of the victim: the texts reveal it is not physical distance or “range” that matters, but the degree to which one perceives the other as similarly human – and that likeness is often contained in the face. This aligns more closely with Levinas’ claims about ethics than Grossman’s claims about distance, even though I will disagree with Levinas by insisting that linguistic representation, or narratives, at times override the “call” of the face. With modern technology soldiers often find it easier to view the other’s face from afar than up close. Therefore Grossman is right to correlate the ability “to perceive the extent of wounds inflicted or the sounds and facial expressions” of the enemy as influential to the human experience of killing, but wrong to presume that it is directly correlated to physical distance (*On Killing* 110). This study will de-link empathic proximity and physical proximity in contemporary killing. While it is not my goal to discredit Grossman

¹³ Robert Engen convincingly critiques Grossman’s claim of innate, or biological, resistance in his 2008 essay “Killing for their Country: a New Look at ‘Killology’.”

– he deserves much credit for advancing the conversation on this topic – I agree with Robert Engen that Grossman presents a “flawed understanding of how and why soldiers can kill” (127).

Hugh Gusterson also criticizes Grossman’s distance model in his book *Drone: Remote Control Warfare* (2016), which analyzes the human experience of drone warfare and concludes that technology has “respatialized” war. He writes that in addition to landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) “drones have disarticulated the spatial relationship between weapon and warrior” (45). For Gusterson, drones and other technologies have “scrambled the relationship of distance” and as a result “in this process of respatialization [...] the clear boundary between the battlefield and civilian space [...] is in danger of erasure” (48).¹⁴ While drone pilots watch a suspected enemy from 8,000 miles away, Gusterson notes that many experience a sense of proximity with the human other, a “remote intimacy” (72). He also develops the idea of “remote narrativization” in which observers “create mental stories” and make “interpretive leaps, fill in informational gaps” in order to help “make sense of the people they watch” (66). Gusterson notes that the “remote intimacy of drone operations plays havoc with Grossman’s model” by taking “the straight line in Grossman’s graph and twisting it into a Mobius strip where beginning and end, although still separate, cross” (72). He concludes that when drone pilots kill, it can be “more psychologically proximate than that of other soldiers, who are physically closer to the enemy” (73). If this is the case, then “narrativization” can create empathic proximity where physical proximity is missing.

Contemporary war literature and film corroborate Gusterson’s criticism of Grossman’s model; however, these texts also inform us that “narrativization” is not limited to remote observers. Indeed, soldiers engaged in close proximity fighting still must make “interpretive leaps” concerning the enemy and civilians with whom they interact. In fact, any human interaction entails some level of such interpretation. As Samina Najmi explains in her essay on Brian Turner’s poetry, it is nearly impossible for an armed American soldier in Iraq to have a fully inter-relational experience with an Iraqi civilian (63). In such circumstances, when a soldier kills, these interpretive leaps justifiably become more highly

¹⁴ One might argue that this happened long before the advent of drones, as whole cities were bombarded in World War II and, to a more limited extent, World War I.

scrutinized. Soldiers must “create mental stories” afterwards which, within their own personal moral framework, either do or do not validate their actions. These stories are largely based on “unconscious cultural assumptions,” as will be shown (Gusterson 66). Whereas Gusterson imagines this aspect of drone warfare to be different from on the ground fighting, in actuality the two are more similar than one might think.

Paul Virilio enhances our understanding of not only the texts I will cover but also both Grossman’s and Gusterson’s distance analyses by explaining that, because of technology, we experience distance differently. First, Virilio explains that humans build a mental image of an event not “on the basis of what they are immediately given to see, but on the basis of their memories, *by themselves filling in the blanks and their minds with images created retrospectively, as in childhood*” (emphasis original, *Vision Machine* 3). Thus both the drone pilot and the soldier on the ground create narratives for what they see and do by “filling in the blanks.” For Gusterson, this is the interpretive leap of narrativization; for Virilio, it is simply how humans make sense of images – processing visual information demands it. Secondly, across several books, Virilio advances an argument that technology has “obliterated distance” in society and war in deference to “instantaneous time” (*Vision Machine* 4). For Virilio “the very notion of ‘physical proximity’ is in danger of finding itself radically changed” (*Open Sky* 43). Because weapons are capable of striking anywhere in the world, the moment an enemy is seen, that enemy may be engaged – so, since the Gulf War, warfare for Virilio has been *teletopological*, or centered on the ability to “see” the enemy first and strike instantly (*Vision Machine* 6). In this environment, one’s geographic location loses importance; “real space” gives way to “real time” while “instantaneity makes up for loss of geophysical distance” (*Open Sky* 9, 63). When destroying an enemy is a matter of seeing first and acting instantly, “the image prevails over the object” (*Vision Machine* 73). In my view, this advent of an instantaneous military technological temporality conflicts with the soldier’s moral and ethical temporality, as the soldier is pressured to act instantly but cannot similarly formulate moral judgments. The two temporalities compete for control of the soldier’s psyche. Technology’s effect, however, is not limited to warfare; societal interactions with computer and television screens have similarly “obliterated distance” and

proximity and created a “square horizon” in which the real and virtual become indistinguishable (*Open Sky* 45). Thus humans are now predisposed to think about distance and “what is real” differently than Grossman claims. I will add that if the image prevails over the object, then no matter where the soldier is, the way in which technology presents an enemy prevails over that enemy’s physical body (and humanness) unless the soldier intentionally seeks the object beyond the image. Ultimately, the observer chooses what to “see” but this requires an act of will. Not only operationally, but also personally, warfare should not be thought of as a mechanical process, but as a contest of wills. This, of course, critiques Levinasian ethics as well as I argue that at times soldiers interpret faces rather than simply being mechanically commanded by them.

Glenn Gray wrote at length about “images of the enemy” and his experiences during World War II in *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959). In it, he explains that the “typical image of the enemy is conditioned by the need to hate him without limits” and is, in part, a “synthetic product of the mass media” (133). Further, these “moral absolutisms of warfare develop through the medium of language” – the metaphors and verbiage we employ (134). For instance, when hatred of an abstract enemy becomes personal, *the* enemy becomes *my* enemy (138). The word “enemy” alone usually yields to something more visceral and highly charged. Thus, Gray proposes that soldiers will either view the enemy abstractly or concretely. For those who view the enemy abstractly, “morally, [the enemy] has no human status whatever” (144). Professional soldiers, for instance, conceive of the enemy as a “human obstacle to be overcome on the way to a clearly defined objective” (142). Likewise, soldiers may also view only the enemy’s ideology with “utter disregard for the individuality of the foe” (154). Conversely, a soldier may take a concrete view of the enemy. Soldiers who take this view will either hate immensely “*my* enemy” or see the enemy as human like themselves, despite the “deep contradictions” of doing so (160). Of this mindset, Gray writes: “it is nearly impossible for a combat soldier to prepare himself psychologically for bloody combat with a will to victory while holding such an image of his foe” (160). Even so, such soldiers, because they have learned to think concretely, “will not hate abstractly” (166). This is the image of the enemy for which Gray advocates.

As I have already discussed, today's soldier in asymmetric war is positioned in this paradox of "deep contradictions" concerning his view of the enemy amidst the civilian population. Gray wrote and thought about total war – the enemy for him was the German state. In counterinsurgency, that is not the case, and many of Gray's "images" of the enemy thus seem inapplicable for a soldier fighting for both the American and the Iraqi or Afghan states. Thus I will use Gray's notion of an abstract or concrete image of the enemy, but I will also complicate it by including the "humanizing – dehumanizing dichotomy" of asymmetric warfare. Ultimately, Gray's abstract view of the enemy places the enemy within the sub or inhuman category as either objects or types, not individuated persons. I will advocate with Gray that the image of the enemy as a human like oneself is the only image which "holds large hope for the future" (166), especially when one considers that many military thinkers believe that most future wars will be "small wars" which are characterized by an intermingling of civilians and combatants (Goldstein 6). Holding this view is difficult but doable, especially in asymmetric war.

This thesis is divided into three chapters based on the perceived bodily risk of the characters in the texts: high personal risk, moderate to low personal risk, and no personal risk. I argue that this degree of perceived risk affects whether or not there is an assumed imperative to kill the human other – which is critical to the soldier's emotional reconciliation or "narrativization" of the event. Within that framework, in each chapter I analyze the perception of the self and others as human and how that affects the soldier's experience of killing in combat. Furthermore, each chapter explores how modern technologies and narratives influence the perception of the self and others. Throughout the entirety, I close read contemporary war literature written by veteran authors to see how they inform our understanding of combat killing and the critical theories I have just summarized. In doing this, I extract lessons for military leaders from these texts and the accounts of killing they develop.

In the first chapter, I cover killing during high perceived personal risk to the characters – mostly soldiers "on patrol" or "out of the wire" or in "direct contact." First, I examine a selection of Brian Turner poems from *Here, Bullet*. These will demonstrate that "remote intimacy" and "narrativization" occur not just for drone operators, but also for soldiers on the ground. Then I explore two short stories from the

collection *Redeployment* by Phil Klay, which won the National Book Award in 2014. These stories present the distancing effects of training and advanced optics, revealing that physical distance or range is no longer a sufficient way to think about killing, if it ever was. These stories also demonstrate the importance of narrative to the soldier: the stories soldiers tell themselves about themselves and their enemy shape their experience in war. Lastly, I examine Kevin Powers' novel *Yellow Birds*, which was a National Book Award Finalist in 2012. *Yellow Birds* portrays the effects of leadership and narratives on the soldier's views of the enemy and how, when those views change for the worse, so too does the soldier's conduct. Powers viscerally displays what happens to the soldier when he or she kills unnecessarily under such conditions. Ultimately, *Yellow Birds* reveals that the image of the self and the other that the soldier takes to battle, not modern technology, is what most affects the soldier's ethical conduct during war and chances for recovery after war.

In the second chapter I look at moderate risk scenarios – soldiers deployed to forward operating bases (FOBs) or combat outposts (COPs). These soldiers are still at risk of mortar or Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attack (or being overrun), but not at as great a perceived risk as the soldier “outside the wire.” I begin the chapter by examining three killing events portrayed in Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Finkel's 2009 book *The Good Soldiers*. In these events, the soldiers are inside the operations center coordinating attacks but also view the attacks through digital screens. When killing the enemy, the soldiers are elated by the presentation of death on the screens, dehumanizing the other. However, when the same screen presents the death of comrades, the soldiers are haunted by the images, revealing that mediated experiences can be intimate. This analysis clearly demonstrates that technology does not determine the experience, the mindset of the soldier does. Then I explore another short story by Klay: “10 Klinks South.” In this story, an artillery crew engages enemy which they cannot see. The crew discusses group absolution and individual responsibility, but the narrator eventually searches for the bodies of the slain. In so doing, I argue, he seeks to establish the humanity of the dead and to feel responsible for his actions. While I do not advocate that soldiers go in search of bodies, I do believe that

soldiers likewise should seek to understand the effects of their actions. As Marlantes writes, one “can’t be a warrior and not be deeply involved with suffering and responsibility” (44).

In the third and final chapter, I examine two very different film portrayals of drone warfare. The first film, *Good Kill*, is an exploration of moral injury and narrative failure in the character of Major Tom Egan. The film presents eleven scenes of violence with little to no back story, making drone strikes appear senseless and unjust to both the viewer and the characters. Because he is not exposed to risk, Egan feels like a coward, and struggles to make sense of what he is doing, especially when he is directed to kill what appear to be civilians in addition to the enemy. This is a “betrayal of what’s right” for Egan, and leads him ultimately to disobey orders and commit a different war crime which he feels is “the right thing to do.” The second film, *Eye in the Sky* is much more concerned with relaying all the information surrounding a single drone strike in which a civilian will likely also die. Both the viewer and the characters are well-informed – yet ultimately the drone strike is authorized. This strike is still traumatic, though the film does not present it as likely to result in moral injury for those involved because the narrative surrounding the event is humanely and sufficiently constructed; the characters and viewers can make sense of the violence. This is a fundamental and important difference for military officers to grasp.

Ultimately what follows is a call for a new warrior narrative: not one which advocates hate towards the enemy or internal numbness, but one which advocates a reflective warrior who sees the enemy as human and approaches killing well aware of the burden it is. It agrees with Marlantes’ claim that the “ideal response to killing in war should be [...] sadness mingled with respect” (42). In order for that to happen, one must view oneself and the enemy as both human. This thesis not only informs our understanding of what the experience of killing can be like, but also how military leaders can help influence that experience by approaching the topic aware of the ethical traps of dehumanization. If warfare both now and in the future is going to be different than in the past, then how we think and talk about killing must also be different. Actively dehumanizing the enemy is enticing because it renders the enemy “more killable” and thus protects the soldier against immediate trauma and/or moral injury. But it can also dehumanize the soldier and opens the door for unethical action, or a “betrayal of what’s right,”

which psychiatrist Jonathan Shay strongly associates with PTSD. Further, the prolonged passive self-dehumanization of “acting like a machine” or becoming “numb” likewise only delays the confrontation with the realities of one’s actions. It suppresses dialogue which is essential to processing war and healing. Leaders must be attuned to this truth. If a soldier is momentarily “machine-like” or “numb” during a particular event, then the military leader must encourage that soldier’s “rehumanization” afterwards.¹⁵ These texts largely demonstrate this through negative examples – what happens when leaders do not encourage communication in their units. While this study suggests that such “machine-likeness” or “numbness” may be unavoidable at times for most soldiers during intense combat, there is nothing to suggest that such a sense of detachment must be prolonged or celebrated as a warrior-like quality. To the contrary, striving to uphold the enemy’s humanity and the soldier’s own humanity – while difficult to accomplish – is the task set before young military leaders. This is particularly the case in asymmetric warfare and the greater “global war on terror,” where more killing does not equate to more success and unnecessary killing most often results in strategic setbacks. Indeed, a view of the enemy as human like oneself is urgently required.

¹⁵ Psychiatrist Edward Tick uses this “rehumanization” approach upon redeployment (*Warrior’s Return* 227).

CHAPTER 1 HIGH PERCEIVED THREAT TO SELF

He's a soldier. All he is *is* a soldier. He's an instrument of war, and he's looking for that fight, and that's why I think he is somewhat frustrated in the fact that he's not in a clean war, where he can be the leader up front—'Follow me, men'—because this war doesn't dictate it. This war dictates drinking chai, handshaking, being political. David Finkel, *The Good Soldiers* (30)

The way I talked about personal preparation for killing in combat changed dramatically from my first to my fourth deployment. Before my first deployment in 2008, as a twenty-three year old infantry lieutenant fresh out of Ranger School, there was an unknowability on the topic which led me to largely avoid the subject altogether. Instead, we focused on things that I did know and understood, things like patrolling, battle drills, and marksmanship. We trained collective activities and individual skills but spent little time on reflective anticipation of the psychological aspects of war. By my fourth deployment in 2012, we spent a lot more time focused on mental preparation in addition to the collective drills inherent in unit warfare. Now, a few years removed, I wonder if part of the reason so many soldiers have a hard time adjusting to life after war is in fact because we do not spend enough time before war anticipating the realities of killing. Just as we prepare the body to react properly to combat scenarios, so too ought we prepare the mind. Yet for a lieutenant fresh out of college or a military academy – how can you speak with authority on something you have not experienced? This problem troubled me as a company commander as I endeavored to mentor my young lieutenants. In addition to sharing my experiences, I had my lieutenants read war literature by veterans to try and help them prepare. What follows is written in hopes that our next young military leaders might be able to prepare themselves and their soldiers their first time around, not their fourth.

Authors, historians, psychologists, philosophers, and soldiers approach killing in combat differently. Most students of military history recognize a trend across many centuries of militaries protecting their own forces by developing technologies that engage enemy forces at increasingly farther

distances. From the hand-to-hand combat of antiquity to the introduction of gunpowder, rifles and cannons, to the advent of precision-guided missiles and drones, generally the argument is made that greater physical distance allows for a less “personal experience” of killing – that it makes killing “easier” (Gusterson 71). This thinking was codified in the work of Dave Grossman, founder of “killology,” who writes in his 2005 book *On Combat* that: “simply stated, the farther away you are the easier it is to kill” (203). Yet the contemporary war literature offers a different perspective. In part this is because the on-the-ground soldiers are out among the civilian population, intermingled with the enemy. Additionally, new, advanced technologies are mediating the act of killing in unanticipated ways. As discussed in the introduction, Hugh Gusterson critiques Grossman through his study of drone warfare, stating that the relationship of distance is now “scrambled” or “respatialized” as drone pilots experience “remote intimacy” with the people they kill (48, 72). For Gusterson, this often is the result of “narrativization,” but for Paul Virilio such “filling in the blanks” is simply how humans build mental images of events (*Vision Machine* 3). Thus this chapter adds to Gusterson’s criticism of Grossman, but it also complicates Gusterson as well by not limiting narrativization to drone pilots. The literature makes clear that physical proximity between combatants is not the primary variable in the experience of killing. Instead, I posit that contemporary fiction prioritizes the degree of perceived shared humanity over physical distance as more influential in the soldier’s experience of combat killing. I argue that in contemporary combat, the perceived human status of the other and the self is influenced by perceived threat, the technology of training, the technology of optics, and constructed narratives.

This chapter reveals that soldiers regularly conceive of the enemy as subhuman if not entirely inhuman – certainly a different kind of human than themselves. The use of racial and religious slurs in war is not new: both dehumanize the enemy into a lesser, more killable other. As explained in the introduction, Glen Gray writes that the “moral absolutisms of warfare develop through the medium of language” (134). Some of the characters in this chapter also animalize and demonize the enemy – all of this, I argue, constitutes active dehumanization. Yet, dehumanizing the other regularly results in the dehumanization of the self: characters in this chapter become “numb” and, worse, “savage” and

“deviant.” Even without active dehumanization, soldiers tend not to individuate the human other; that is, soldiers view the other as an abstract object rather than an individual. Thermal and infrared optics technologies, along with the technology of training in this chapter present the other as abstract: they blur and distort the figure of the human enemy into a faceless object or form. This passive form of dehumanization can be problematic too: it often reduces the soldier to a “machine-like” or “numb” being as well. Both forms of dehumanization serve to break the “shared humanity” between the two combatants and render the other as less human, creating space for killing but also for unethical action.

In this chapter I examine three contemporary war authors to see how training, technologies and narratives influence the soldier’s perception of the humanity of the other in scenarios where the soldier is at great perceived risk. By close-reading a selection of Brian Turner poems including “Here, Bullet” and parts of his three “observation poems,” I will demonstrate that advanced optics technologies can create emotional proximity or “remote intimacy” for on-the-ground soldiers, not just drone pilots. In the observation poems, the optics of war create a sense of proximity for the somewhat removed observer who then makes the “interpretive leap” of “narrativization” which results in “remote intimacy.” I will then show that technology can conversely create emotional detachment despite physical nearness by close-reading excerpts of Phil Klay’s short stories “Psychological Operations” and “After Action Report.” In these stories, both the technology of training, or – to borrow Grossman’s term – conditioning (*On Killing* 253), and the technology of optics distance the soldiers from their human enemies despite physical proximity. Likewise, the soldiers’ employment of bravado and dehumanizing narratives of the enemy creates emotional distance. These texts will show that, in the experience of killing in combat, physical proximity is at best an influencing factor in the perceived humanity and threat of the other.

In examining the perceived humanity of the enemy, I will invoke Gray’s “abstract or concrete” paradigm (166). I will argue that technology can make the enemy both more abstract and more concrete, at times making the enemy easier to kill and at other times harder. As will be shown, the human other is frequently reduced to a form, an object, or an abstraction. While Turner’s optics allow his speakers to humanize (make concrete) those they observe, the technologies and narratives in Klay’s short stories

allow the soldiers to deny the enemy a human status. Yet in both “Here, Bullet” and “After Action Report” the soldiers themselves experience a movement towards a machine-like experience during combat as training “kicks in” and suppresses self-awareness and awareness of others beyond their form or silhouette. This metamorphosis into war-machine, I argue, enables the soldiers to be temporarily indifferent to the humanity of the enemy, but simultaneously dehumanizes the soldiers themselves.

To conclude the chapter, I discuss Private John Bartle’s transformation in Kevin Powers’ novel *Yellow Birds*. Bartle, I argue, begins the war viewing the enemy and himself as similar, concrete humans, but ultimately takes on the characteristics of his team leader and abstractly dehumanizes others. In so doing, he dehumanizes himself also. This last section demonstrates that the technology of war is ambivalent towards the human experience and that the attitude the soldier brings to the technology and the human other is greatly influenced by his or her unit and leadership. Thus, in addition to battle drills and “pop up” marksmanship training which prepare soldiers to succeed and survive in combat, shaping the attitude towards others and the self also must be a primary goal of military leaders in preparing soldiers and units for combat – especially counterinsurgency combat in which soldiers encounter the strange dichotomy of needing to humanize the populace in order to “win hearts and minds” and simultaneously to dehumanize the enemy in order to psychologically be able to kill him or her.

This chapter not only informs our understanding of what the experience of killing while at high perceived personal risk can be like, but also how young military leaders can help influence that experience by approaching the topic aware of the ethical traps of dehumanization. Actively dehumanizing the enemy is enticing because it renders the enemy “more killable” and thus protects the soldier against immediate trauma and/or moral injury. But it can also dehumanize the soldier and opens the door for unethical action. Further, prolonged passive self-dehumanization of “acting like a machine” or becoming “numb” likewise only delays the confrontation with the actualities of one’s actions. If a soldier is momentarily “machine-like,” then the military leader must encourage immediate “rehumanization”

afterwards.¹⁶ Indeed, striving to uphold the enemy’s humanity and the soldier’s own humanity – while difficult to accomplish – is the task set before young military leaders. It may not always be accomplishable, but it must be the goal. This is particularly the case in counterinsurgency, asymmetric warfare, and the greater “global war on terror” where more killing does not equate to more success, and unnecessary killing often results in tactical and strategic setbacks, not to mention potential prolonged moral injury to the soldier. I begin with “Here, Bullet” by Brian Turner:

“Here, Bullet”
If a body is what you want,
then here is bone and gristle and flesh.
Here is the clavicle-snapped wish,
the aorta’s opened valves, the leap
thought makes at the synaptic gap.
Here is the adrenaline rush you crave,
the inexorable flight, that insane puncture
into heat and blood. And I dare you to finish
what you’ve started. Because here, Bullet,
here is where I complete the word you bring
hissing through the air, here is where I moan
the barrel’s cold esophagus, triggering
my tongue’s explosives for the rifling I have
inside of me, each twist of the round
spun deeper, because, here, Bullet,
here is where the world ends, every time.

For the combat service member exposed to the highest level of personal risk, face-to-face with the enemy or “out of the wire,” killing can be intimate or detached, premeditated and self-conscious throughout or simply a reflexive, machine-like act. In the poetic landscape of Brian Turner, killing is at times embodied by the speaker-soldier and at other times disembodied, alienated and detached by means of the poetic language employed. In Turner’s poem “Here, Bullet” the speaker-soldier (who in this case is the victim) attempts to disembody the act of killing by occluding the would-be human assailant and assigning agency to the material bullet instead. In the poem, the speaker-soldier addresses not simply the weapon of war, but the ammunition itself, moving the agency and desire to kill away from the abstract

¹⁶ This is Edward Tick’s term (*Warrior’s Return* 227).

human who fires it and assigning that agency and desire to the machinery and material of war, or the singular “Bullet.” In personifying the bullet, the poem transforms the bullet into the subject and dehumanizes the targeted soldier into the object. This construct presents the bullet as the actor and the human as only a body to be acted upon, to be punctured. Even so, the poem’s texture complicates this reversal of traditional human-nonhuman roles, and, ultimately, the poem’s ending questions whether such a reversal ever takes place.

In the poem, the weapon undergoes an anthropomorphosis; the barrel becomes an esophagus, which utters a word – the bullet – into the air, causing the speaker-soldier to moan and “complete the word” (11-12). The speaker, too, begins a figurative metamorphosis into a non-human object whose tongue is “triggered” by the bullet, revealing the “rifling I have / inside of me” (12, 13). In this moment, the inside of the speaker-soldier is as the inside of the barrel: rifled (7). Here, the rifle and speaker’s roles are inverted: the human body is transformed into a mechanical prosthesis of the speech-endowed rifle. Furthermore, the momentum and rhythm of the poem advance the act of assembling the many body parts, the rifle, the bullet, the hissing and the word into a single “war assemblage” in which the inert speaker-soldier is less endowed with agency than the speech, desire, and intention-invested rifle and bullet. During this assembling, the poem’s catalogue of body parts reinforces the body’s status as an object to be punctured, a machine to be triggered and nothing more. In this figurative poetic landscape, the speaker assigns the emotions of desiring a body and craving the adrenaline rush of killing to the “Bullet,” deflecting such emotions away from the human enemy and also him/herself. By removing the human enemy from the poem’s narrative altogether, the poem insists on a totally abstract, yet implicitly present, enemy. Disregarding the enemy altogether, the speaker-soldier merges into a rifle and beckons the coming bullet only for the poem – mimicking the discharge of a round from a barrel – to end abruptly: “the world ends” (16). This ending undoes the subject-object reversal employed throughout the poem: surely the world does not end with the wounding or death of the speaker-soldier. Thus the poem constructs a disembodied experience for a detached, objectified speaker-soldier and abstract (absent even) enemy only to undo itself, to end the detached, disembodied world with the restored, embodied

experience. The speaker insists on his or her own distinct, embodied consciousness, even as the poem denies the individuality of his or her enemy: if the speaker's life ends, then the whole world ends with it.

The poem's final turn back to the significance of the speaker-soldier's own embodied consciousness reflects the embodied humanism in the poem's texture which throughout resists the total convergence of soldier, weapon, and ammunition into a unified war assemblage. The poem ends just as the "world ends, every time" precisely at the moment this burgeoning assemblage's motion towards unity would be made complete by the act of killing, the puncture of flesh by bullet. Notably, after having written the poem, poet-warrior Brian Turner carried it with him in his breast pocket for the remainder of his deployment. Literally, "here" is the location where the poem and his life end when the paper is perforated and his flesh punctured by the "Bullet." Yet the phrase "every time" indicates that this phenomenon is never completed, in fact is repeated throughout the war for the speaker-soldier. The body is not punctured and the poem actually ends with the extra two words "every time." Thus, the poem and speaker taunt both bullet and death. Ultimately, the bullet, then, is forever an other to the human speaker-soldier: an unwanted, even if necessary, part of the speaker's intimate combat experience. The speaker-soldier, in taunting the bullet, resists any final unification with the war assemblage and insists on his/her own separate, individual existence. The undercurrent of taunting death and its instruments reveals the speaker-soldier's concern for his or her own body, which problematizes the image of machine-like integration with the anthropomorphic rifle.

Thus, despite the speaker's abstraction of the physically removed enemy, he or she still experiences intimacy, only not with the human other, but instead with the material other, the rifle and bullet. Instead of creating a war assemblage then, the poem more accurately displays the one-sided nature of intimacy resulting from non-face-to-face, impersonal killing. For the victim, the encounter remains both intimate and personal. This one-sided encounter with killing lacks human interchange and mutual recognition, yet the experience is still intimate, the language of the poem full of *moaning* and *craving* and *gristle* and *flesh*. The poem positions the event of being killing in on-the-ground combat as wholly embodied even as it disembodies the act by eliding its human origin. The poem is in fact highly focused

on the human body: the “bone and gristle and flesh” (2), the clavicle (3), the aorta (4), the “leap / thought makes at the synaptic gap” (4-5), the adrenaline rush (6), esophagus and tongue (12, 13), and, ultimately, the puncture of the body, comprised of “heat and blood” (8). The speaker is clearly aware of his or her own body, even while he or she detaches the bodily existence of his or her enemy from the event altogether.

Yet, for Turner, the objects at the far end of the instruments of war are not always abstract and the preservation of the self as human is not always directly related to moments of anticipated killing. In fact, through the act of “remote narrativization,” most of Turner’s speaker-soldiers humanize and experience intimacy with the humans they observe. While Gusterson links this phenomenon to the act of voyeurism that accompanies remote observation through Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (Gusterson 63), as I will show, it clearly occurs in Turner’s “observation poems” as well. Turner’s speakers *fill in the blanks*, as Virilio explains, to create mental images based on their memories. In these “observation poems,” while the technology of war optics allows for a measure of physical distance, through “remote narrativization” and the manufacture of mental images, the speaker-soldiers create emotional proximity, or what Gusterson terms “remote intimacy” with the humanized, observed other (47). In humanizing the others, the speaker-soldiers, as Samina Najmi notes, attempt to see themselves as human also (70). Importantly, these poems act as an observation technology as well: they provide for the reader an intimate understanding of the war experience built upon language and narrative.

In “Observation Post #71” the speaker-soldier observes an owl resting in wild grape vines. The poem positions the speaker as having “seen him in the shadows. / I have watched him in the circle of light / my rifle brings to me” (7-9). The instrument of war, the rifle with its circular-lensed optic, is a medium through which the speaker-soldier experiences not just the enemy in Balad, but also his environment. Additionally, in both “Observation Post #798” and “In the Leupold Scope” both speakers experience an intimacy with other humans despite being physically distanced from the Iraqis whom they observe. In the former, the speaker-soldier searches for a brothel through binoculars, hoping to see a woman emerge at dusk. When a woman finally does appear on the rooftop “smoking a cigarette and shaking loose her long

hair” the speaker is “stilled by her” and “transported 7,600 miles / away” (12, 14-15). Here, the speaker-soldier turns the observed, visual image of the woman into a mental image by filling in the blanks with memories of his or her own home. Seeing the woman through the binoculars, the speaker feels “as a ghost might” when gazing “upon the one he loves” (15). In her reading of Turner’s poems, Najmi notes that the poems demonstrate “the mutuality and interdependence of identity construction” which is precluded for Turner’s speakers in Iraq because to the “Iraqi civilian, what that person beheld in [the speaker] was not another individual but an armed and uniformed American” (56). Throughout Turner’s war poems, she explains that each speaker attempts to “preserve a self-identity in the face of his paradoxically empowering and obliterating” role as a soldier (57). Thus, in this poem, she reads the speaker gazing on the prostitute like a ghost as an attempt “to feel his humanity again” (70). For Turner, humanizing the other is also a means of humanizing the self. Interestingly, as Najmi notes, this cannot happen face-to-face because the Iraqis cannot see Turner’s speaker as an individual; therefore the speaker’s identity is “paradoxically empowering and obliterating” (57). As Najmi reads Turner, this humanizing moment can only occur remotely, and, I would add, through the medium of the optic.

The act of remote narrativization is even more prominent in Turner’s “In the Leupold Scope,” in which the speaker-soldier from “two thousand meters out” observes a city skyline through a “40x60mm spotting scope” (3, 1). The speaker finds a woman “hanging laundry on an invisible line” on a rooftop (6). Despite the distance of two kilometers, throughout the rest of the poem, the speaker interpolates the woman’s life and circumstance, believing her to be “dressing the dead, clothing them / as they wait in silence” (7-8), to be “welcoming them back to the dry earth” (10), and waiting for the dead to “return to the bodies they once had” (15). In this act of narrativization, the spotting scope is again more than an optic; it is the medium through which the speaker-soldier experiences “remote intimacy” with the woman.¹⁷ In actuality, as far as Turner’s speaker-soldier can know, the woman may not be waiting for

¹⁷ Yusef Komunyakaa’s Vietnam War poem “Starlight Scope Myopia” presents a similar scenario to Turner’s “observation poems” in which the speaker experiences remote intimacy with a male “VC” whom – presumably – the speaker will have to kill with his M-16.

dead family members, but the lack of narrative and the compelling need to create a narrative in that void is profoundly echoed by the humanistic texture of the final stanza. The remote intimacy is so intense for the speaker that the speaker pictures the imagined dead – for whom he believes the woman is waiting – to be “women with breasts swollen with milk, / men with shepherd-thin bodies, children / running hard into the horizon’s curving lens” (16-18). The unseen men and women are not abstract and formless: they have distinct, concrete personal characteristics. Through this narrative infilling, the observed woman is no longer only an object of observation, but, importantly, the subject of a humanizing narrative created by the speaker-soldier. This speaker, as in the other “observation” poems, humanizes the human other in contrast to the speaker in “Here, Bullet.” In so doing, the human others become concrete figures, complete with narratives, rather than the abstract enemy of “Here, Bullet.” This narrativization occurs at the intersection of the curving lens of the speaker-soldier’s eye looking through the curving lens of the spotting scope at the “horizon’s curving lens” (18). As the three curving lenses fold into one, physical distance disappears into one-sided intimacy. A key difference between the speaker of “Here, Bullet” and those of the “observation” poems, however, is that the speaker is now the potential killer, rather than the victim, yet the one-sided intimacy remains the same.

These four poems also establish the importance of personal risk in speaker-soldiers’ choice to dehumanize or humanize the human other in close combat. In “Here, Bullet” the speaker-soldier perceives his or her own death to be potentially imminent at every moment, and the poem avoids the enemy’s human status by excluding him from the poem altogether. In “Here, Bullet” whatever agency the enemy holds is stripped from him/her and given to the bullet instead in part because the enemy is unseen, but also because the enemy is or will be a threat to the speaker and thus may require the speaker to kill him/her. Conversely, the speakers in the “observation” poems are still vulnerable to enemy attack, but the women – at least as narrativized – do not present that risk. Therefore, the speaker-soldiers are not compelled to remove the women’s humanity, but rather in both cases through narrative infilling the

speaker-soldiers create remote intimacy with the women they observe.¹⁸ Put another way, they empathize with the women. As Susan Sontag discusses in the context of viewing the pain of others through war photographs, this is a problematic form of empathy, a one-sided intimacy which cannot match empathy resulting from face-to-face human interchange (Sontag 61), but it nonetheless draws the soldier closer to a mental image of the human other as an individual rather than an abstraction – as similarly human rather than different kind of beings.

This humanized view of the enemy amongst noncombatants complicates the soldier's requirement to kill in war. To avoid this internal contradiction, soldiers instead frequently dehumanize the enemy they might have to kill by creating negative narratives of the enemy (seen or unseen) in order to reduce that enemy to the subhuman status of savage or the nonhuman status of animal or even to an abstract object, making the act of killing less psychologically jarring and more justifiable (Grossman, *On Killing* 161). However, in asymmetric and counterinsurgency warfare the erasure of delineated war zones separated from civilian spaces complicates this effort to create separate narratives for the human civilian "on the battlefield" and the sub/nonhuman enemy. The soldier is compelled to "win the hearts and minds" of the civilian populace from which he or she must also separate (and, at times, kill) the enemy. Therein is one of the soldier's great paradoxes: to be successful in counterinsurgency the soldier must create a narrative of fraternal kinship with the larger civilian body of which the enemy is a part. In most cases, this is not a preexisting narrative; the typical American soldier has not for years felt neighborly love towards the Iraqi or Afghan populace. This dichotomy of intentionally humanizing the civilian population while also intentionally or subconsciously dehumanizing the (often unidentifiable) enemy within that population problematizes the soldier's effort to prepare for and recover from killing in combat.

¹⁸ One might wonder if Turner's speakers would feel the same way while gazing upon men and if this is not scopophilia. Najmi notes that "the objectified female not only does not gaze back but remains unaware of the male gaze focused on her. The power dynamic between active gazer and passive object of gaze reveals itself explicitly here, and to this extent the poems fall into a recognizable genre in cultural representations of race and gender relations" (63). Yet in Komunyakaa's Vietnam poetry, the observed are often males and the effect is similar to Turner's poetry.

Phil Klay's short story "After Action Report" explores the complexities of this dialectic within the soldier through the character of Timhead. This story, as do many of Klay's other stories, emphasizes training as a mechanism through which soldiers are able to kill in close combat when required despite the "humanizing-dehumanizing dichotomy" of asymmetric warfare. Furthermore, the story reveals that after killing soldiers are presented with the problem of establishing their own narrative of the event in order to justify the act to themselves – a narrative which is not so easily built for Timhead, who is caught between this humanizing-dehumanizing dichotomy of contemporary counterinsurgency and the contemporary narrative of the "warrior." The story thus probes the creation of such a narrative or "report" to oneself.

The short story "After Action Report" is a first-person narrative account which opens with Timhead killing a 13 or 14 year old Iraqi boy. The story is told from the perspective of Lance Corporal Ozzie Suba, Timhead's roommate and a turret gunner in a Mine Resistant Armor-Protected (MRAP) vehicle. While on patrol, the vehicle is ambushed by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). After the IED blast, Suba, Timhead and the rest of the crew climb out of the vehicle. Suba, narrating the events, explains that "I wasn't quite steady on my feet, but training kicked in" (Klay 30). Moments later there "was a crack of rounds" aimed at two exposed Marines – Suba and Timhead (31). Despite not being able to see the attacker, Suba "snapped back to training" (31). Noting that Timhead was firing, Suba "fired where he was firing" and only stops firing after Timhead does (31). Timhead kills the attacker, the 13 or 14 year old "kid." Suba, explaining Timhead's actions, says that "Timhead, like the rest of us, had actually been trained to fire a rifle, and he'd been trained on man-shaped targets. Only difference between those and the kid's silhouette would have been the kid was smaller. Instinct took over" (Klay 32). In this killing event, Klay problematizes the humanity of all three involved: Timhead, Suba and the kid.

First, Suba insists that Timhead's stimulus-response training equips him to kill the attacker. In Dave Grossman's terms, Timhead responds as he was *conditioned* to act (Grossman 253), which is to say that Timhead does not choose to act, does not act consciously as a human, but as something less, something more akin to a machine which performs instinctively, as it was programmed, or a Pavlovian dog. Second, Suba acknowledges that he, too, is machine-like rather than a conscious human. For a moment

after the blast, his war-machine status is in question: Suba malfunctions while disoriented. Yet his system reboots, he “snaps back” to training, training “kicks in” and he fires as he was trained to fire. Third, Klay also reduces the “kid’s” humanity to his bodily form, his silhouette, which normally would be entirely de-individuated, but in this particular case is somewhat distinct because “the kid was smaller” than normal silhouettes (32). In this killing event, for Timhead there is no flesh and gristle as in “Here, Bullet” but instead only the silhouette. The kid is an object which looks like a man-shaped target, not an embodied human. Thus the text reveals that instinctively firing at a silhouette rather than an embodied human is an emotionally distancing method of abstraction and dehumanization for the soldier which is predicated on the technology of military training. Importantly, this dehumanization works both ways: Timhead himself is reduced to a machine while the kid is objectified as a silhouette and abstracted into a target. The technology of training creates emotional distance for Timhead which supersedes physical proximity with the enemy. Importantly, Timhead can justify the act to himself because the “kid” posed an immediate risk to his life. The boy was *the* enemy. Still, Timhead’s efforts to create a post-killing narrative with which he is comfortable are complicated by the presence of other children who presented no risk to him.

Immediately after the mission, Timhead asks Suba to lie for him and tell the rest of the platoon that Suba, not Timhead, killed the boy.¹⁹ That the two choose to lie about what happened and an “after action report” is actually an official military document meant to relay the truth about what happened on a mission creates a pervasive irony in the story. After action reports are meant to improve the unit from one mission to the next – if you lie in the report, the unit ends up in the potentially damaging cycle of repeating mistakes. Creating false narratives are not only personally problematic, but also hinder military effectiveness. Yet Timhead and Suba do just that. They perpetuate this false narrative of the event because Timhead struggles with guilt. Not guilt for killing the boy, as one might expect, but guilt because the boy’s family was present. Timhead explains: “it’s not that I killed a guy” but rather “his family was

¹⁹ A similar event occurs in David Finkel’s *The Good Soldiers*, in which a young soldier, Marsh, kills an insurgent with an eight year old girl in the room watching. Afterwards, Marsh asks his squad leader to take credit for the action (130). Describing his memory of the event, Marsh says: “It’s photographs” and that “I see myself shooting the guy. I see a still frame” along with “I can see the little girl, the face of the little girl” (134).

there. Right there [...] Brothers and sisters in the window” (48). He remembers that there “was a little girl, like nine years old” (48). This girl prevents Timhead from creating a mental image, or memory, of the event that is exclusively one of combat. Instead, the girl’s presence links this respatialized battlefield with “home” for Timhead, and he fills in the blanks of her visual image based on his personal memories when he transforms her visual image into a mental image and memory. “I got a kid sister” he says (48). Much as the woman on the rooftop transports Turner’s speaker-soldier 7,600 miles to his lover, this nine year old girl disrupts Timhead’s efforts to create an acceptable narrative of the event. Suba, who throughout the story pretends to be the one who shot the boy, seeks help for Timhead by falsely confiding to “Staff Sergeant” that he, Suba, is troubled by the girl. Staff Sergeant reminds Suba that the girl had probably seen worse since she lived in Iraq. The conversation ends as follows:

“Shit. There’s explosions in this city every fucking day. There’s firefights in this city every fucking day. That’s her home. That’s in the streets where she plays. This girl is probably fucked up in ways we can’t even imagine. She’s not your sister. She’s just not. She’s seen it before.”

“Still,” I said. “It’s her brother. And every little bit hurts.”

He shrugged. “Until you’re numb.” (50)

The nameless “Staff Sergeant” creates a counter-narrative to Timhead’s narrative infilling of the girl’s life. “Staff Sergeant” categorically dehumanizes the girl and denies her the capacity of feeling emotions. By denying the humanity of the girl, Suba (in reality, Timhead) can emotionally distance himself from the guilt or trauma of having killed her brother. “Staff Sergeant’s” argument is that the girl must be numb to violence because she experiences it every day. By implication, “Staff Sergeant” argues that the girl experiences less human emotion and therefore is less human than an American girl because she lives in abjection. Importantly, the story never establishes that the young Iraqi boy was in fact the girl’s brother – he very well may not have been – but that does not matter for Timhead: the perceived reality and the ensuing narrative are a reality for Timhead. By connecting the girl to his sister, Timhead Americanizes and humanizes the girl. The girl in the window frame becomes freeze-framed as a photographic mental image which haunts Timhead – which Sontag would argue is the appropriate response to viewing

another's agony (Sontag 115). In so doing, Timhead resists his own total transformation into an unthinking war-machine – he insists on a self-awareness which can experience empathy. Again, as in Turner's "observation poems," this empathy and humanization is only a projection onto the girl, not an actual understanding of her individual, nuanced humanity, but it is still an effort to view her as human and not something less. Should Timhead deny her humanity as "Staff Sergeant" suggests, he would also surrender part of his own humanity by reducing himself to an unfeeling, "numb" machine. Cleverly, Klay constructs the character of "Staff Sergeant" in precisely this way. "Staff Sergeant" has given himself over to being "numb" and for that "Staff Sergeant" has no proper name. He is an interchangeable, nameless, emotionless cog known only by his rank. He is a war-machine.

As I have already discussed, I believe the discerning contemporary soldier in asymmetric war is today positioned in this paradox of "deep contradictions" concerning his view of the enemy amidst the civilian population. Timhead certainly occupies this space: the concrete humanity of the girl results in "deep contradictions" which wreak havoc on Timhead's psychological processing of the event, or his ability to narrate the event acceptably. Here the importance of leadership and a strong moral climate within a unit should be noted. Had "Staff Sergeant" been a good leader, he might have helped Timhead cope with the aftermath of killing. Instead, he makes matters worse, and Timhead does what many veterans do, which is deny the emotions of the experience. This does not help the much longer narrative process of making sense of and coming to terms with one's experiences. On one level, the story substitutes itself for the sergeant's failure of leadership and narrative inadequacy.

While Timhead wrestles with creating an acceptable post-killing narrative, "After Action Report" also insists on another form of narrative: bravado, or the stories soldiers tell themselves about themselves before and after killing. Of such forms of narrative, Klay said in an interview that they are "the stories we tell ourselves so we don't have to examine what we think about war too closely" (Anderson 7). "After Action Report" presents a joke Marines tell each other in which a journalist asks a sniper what he feels when he kills someone; the sniper replies with only one word: "Recoil" (Klay 47). Even armed with the confidence of training, the text time and again displays Marines engaging in such hyper-masculine

exchanges of bravado and dehumanization of the enemy and themselves during and in preparation for combat. Timhead, however, avoids bravado publicly. He convinces his roommate Suba to tell his platoon that Suba killed the insurgent, not Timhead. Suba, then, runs with the opportunity to increase his own standing within the platoon: “me and Timhead see hajji with an AK and that was it. Box drill. Like training” (35).²⁰ Talking about the killing, Harvey, another Marine, tells Timhead that he, Timhead, “just ain’t quick enough on the draw” before bragging that he would have “been up there so fast, bam bam, shot his fuckin’ hajji mom, too” (38). Here, Suba and Harvey embrace the image of a “warrior” as an emotionless killing machine who feels only the rifle’s recoil. However, Timhead neatly demonstrates the irony of the “recoil myth” in that he experiences moral recoil as well.

The lies Suba and Timhead circulate eventually wear on them both. Suba seeks out help from his squad leader and the unit’s chaplain. Timhead, while publicly hiding the fact that he killed the insurgent, emotionally distances himself from Suba. When Suba tries to get Timhead to open up to him, Timhead dismisses his efforts. He says: “I’m fine [...] I signed up to kill hajjis” (40). Suba, however, knows this is not true. Timhead’s older brother had been badly injured in 2005 and “Timhead joined to take his place” (40). So while Timhead publicly eschews bravado, when he is emotionally vulnerable – alone with Suba who knows the truth – he turns to it as a defense mechanism. Here, it is important to note Gray’s insistence on the difference between friendship and comradeship. “Suffering and danger,” he writes, “cannot create friendship, but they can make a difference in comradeship” (89). Friends, according to Gray, experience a “heightened awareness of the self” whereas comrades suppress self-awareness (90). Suba and Timhead provide a striking example of this: they do not confide in one another, they do not seek to expand the walls of the self into one another, rather to each other and their platoon they suppress self-awareness. Thus Timhead deals with the emotions of killing, the “recoil” on his own.

In this next killing event, Klay probes the influence of optics on the soldier’s experience. In Klay’s short story “Psychological Operations” the narrator, Waguih, describes watching an insurgent die

²⁰ In Arabic, “hajji” denotes a Muslim who has completed the pilgrimage to Mecca – it is a term of respect. In this instance, however, it is used pejoratively by American soldiers as a way to denigrate Muslim men.

through a thermal optic.²¹ Waguih explains that the squad “had been using thermal scopes because the heat signatures made it easier to tell the thin shadows of dogs from the bright white heat of humans” (186). In the medium of thermal imagery, what distinguishes human from non-human is the body temperature, the “heat signature.” Thus, the dying or dead insurgent is but a “bright jumble of limbs lying twenty feet out from the nearest building” distinguishable from his weapon because the weapon is a different temperature, a “black strip” (186). The insurgent is *dying or dead* because in the medium of thermal imagery it is impossible to distinguish alive from dead until body heat dissipates: the difference between living and dead is a distinction of temperature. Waguih is told by a corporal to “watch for the heat signature dying, the hot spot fading to the ambient temperature. He told me, ‘That’s when we’ll officially call in the kill’” (187). The insurgent is only “officially dead” when his heat image fades into the heat image of his surroundings and the two become indistinguishable. When that occurs, in the medium of the thermal image, the body literally disappears; it dissolves away. But bodies lose heat slowly, and in the aftermath of the gun battle, adrenaline wears off quickly for Waguih as he observes the uncertain status of the insurgent/corpse. “I’d look up for a second and then back, to try and catch a change” Waguih says (188). He cannot tell if the insurgent is alive or dead. One Marine keeps repeating “He’s dead. He’ll fade for sure,” but Waguih “couldn’t tell, so I held my fingers out in front of the optic” (188). Here, in order to assess the aliveness of the enemy, Waguih compares his own body temperature’s reproduced image to that of the insurgent. His fingers make a “searing hot spot” but in the thermal scope “everything, the shadings, the contrasts, they’re off in this weird way” (188). So the spectacle goes on. And it is a spectacle – Waguih acknowledges the “voyeurism” of “looking through the scope” (187). Yet this is not an intimate experience; the insurgent’s death is a technologically mediated, emotionally distanced event to be watched. Notably, the exact moment of passage between life and death, between human and no-longer-human, mediated through the thermal optic is impossible to discern. Waguih

²¹ Thermal optics detect the heat (thermal energy) emitted by objects, amplify that invisible (to the human eye) part of the electromagnetic spectrum through image enhancement, and reproduce it in a form visible to the human eye. Because thermal sights detect heat and not light, they can be used both during the day and at night.

“stared into the scope and tried to see the life going out of him. Or the heat, I guess. It happens so slow” (189). In this killing event, for Waguih, the enemy never achieves a human status. The enemy is a heat-producing object in a digital image of heat signatures. Thus, Waguih is ambivalent about watching the insurgent die. In fact, he recalls this incident in conversation with a college peer after redeploying. “You watched him die” she says – to which he retorts: “Just the heat signature” (189). Not even *his* heat signature, but *the* heat signature. Again, this is close combat, building-to-building fighting, but the thermal technology creates emotional distance for Waguih. Only after the fact, upon redeployment, does he experience remorse. This is the opposite effect of remote intimacy: this technology distances Waguih from the human other.

Near the end of “After Action Report,” Suba experiences his own killing event, also mediated by technology – the night vision infrared optic.²² In this instance, again contrary to Turner’s “observation poems,” the technology creates emotional distance from the human enemy. While on a convoy, Suba spots through his night vision device “two hajjis” evidently emplacing an IED in the road. Garza, his vehicle commander, tells him to “Light ’em up” (47). The two men run. Suba narrates: “I fired. They were on the edge of the field by then, and it was dark. The flash of the .50 going off killed my night vision. I couldn’t see anything, and we kept driving” (47). Describing the “wild thrill” of killing, Suba places limited agency in the .50 caliber machine gun, deflecting responsibility for the act of killing to the material weapon, just as the speaker-soldier in “Here, Bullet” does: “The trigger was there, aching to be pushed” (48). Further, Suba benefits psychologically from several factors: the enemy is not intermingled with civilians, the enemy poses a high threat to his life, and Suba actually engages the digital image of the men reproduced by his night vision device, not the men themselves. This, I argue, is the crucial element in Suba’s successful detachment from the act of killing and his ability to create a post-killing narrative with which he can be comfortable.

²² This more common form of night vision is also known as image intensification. It detects the light that objects reflect from starlight, moonlight and artificial light, amplifies that light through image enhancement, and digitally reproduces that light information to the viewer in a form bright enough for the human eye to detect.

The night vision device, with its single green lens, acts as a medium through which Suba engages not only the enemy, but, on this patrol, the world also. His visual sensorial experience is reduced to one eye's intake of a green, digital reproduction of ambient light less than an inch from his face. Through this technology, which enhances ambient light and is capable of zooming in and out and focusing on different objects, Suba is able to see through the dark the "two hajjis" evidently arming an IED.²³ Suba racially dehumanizes the enemy as subhuman "hajjis," but he also, because of the medium of the night vision, emotionally conceives of this particular enemy as nonhuman objects. The enemy are in fact only presented to Suba because of the night vision technology. While they exist outside of it, Suba is only made aware of their existence through the medium of the night vision. Importantly, in viewing a human through night vision – especially one at any remove – the viewer recognizes the form of a body, but the digital image in no way resembles what the viewer is accustomed to associating with "human." When Suba fires, he fires at the digital reproduction of the "two hajjis'" bodily form, not their actual bodies of flesh and bone. He even refers to the "two hajjis" afterwards as "only shadows" (48). Shadows, of course, are only less distinct silhouettes. This, then, is never a concrete, human enemy, only abstract figures displayed in a monocle, only blurry silhouettes of the human form. Further, when Suba engages, the muzzle flash of the .50 caliber machine gun causes his night vision device to "white out" from the bright light and air pressure and then immediately turn off – a common occurrence for heavy machine gunners. In effect, when this happens the enemy ceases to exist in the medium of the night vision; the narrative is interrupted. The medium, in fact, is removed altogether and in its place is simply darkness: "I couldn't see anything" (47). Emotionally, the enemy disappears with the removal of the medium. Suba does not see the bodies or the results of his actions: "Maybe they were body parts at the edge of the field," he says, but he may also tell himself "maybe they got away" even though, intellectually, he knows "the .50 punches holes in humans you could put your fist through" (47). Throughout contemporary war literature, concern

²³ It should be noted that to arrive at the conclusion that the two "hajjis" were arming an IED requires that Suba make an "interpretive leap" and create that narrative. As readers, we, cannot know what the two were actually doing because the narrative does not divulge it; yet in this, we are much like the character of Suba, who likewise cannot know for sure.

for dead bodies, especially those which the soldier personally has killed, resounds as crucial element in the psychological aftermath of killing and creation of a post-killing narrative. Suba, because of the personal threat, the medium of the night vision (and its sudden removal), and the fact that the patrol does not stop driving to search and identify the bodies (an unwise tactic), detaches himself from this close proximity killing, which, in Grossman's model should have been precipitated by resistance and afterwards caused great psychological trouble for him (98). Instead, Suba simply says: "So that happened. It wasn't that bad, though. Not like the kid" (Klay 48). Suba distinguishes between his experience and Timhead's.

These three instances of on-the-ground, close proximity killing within the same compilation of short stories create problems for Grossman's model of resistance to killing and physical proximity, while also corroborating his emphasis on training as conditioning. In *Redeployment* the technologies of training and optics mediate perceived proximity with and humanity of the enemy, rendering physical distance less meaningful. Grossman actually terms the "psychological buffer" afforded by infrared and thermal optics "mechanical distance," which he acknowledges contributes to "emotional distance" (*On Killing* 169), but he nonetheless insists on the "link between distance and ease of aggression" (*On Killing* 97). *Redeployment* and *Here, Bullet* demonstrate that this relationship does not *directly* exist in a technology-mediated world. In fact, *Redeployment* and *Here, Bullet* demand a different assessment about killing: that the perceived humanity of the other, in part determined by his or her possession of a distinct "human" face, is most critical. Neither silhouettes, shadows, nor heat signatures have a human face, nor does the absent enemy of "Here, Bullet," but the women in Turner's "observation poems" and Timhead's little girl do. These texts then point away from Grossman towards the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, who describes the encounter with the other's face as the beginning of ethics. For Levinas, the face of the other "commands" the viewer and reveals the commandment "Thou shall not kill" (*Entre Nos* 104). Timhead's encounter with the little girl certainly affirms Levinas' theory. Yet I would also offer that Turner's "observation poem" speakers corroborate Levinas as well. Taken together, distance from the other does not seem to matter so long as one can encounter the face. Interestingly, Virilio insists that in

contemporary war and society “all distances are reduced to zero” (*Desert Screen* 43), because of the “phenomenon of acceleration” of information in which the optic and eye become indistinguishable, “obliterating” distance (*Vision Machine* 4). While in this argument Virilio is interested in the camera and television, I offer that the distance between Turner and Klay’s characters’ eyes, their optics, and the human other also become indistinguishable and present the same obliteration of distance for the technology-equipped soldier during the encounter with the enemy (and that enemy’s face).

Yet, for the soldier, the technology itself is ambivalent. In truth, when presented with a visual image of a human figure at any distance through any (or no) medium, the soldier chooses to *fill in the blanks*, as Virilio explains, to create a mental image of that figure which either can or cannot be killed. War demands that soldiers sometimes kill individuated enemies, often face-to-face in events of mutual recognition. In these situations, the soldier must choose to bestow or remove humanity in the other he or she perceives. When the soldier deliberately dehumanizes the enemy in order to distance him/herself psychologically from the act of killing, then that form of dehumanization is very different than the passive, abstracting technology-mediated dehumanization discussed so far. It requires a constructed narrative. It inherently involves distinguishing between the enemy’s humanity and the soldier’s own humanity; it inherently involves active denial of humanity. Yet it also requires, or results in, the soldier’s self-dehumanization into an unfeeling machine, or something worse.

Kevin Power’s novel *The Yellow Birds* explores this problematic approach to killing along with the dangers of subscribing to a narrative of the contemporary warrior as an unfeeling being. *Yellow Birds* traces the 2004 – 2005 deployment to Al Tafari, Iraq of Private John Bartle, 21, and his battle buddy Private Daniel Murphy, “Murph,” 18, both from Virginia. The two new recruits are led by their battle-hardened team leader, Sergeant Sterling, 24, who has been deployed before. Both privates are unsure of their abilities to perform in combat – something Sterling tirelessly works against by advancing a contemporary warrior narrative of a detached, emotionless killer. Before deploying, he explains to the two junior soldiers that the enemy will not act like pop-up targets on a shooting range:

“They aren’t gonna pop up and wait for you to shoot them. Remember your fundamentals and you’ll be able to do what needs to be done. It’s hard at first, but it’s simple. Anybody can do it. Get a steady position and a good sight picture, control your breathing and squeeze. For some people, it’s tough after. But most people want to do it when the time comes.” (41-42)

This advice echoes Suba’s emphasis on training on pop-up silhouettes as a mechanism to kill in combat. As with Suba, the enemy is notably absent for Sterling: with a proper sight picture, the sights should be in focus and the target (the human enemy) blurred. This technique of firing inherently *blurs* the human figure of the enemy into a less concrete visual image, a silhouette. Yet for Sterling, killing is not only a matter of doing what the soldier has been trained to do, it is also a matter of hatred “without limits” (Gray 132). Sterling’s approach to combat is entirely different than Turner’s speakers and Suba and Timhead’s. As the platoon anticipates an attack, Sterling cannot wait to “fucking kill the hajji fucks” (17). He later spends time salting dead insurgent bodies in order to desecrate them (94). Sterling does not differentiate between civilian and combatant; he responds to the humanizing-dehumanizing dichotomy of contemporary counterinsurgency by simply dehumanizing everyone not in an American uniform. He subscribes to a contemporary narrative of the warrior as unfeeling and, worse, “deviant” or savage. This is a different form of self-dehumanization than in Turner’s “Here, Bullet” and Klay’s stories, where the soldiers become momentarily machine-like in battle. In Sterling’s words, the young soldiers must “find that nasty streak” and “stay deviant” (42, 156). Both young soldiers initially resist this influence. In fact, they hate Sterling, even as Bartle recognizes he is necessary for their survival: “I hated him. I hated the way he excelled in death and brutality and domination. But more than that, I hated the way he was necessary, how I needed him to jar me into action” (19). Eventually, the two young privates must choose to become like Sterling and be “deviants” or to refuse and bear the moral weight and personal risk of war fought humanely.

In the first battle of the book, Bartle sees an armed enemy running for cover who is “astonished to be alive” (19). Bartle’s “first instinct was to yell out to him, ‘You made it, buddy, keep going’” (20).

Despite Sergeant Sterling's influence, at this point in the novel, Bartle still views the enemy as human. Further, Bartle attempts to maintain his own consciousness and humanity during the gunfight. As the armed Iraqi continues to run for cover, Bartle narrates:

I wanted to tell everyone to stop shooting at him, to ask, "What kind of men are we?" An odd sensation came over me, as if I had been saved, for I was not a man, but a boy, and that he may have been frightened, but I didn't mind that so much, because I was frightened too, and I realized with a great shock that I was shooting at him and that I wouldn't stop until I was sure that he was dead. (21)

Here, Bartle's view of the enemy is similar to that of Turner's "observation poems" speakers – he experiences empathy for the man, imagining him to be frightened, and then connects the enemy's humanity to his own because he is frightened too. He even roots for the man to make it to safety. Simultaneously, Bartle attempts to cling to his own consciousness – asking "what kind of men are we?" and senses that he is not a man, but a boy. In imagining himself a boy, Bartle invokes his innocence in the war, his own reluctance to kill this concrete human enemy. Yet through all these thoughts, he is shooting at the man. He fires both because Sterling tells him to and because he has been trained to, and he knows that he will continue to shoot until the threat is gone, the enemy is dead. In this gunfight, Bartle is simultaneously a self-aware conscience who sees the enemy as human and, separately, a bodily war-machine which performs indifferently to the enemy's humanity. He kills the insurgent. Sterling kills several others, including a woman driving a car, which shocks Bartle. Bartle still differentiates between combatant and civilian; he has not yet subscribed wholly to Sterling's image of the enemy as subhuman, or, in Gray's words, "a creature who is not human at all" but something to be "sought out to be exterminated, not subdued" (149). Gray warns that soldiers who hold this view are "subject to rapid brutalization" because the "lack of compunction in such taking of life deprives the destroyer of any emotional purgation" (151).

In the next battle in the book, Bartle and Murph appear more like Sterling and begin to forfeit that "emotional purgation" and move from semi-conscious machines to savages and eventually deviants. Later

in the deployment, after the platoon has battled through an orchard and back into Al Tifar, losing a soldier in the process, Bartle “disowns the waters of my youth” and gives up the reflexive part of himself (126). He encounters the “deep contradictions” Gray describes in the soldier who views the enemy as “a human being like yourself, the victim of forces above him” (159), and chooses to become the “deviant” Sterling has asked him to be rather than maintain a human view of the enemy. He accepts Sterling’s warrior narrative. Temporarily, this is psychologically easier for Bartle; he feels nothing. He “moves to the edge of the bridge and begins firing at anything moving” (125). His mind wanders from what he is doing, it drifts to his home on the Chesapeake, the “fleeting thought of a young girl sitting beside me on a dock” as he “shot and shot again” a “man crawling from his weapon” (126). He no longer empathizes with the enemy; he kills without emotion, mechanically firing into the body. Sterling and Murph arrive and the three soldiers together fire fresh magazines into the body. This is, without question, a war crime. The men are no longer machine-like in the heat of battle, but “deviants.” Sterling tells the soldiers: “Now you’ve got it, Privates. Thorough, thorough is the way home” (126). Bartle now sees the enemy dead as “part of the landscape, as if something had sown seeds in that city that made bodies rise from the earth” (124). He no longer sees the enemy as human; rather they are inhuman, just abstract forms amongst other objects that make up an environment. Narrating, Bartle says “I had taken it as far as I could” before wondering “what could I do beyond this? Where would he take us?” (126).

Yet Bartle goes “beyond this.” He is in the midst of the process which Gusterson calls “ethical slippage” in which organizational pressures change individual tolerance for ethically questionable actions (105). Bartle tells Sterling that Murph has become emotionally removed; Sterling replies that Bartle has forgotten “the edge you’ve got, because the edge is normal now” (156). Sterling tells Bartle that there is only one way home: “to stay deviant” (156). Although in the moment of narration Bartle is aware of his deviancy, at the time he became “unaware of even our own savagery now: the beatings and the kicked dogs, the searches and the sheer brutality of our presence. Each action was a page in an exercise book

performed by rote” (159).²⁴ Bartle’s transformation from a conscientious human wondering “what kind of men are we?” into an unfeeling “brute” or “savage” who performs his duties by “rote” is startling. His metamorphosis from “human” to “savage” is a function of leadership, choice, and narrative representation. The negative influence of Sergeant Sterling goes unchecked by the platoon leader. As with Klay’s “Staff Sergeant” in “After Action Report,” the platoon leader is unnamed, is only “LT” – an interchangeable type which should have exerted positive leadership to prevent Sterling and Bartle’s descent into savagery, but did not. Bartle’s transformation into “savage” rather than “machine” echoes the distinction between active, prolonged dehumanization of the other in combat and passive, temporary dehumanization mediated by technology and training.

Murph is repulsed by his transformation into an unfeeling savage – he “wants to replace the dullness growing inside him with anything else” (165). He walks off the base naked into Al Tifar and is tortured, mutilated, and killed. Bartle and Sterling find his body, and Bartle talks Sterling into not returning the mutilated corpse to their base, from where it would be sent home to Murph’s mother. Ironically, Bartle defies his earlier logic that he would “never have to make a decision again” to arrive at this incredible decision to commit another war crime. Bartle and Sterling enlist the help of an Iraqi man, a hermit with a cart who had led them to the body. Together, they dump Murph’s body into the Tigris. Sterling then murders the hermit, and the two lie about finding Murph. Somehow the murder seems logical within the construct of the novel – it is an appropriate conclusion to the “deviation” of Bartle and Sterling from humans to savages. It seems, in fact, almost unavoidable.

On his redeployment questionnaire, Bartle pauses on the question “After a murder-death-kill, rate your emotional state” (184). He chooses “Delight” (185). Yet, as Gray explains, the attitude towards

²⁴ In a non-fiction account of a similar “deviation,” in 2006 four soldiers in the 101st Airborne Division (specifically, the heralded 502nd Infantry Regiment) intricately planned and then carried out the rape of a fourteen-year-old girl and the murder of her and her family (Frederick 260). Jim Frederick chronicles their unit’s decline in his 2010 book *Black Hearts: One Platoon’s Descent into Madness in Iraq’s Triangle of Death*. Members of the unit report that the platoon “became something monstrous. It was not even aware of what it was doing” (241). Frederick summarizes the problem: “Iraqis were not seen as humans. Many soldiers actively cultivated the dehumanization of locals as a secret to survival” (242).

killing which Bartle embraces is only temporarily easier than bearing the moral weight of killing in combat. Bartle's descent from an empathetic human to an unfeeling "deviant" or "savage" is interrupted by his redeployment. Throughout the novel, the location switches between Bartle at war and Bartle redeployed in Virginia afterwards, where he is "afraid of nothing in the world more than having to show myself for what I had become" (132). He experiences an acute sense of shame and guilt, describing the feeling as "like there was acid seeping down into your soul and then your soul is gone" (145).²⁵ In his construct of the human as ensouled, he renders himself as inhuman as those he killed.

Concluding a chapter on technology's influence on the soldier's experience of high-risk killing with an example of killing without a "modern" medium of technology accomplishes several things. Importantly, it reminds us that technology itself is ambivalent. It is possible for the soldier to humanize or dehumanize both the self and the other without it, particularly through created narratives, and the choice to do so is not linked to physical distance. Military optics can "obliterate" distance – optics can both allow for emotional proximity from great physical distances (as Turner's "observation poems" demonstrate) and allow for emotional detachment despite physical proximity (as Klay's short stories show). It is to the soldier to determine whether or not to conceive of the technology-mediated human other as human or not, and I have argued that this is more closely related to perceived threat and created narratives than physical proximity. I have also proposed that for the contemporary soldier deployed in a counterinsurgency, working through the requirement to humanize the populace and the urge to dehumanize the enemy is nearly impossible. It places the soldier within the "deep contradictions" of seeing the enemy as human – a position Bartle attempts but ultimately abandons in favor of dehumanizing both civilians and combatants. As *Yellow Birds* illustrates, the perception of the enemy that the soldier takes to the technology of war is profoundly affected by the unit and particularly leadership which creates an organizational narrative. A tangible take-away regarding the ambivalence of technology and the soldier's perceived humanity of the other is the vital importance of strong, moral leadership in creating an organizational climate in which the

²⁵ Here, one should remember Edward Tick's argument about the "soul" at war and his definition of moral injury as a "soul wound" (*Warrior's Return* 151). Additionally, Jonathan Shay's "betrayal of what's right" applies to Bartle.

soldier can cling to his or her own humanity and bear the terrible responsibility of killing other humans without resorting to bravado and intentional, prolonged dehumanization of others.

What this chapter further reveals is that soldiers may naturally slip into machine-like behavior when presented with a requirement to kill a perceived enemy threat. Timhead, Suba, and Bartle each demonstrate this movement towards mechanical detachment, this suppression of self-awareness as reflex and training momentarily take over the body. This is part of what effective training does – it prepares the soldier to perform and to kill when required, and, as importantly, only when required. Yet Bartle chooses to suppress his conscience beyond what is required. Soldiers should emulate the early Bartle – both responding bodily in combat as they have been trained and simultaneously mentally clinging to an image of themselves and the enemy as human. For young military leaders, the task is to create an environment where that is possible, which means dealing with negative actors like Sergeant Sterling.

In combat it is much better to wonder “what kind of men are we?” – both in the moment and perhaps for years thereafter – than to intentionally dehumanize the other; much better to wrestle with the “deep contradictions” than to become “deviant;” much better to be momentarily a “machine” than a prolonged “savage.” The mechanics of shooting, the technology of optics and the technology of training already incline the soldier, when threatened, to move towards machine-like behavior and to transform the human enemy into an abstract object. To intentionally conceive of the enemy as sub or inhuman risks injury to the soldier’s long-term self-conception as an ethical human (moral injury) and is a movement beyond a momentary machine and into self-identification as “savage” or “deviant.” Such extended dehumanization opens the movement towards “delight” in killing rather than remorse. Further, it precludes the humanizing tendency towards civilians in Turner’s “observation poems” and creates a tolerance for (unethical) violence even when no threat exists, as demonstrated by *Yellow Birds*. The weight of killing in combat is (or ought to be) heavy enough without the extra burden of such a loss of morality. Thus I agree with Jonathan Shay that war will always be traumatic but need not always include a “betrayal of what’s right.” The latter leads to moral injury, which Shay correlates with “lifelong

psychological injury” (20). In this chapter, I have argued for a view of the enemy which might help prevent such injury.

This is a different warrior narrative than I believe the military, the media, and our culture are advancing. This is not simply the creed-chanting recruit in basic training, nor the unfeeling soldier of so many war movies, nor the kill-with-abandon first-person video game. The portion of combat in which the soldier is a “killing machine” ought to be but a small fraction (if any part) of his or her combat experience directly linked to the event of killing and then rejected as Turner’s speaker ultimately rejects transformation into a war machine in “Here, Bullet.” This nuanced warrior narrative allows for movement into and out of machine-likeness but is foundationally focused on an embodied and reflective self-awareness which respects the enemy and oneself as similarly human.

CHAPTER 2 MEDIUM AND LOW PERCEIVED THREAT TO SELF

Next he walked past the mooring site for a bright white blimp called an aerostat, which floated high above the FOB with a remote-controlled camera that could be focused on whatever might be happening a thousand feet below. Day or night, the aerostat was up there, looking down and around, as were pole-mounted cameras, pilotless drones, high-flying jets, and satellites, making the sky feel at times as if it were stitched all the way up to the heavens with eyes. David Finkel, *The Good Soldiers* (32)

“It happened soon after sunrise on a quiet Sunday morning and shook every building on the FOB. Doors bowed from the concussion. Windows broke and blew out. It wasn’t the usual rocket or mortar, but something louder and scarier. There’d been no siren, no warning at all, just a sudden explosion that felt like the end of the world had arrived, and before anyone had a chance to do anything, such as run for a bunker or crawl under a bed, there was a second explosion, and a third. David Finkel, *The Good Soldiers* (193)

The soldier’s perceived risk while on a combat outpost (COP), forward operating base (FOB) or patrol base (PB) varies.²⁶ Ordinarily this perceived risk is less than while “out of the wire,” but, depending on the base and the enemy’s tactics, that may not always be the case. In the instances I examine in this chapter, however, the soldiers perceive the risk to self to be present but not immediately or extraordinarily so, as in the first chapter. For these characters, the base provides a measure of security, but the soldiers nonetheless understand that they might at any time be seriously injured or killed by enemy attack – the second excerpt from *The Good Soldiers* above is but one example of how a “quiet Sunday morning” can be interrupted “with no warning at all, just a sudden explosion that felt like the end of the world” (198). In many cases when an attack such as this does materialize, the soldier never sees the enemy at all and yet engages that enemy with mortars or artillery or some other indirect weapon system. If the soldier does see an image of the enemy, it is almost always through a television, computer, or some other form of technological, digital screen – typically presenting an overhead image looking down on the

²⁶ The difference between these doctrinal terms matters militarily, but not for this study. I examine the bases not according to their doctrinal function, but rather according to the sense of security they provide.

earth, as Finkel describes in the first excerpt above.²⁷ These soldiers are commonly in operations centers or fire control centers, coordinating the battle and directing different weapon systems to fire at the enemy – for instance, calling for fire from the mortars or artillery, helicopters or bombers onto an enemy they observe through remote observation.

Traditionally, this type of killing – artillery, mortars, bombers, etc. – has been conceived of as “easier” and “less personal” because the combatants are farther apart. In Dave Grossman’s resistance to killing and distance model, these killing events constitute “Maximum Range” and should be accompanied by no resistance to killing beforehand or psychiatric trauma afterwards (*On Killing* 98, 108). For Grossman, group absolution (or diffusion of responsibility) and the “anonymity created in a crowd” characteristic of this kind of killing also lessen the individual psychological burden of killing (*On Killing* 152). This chapter shows, however, that while group absolution does sometimes occur, it only does so insofar as the soldier considers him/herself to be a machine-like or interconnected being and not a discrete human. Further, a study of contemporary war literature reveals that, as in the previous chapter, it is not the physical distance between combatants which directly affects the soldier’s experience of killing, but the soldier’s view of him/herself and the enemy as similarly human. While distance may factor into the encounter with the other as human, the soldier can nonetheless insist on the enemy’s human status despite not even being able to see that enemy. Conversely, while technology may present a “close up” image of the human other through digital screens, the soldier may still conceive of that enemy as less than human and specifically less human than him/herself. As in the previous chapter, how one conceives of the self and the other is greatly influenced by the narratives one creates both before and after a killing event. Once again, to dehumanize the other is also to dehumanize the self. Ultimately, then, I argue that upholding one’s own humanity and respecting the humanity of the enemy is – while profoundly difficult – the goal towards which soldiers and leaders must aim, while relying on training and discipline to equip themselves

²⁷ In this chapter, I do not consider the soldiers in the guard towers or “on the perimeter”: in my perceived risk consideration, their experience is more akin to that found in the first chapter.

to kill when necessary. After the fact, however, soldiers must communicate constructively – that is they must build a narrative with which they can be at peace. Frequently, that is not what happens in the texts.

J. Glenn Gray also advocated a view of the other as human, even as he acknowledged the difficulty of doing so. Writing about his experiences in World War II, Gray explains that most of war is carried out by soldiers who “act as automatons, behaving almost as mechanically as the machines they operate” (102). Such soldiers do not consider the results of their actions because “machines cannot respond; they can only perform” (180). In response to this observation, Gray advocates for a “reflective” soldier who “sees the enemy as essentially a decent man who is a human being like yourself” (158). Gray himself struggled with such a concept: describing himself during a low point in the war, he writes that “I regarded myself then, insofar as I was a soldier, as less than a man” (26). Nonetheless, throughout the war, Gray consistently returned to an insistence on his own humanity. He also insisted that distance played an important role in war, writing that “destroying is easier done with a little remove” because soldiers can “not guess what havoc their powerful weapons were occasioning” (178). Yet from a distance, for Gray, “war as a spectacle, as something to see, ought never to be underestimated” because “human beings possess as a primitive urge this love of watching” (29). He explains that the experience of flying in a plane over combat “provides opportunity for aesthetic satisfaction” (32). Further, he argues that “war yields delight in aesthetic contemplation” for many soldiers who are fascinated by the “manifestations of power” demonstrated in battle (33). For Gray this comes from “the delight in destruction slumbering in most of us” (52). Gray’s insights into war as spectacle remain true even as his understanding of distance or “remove” may not – the introduction of remote camera feed via digital screens to the operations centers results in the proliferation of terms like “kill tv” and “war porn” as soldiers gravitate to watch both near and far killing or the “havoc” of their weapons.

The rise of remote cameras in warfare capable of presenting the enemy to the soldier changes the experience of distance in battle and in many cases renders physical distance less of a factor for the soldier. This affirms Paul Virilio’s argument that technology has “obliterated distance” in society and war in deference to “instantaneous time” (*Vision Machine* 4). For Virilio “the very notion of ‘physical

proximity' is in danger of finding itself radically changed" (*Open Sky* 43). Finkel's observation that the sky above his base in Iraq felt like it was "stitched all the way up to the heavens with eyes" is but one example of the mechanism by which distance can be obliterated (32). On that base, as predicted by Virilio, the moment an enemy is seen, that enemy can be engaged – war is in part *teletopological*, or centered on the ability to "see" the enemy first and strike instantly (*Vision Machine* 6). In this environment, one's geographic location loses importance; "real space" gives way to "real time" as "instantaneity makes up for loss of geophysical distance" (*Open Sky* 9, 63). When destroying an enemy is a matter of seeing first and acting instantly, "the image prevails over the object" (*Vision Machine* 73). This effect is not limited to warfare; societal interactions with computer and television screens have similarly "obliterated distance" and proximity and created a "square horizon" in which the real and virtual become indistinguishable (*Open Sky* 45). In this chapter, the "square horizons" or screens in the operations center present images which prevail over objects but also present human enemies which the soldiers actively dehumanize through their narratives. Like screens, narratives also mediate the experience of combat. Yet when the screens display the death of their comrades, the opposite effect occurs and the soldiers struggle to reconcile what they have witnessed. Clearly the technology allows the soldier to choose what he or she will see – it presents both friend and foe in the same medium. Thus the role of narratives increases in importance in making sense of killing as bodily danger decreases.

Hugh Gusterson is likewise much interested in the effect of screens on the observer. In his book *Drone: Remote Control Warfare* (2016), he argues that technology has "respatialized" war, explaining that "drones have disarticulated the spatial relationship between weapon and warrior" and have "scrambled the relationship of distance" (45, 48). Gusterson notes that many drone pilots experience a sense of proximity with the human other, a "remote intimacy" (72). This results from "remote narrativization" in which the observers "create mental stories" and make "interpretive leaps, fill in informational gaps" in order to help "make sense of the people they watch" (66). For Gusterson, "remote narrativization" often leads to "overnarrativization" because the drone pilot lacks cultural context and thus assumes things incorrectly (66). He concludes that when drone pilots kill, it can be "more

psychologically proximate than [in the case] of other soldiers, who are physically closer to the enemy” (73). This chapter will add to Gusterson’s analysis of drone warfare by considering the aerostat blimp camera feed and asking what happens to Gusterson’s “remote intimacy” and “remote narrativization” when the soldiers observing the feed and directing lethal action are exposed to some level, if only limited, of reciprocal violence. Such an inquiry reveals that perceived risk does affect the perception of the other. Furthermore, this analysis complicates Gusterson’s concept of “overnarrativization”: even when soldiers are in the same city as the enemy they remotely observe, they still must make interpretive leaps, leaps which turn out to be just as difficult of an interpretation as the drone pilot’s from thousands of miles away.

This chapter examines several such killing events, beginning with two non-fictional excerpts from David Finkel’s *The Good Soldiers* (2009). In *The Good Soldiers*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist chronicles the 2007 deployment to Baghdad of the “Rangers,” or the 2-16 Infantry Battalion. The two killing events reiterate that, when operating within an atmosphere of violence or threat of bodily harm, the tendency is to dehumanize the enemy and allow what Vietnam veteran and author Karl Marlantes describes as “that mad primitive chimpanzee part of us” to take over (30). In these events, soldiers within the operations center direct fire onto enemy outside of the base and watch the effects of their actions through television screens, responding with elation. Later, however, they witness the death of their comrades through the same screens – and the experience obviously differs. Such distinction reveals that when a human is “in the loop” the technology itself is not what prioritizes the image over the object, as Virilio explains, but the viewer. After these close readings, I examine Phil Klay’s short story “10 Klikes South” in which an artillery crew fires on “the enemy” without a visual image of that enemy. The crew then must hypothesize the results of their action and use mathematics to create a narrative which makes sense of their actions. In this math narrative, the crew members probe their individual responsibility within the organization and ponder the human status of the enemy. Again, this analysis demonstrates the fluidity with which soldiers conceive of themselves and the enemy as “human” and how common it is for soldiers to act, in Gray’s words, as automatons or “as mechanically as the machines they operate” (102).

In order to understand killing in a counterinsurgency, one must first comprehend the effort undertaken by some counterinsurgency units and individuals to make life better for the local population and the exasperation which comes when that effort is violently rejected. Throughout *The Good Soldiers*, Finkel notes the efforts made by the soldiers of 2-16 on behalf of the locals of eastern Baghdad: efforts to increase adult literacy, build functional sewage and potable water systems, establish security, allow for democratic voting, and so on. Yet, time and again the insurgents upset progress and the locals reject the soldiers' presence and thus their (however limited) goodwill. After having worked to "win the hearts and minds" of the locals of eastern Baghdad for over a year, "everything fell apart" in March 2008 for the soldiers of 2-16 when Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, Jaish al Mahdi (JAM) began an offensive (Finkel 268). When he had first deployed, the battalion's executive officer, Major Cummings, had spoken of the "goodness" of Iraqis and the "need to act morally" because "otherwise we're not humans" (273). However, after a year in combat, watching the destruction inflicted by the insurgents not only against his unit but the local infrastructure and population, Cummings reverses course and exclaims: "stupid people. I hate 'em. Stupid fucking scumbags" (273). While it is understandable for Cummings to be frustrated, his reaction fails to acknowledge the complexities of human nature – it fails to understand why the inhabitants of eastern Baghdad rejected American aid and security. It also highlights that the enemy's actions do in part affect the way in which the soldier perceives that enemy: if the enemy acts as a soldier believes a soldier should then it is easier for the soldier to respect that enemy. The opposite also appears to be true, as the soldiers of 2-16 ask: what kind of human would reject such goodwill? Cummings determines that the answer to that question is "stupid fucking scumbags" (273). I argue that the language soldiers employ and the narratives soldiers create to make sense of war affect their experience of it – it is hard to be respectful of stupid scumbags. Once a soldier has given up respect for the enemy and/or civilians, further slippage into dehumanization is likely.

As I argued in the first chapter, the soldier deployed to a counterinsurgency is inevitably presented with a dichotomy of needing intentionally to humanize the civilian population while simultaneously facing the subconscious tendency to dehumanize the enemy. When counterinsurgency

does not go well, it often leads to the soldier hating or dehumanizing – as Major Cummings does – both civilians and insurgents (of note, Cummings does not say “stupid insurgents” but instead “stupid people”). The same thing occurs for Sergeant Sterling and Bartle in *Yellow Birds*, as previously discussed. Yet by dehumanizing the civilians, by conceiving of their humanity as different from his own, by his own reasoning Major Cummings dehumanizes himself also. This occurs for several reasons but principally emerges out of the implication that if the soldier no longer experiences empathy towards others and instead becomes “numb” or emotionless or – worse – enjoys killing, then that soldier is likewise less than fully human. This is the environment in which Finkel writes towards the end of 2-16’s deployment.

In March 2008, after several months of relative stability, the 2-16 soldiers find themselves fighting the enemy on “every convoy and at every COP. Gunfire. Mortars. RPGs. EFPs” (275).²⁸ Major Cummings and his operations center “track the battle” and direct different weapon systems and military assets to different locations to engage the enemy. The intense fighting extends for days. Finally, after having killed more than one hundred twenty-five suspected insurgents in five days, 2-16 loses two soldiers. Inside the operations center, the soldiers pan the overhead cameras to the area: “the camera on the aerostat balloon pivoted and found the war’s newest column of rising smoke, and there, beneath it, was Nate Showman’s platoon” (281). The battalion commander orders a guided bomb be dropped on the building from which the attack continues. The operations center coordinates the attack. Before long the soldiers in the operations center hear “the scream of a low jet, followed by the satisfying sight on the video monitor of an exploding black blossom, somewhere inside of which was a building” (283). Following the explosion, the battalion commander says “enjoy your seventy-two virgins” and Finkel explains that “his soldiers, virgins, too, once, hollered and clapped” (283).

Several distinctions should be made here: the first being between blowing up a building with enemy inside it and blowing up or killing a visible human. In blowing up a building, soldiers can emotionally detach themselves from the reality of killing even as they understand the results of their

²⁸ RPG: Rocket Propelled Grenade. EFP: Explosively Formed Projectile, a weapon designed to pierce armored vehicles.

actions intellectually. Secondly, the soldiers in the operation center are directing the attack, not individually pulling a trigger. Nonetheless, the soldiers in the operation center are an essential part of this event – without them the bombing run could not have been coordinated. In many ways, they act as both participants and spectators. Indeed, Finkel’s own journalistic dissociation is called into question in that he uses the phrase “the satisfying sight” which, at the very least, draws him into a form of limited participation in the event by hinting that he, too, enjoys what he observes aesthetically and perhaps even ethically. The explosion is a blossom – it is beautiful. Yet it is a black blossom – it is the visible display of justice and death. Here one must recall Gray’s insistence that “human beings possess as a primitive urge this love of watching” and that there exists a “delight in destruction slumbering in most of us” (29, 52). In this, Gray presents a very different view of the human than Grossman does. Grossman’s argument that humans are innately resistant to killing one another seems overly optimistic in light of the soldiers’ satisfaction, hollering and clapping at the visible destruction of others. Even Finkel seems to find satisfaction in the act, although as he acknowledges the shared humanity of those being sent to “enjoy” virgins and the soldiers who themselves were once virgins also. Perhaps one could argue that for the soldiers this is satisfaction in the aesthetic display of power, not killing in particular. Such an argument is undone by the next killing event, in which a human is involved, not a building.

The following month, the soldiers in the operation center continue to track the battle as the battalion prepares to redeploy to the U.S. The attacks continue, even though Muqtada al-Sadr has reinstated a cease-fire. The soldiers monitor unit movements via the aerostat blimp and other cameras:

At one point, in the operations center, where the movements were being coordinated, several soldiers watched incredulously on a video monitor as an Iraqi with an AK-47 jumped out from behind a building and began firing Rambo-style on a convoy. “Die, monkey, die!” Brent Cummings hollered for some reason, and the others began hollering it, too, laughing and chanting right up until the moment an Apache helicopter swooped in and blasted the monkey to smithereens, at which point they broke into cheers. (295)

Here Cummings' view of Iraqis has entirely transformed. In 2007, at the beginning of the deployment, he insisted it was imperative to view the Iraqis as good people, because if the soldiers could not then they would not be human either. During the intense fighting of March 2008, that image of Iraqis regressed to "stupid people" or "scumbags" which occupy a lower human status (273). In the final days of the deployment, quoted above, however, Cummings animalizes this particular Iraqi into a "monkey," which is to say he creates an image of an entirely inhuman being (295). He no longer sees any human likeness in the other. This is despite the fact that the image of the enemy displayed in the operations center is obviously clear enough to determine that this particular enemy is firing "Rambo-style" which means that the enemy is individuated, is more than a "silhouette" and instead is a distinct being presenting a distinct image. So this is active dehumanization. This is a choice made after months of combat, after months of trying to do "good" but not meeting with success. It is a choice influenced by the progression of language from "good" to "stupid" and "scumbags" to finally "monkeys."

Yet in dehumanizing the Iraqi, Cummings and the other soldiers in the operations center – true to Cummings' warning – likewise transform themselves. Remembering Gray's insistence that humans possess as a "primitive urge" a "love of watching," it is interesting that Finkel presents these soldiers as primate-like beings who create a jungle-like cacophony of noises by "hollering," "laughing," and "chanting" out loud. Ironically, Karl Marlantes uses the same metaphor when he warns that the "killer" inside of humans is contained in "that mad chimpanzee part of us" (30). After Cummings hollers "die, monkey, die" the others begin to holler and chant "die, monkey, die" as well as they wait for the inevitable, reminding us that one synonym for "imitate" is "to ape." Having imagined the enemy as a monkey, the soldiers too are presented as chimpanzee-like. This metaphorical transformation of the soldiers into also less-than-human results in their experience not of empathy for the insurgent but of elation. These soldiers have moved away from an emotional detachment which avoids the enemy's status as human and into an active dehumanization of the enemy which allows them to enjoy the killing spectacle. This presents an essential problem in all dehumanization of the enemy: most "humans" would feel empathy for an actual monkey being "blasted to smithereens," but these soldiers do not. Their

capacity to experience a full range of human emotions is limited by the construct they create of the enemy and thereby also of themselves – Finkel’s language insists that dehumanization cuts both ways. What Finkel portrays as a primitive or primal exuberance crescendos at the death of the insurgent, shown to the operations center by the screens as only a caricature – “Rambo” – blasted “to smithereens.”

Yet the screens are not what create this affect in the soldiers. The soldiers themselves create the narrative in order to make sense of what they see. This is powerfully demonstrated by Finkel within the same paragraph as he describes the death of Americans portrayed on the same screens:

At another point, they were monitoring a route-clearance team from another battalion that was moving up Predators toward some 2-16 soldiers at an abandoned Iraqi checkpoint.

All of a sudden the screen went black, and when it cleared, the lead vehicle was curving off the road and accelerating through a field, the result of an EFP explosion that had decapitated the driver but left his foot in place on the gas pedal. All night long,

Cummings continued to see that vehicle curving ever so gracefully into the field. (295)

Here, as in the bombing of the building, the human is not presented by the screen. Instead, the soldiers are watching vehicles in a route-clearance convoy moving along the road known as “Predators” when “all of a sudden the screen went black” (295). Finkel employs similar language in describing the previous bombing of the building: an “exploding black blossom, somewhere inside of which was a building” (283). Similarly, only after the blackness of the explosion clears can the vehicles be seen again. Rather than elation, Finkel’s language reflects grief. Finkel writes that Cummings will continue to see that vehicle “curving ever so gracefully” all night long (295). By evoking “grace” Finkel emphasizes the spiritual nature of this loss – the Christian concept of salvation by grace cannot be missed. In contrast to the bomb which delivered the “black blossom” of beautiful justice, this explosion results in a graceful deliverance. This attempt to aestheticize loss reveals that the technology is not what determines the emotional response to killing or how the soldier will view the other. To Cummings, the unseen comrade is more human than the seen enemy. Even though the same screens present similar explosions, the experience is entirely different. In the case of the route clearance platoon, the object prevails over the image.

I want to be clear that I am not advocating that soldiers view the death of an enemy and a comrade equally. Clearly a soldier will and must be more affected by the death of a comrade. Nor am I proposing that in either of these scenarios there was not a moral imperative or justification to kill the enemy. However, I am advocating that soldiers must strive to view the humans themselves as humans. By that I do not mean identical humans, but I do insist we should respect our enemy as human beings, however different we are. Not doing so creates room for unethical action in the short term and presents long-term problems for the soldier's recovery from combat. It saddles the soldier with the same predicament as Marlantes 40 years after Vietnam: "I now think of what was 'the enemy' as human beings" (41). He proposes that the "ideal response to killing in war should be [...] sadness mingled with respect" (42). Respecting the enemy is different than caring about the enemy in the same way as one cares about his or her comrades. Respecting the enemy helps ensure ethical conduct in war. Finkel makes this point clearly through his subtle use of language. The destruction of the building is "satisfying"; the chant "die, monkey, die" is troubling; and the vehicle curves "ever so gracefully," implying the intimacy and sadness in the death of a comrade and the terrible irony of that moment of aesthetic beauty. Still, Finkel is adamant that these are *good* soldiers. One never gets the sense that he is judging the soldiers; in fact his affinity for the soldiers is obvious. So, for the soldier and leader preparing for war, the task is to understand the tendency to dehumanize the enemy and resist it. War is full of enough "inhumane" and terrible events without the added burden of deliberately making it more "inhuman" by actively dehumanizing oneself and the enemy. Again, I agree with Jonathan Shay that war is inherently traumatic, but does not inherently "betray what's right" and result in moral injury (20). In these "operations center" killing events, it is not the actual killing which betrays what's right, but the response to and representation of it. The same killing could have been done without dehumanizing and mocking the enemy.

I will now shift away from the digital screens of the operations center while remaining "on base" to explore Phil Klay's short story "Ten Kliks South." In the story, told through first-person narration, an artillery crew discusses the results of its first combat mission. The story raises the same issues of whether or not the soldiers and enemy are portrayed as human with the added complexity that this time the enemy

is not even visible. The enemy is only a “target description” - something to be imagined. Here the soldiers are situated in what Gray describes as the inability to “guess what havoc their powerful weapons were occasioning” (178). Without a visible enemy or visible effects of their artillery rounds, the soldiers must construct a narrative to make sense of their actions. In so doing, the soldiers probe their own individuality and responsibility within the crew’s collective action. After collectively creating a math narrative for their actions, the narrator goes to the morgue in search of the enemies’ bodies, which is to say he attempts to restore the humanity of the enemy to the abstract event (and narrative) of killing. In so doing, he reasserts his own humanity.

In “Ten Kliks South” the human enemy never appears; the enemy is, for the artillerymen in the story, only a “target” consisting of a “quadrant and deflection” given to Gun Six by the Fire Direction Center, or FDC (Klay 277). While the target is a definite geographic coordinate, “the enemy” remains abstract in that the artillerymen do not know how many insurgents they engage or kill. The artillerymen simply “send” destructive power, killing power, to a point in space. Thus enemy never appears as human, never presents a face or even a bodily form to the artillerymen. The gun crew is told that it fired upon a “platoon-sized element” but one of the members of Gun Six, Bolander, reminds his crewmates that “AQI don’t have platoons” (272).²⁹ The only way the nine Marines even know that they in fact hit their target, or killed any enemy, is that “the lieutenant told us so” (271). For the artillerymen, “the enemy” remains an abstract idea conceivable only by the inappropriate – at least according to Bolander – description “platoon-sized element.”

Because of this ambiguity, the Marines of Gun Six attempt to answer “how many” – or create a narrative for the results of their actions – through mathematics. Killing is for them, in fact, a matter of calculations – degrees of elevation and deflection, number of charges, number of rounds, properly aligned aiming poles and precisely calculated routines executed by a trained crew to achieve an accurate result. So to calculate how many insurgents they have killed, the crew does the math. The narrator assumes

²⁹ AQI: al Qaeda in Iraq

“platoon-sized” means forty insurgents and does simple division from that figure: “six guns, so divide and you got, six, I don’t know, six point six people per gun” (272). Bolander, despite his assertion that AQI does not have platoons, agrees: “we killed exactly 6.6 people” (272). Their crewmate Sanchez, however, goes one step further: “divide it by nine Marines on the gun, and you, personally, you’ve killed zero point seven something people today. That’s like a torso and a head. Or maybe a torso and a leg” (272). Sergeant Deetz, their leader, tells the artillerymen “we definitely got more [...] we’re the best shots in the battery” (273). Being the best shot in the battery would change the equation somewhat – their gun, Gun Six, would be weighted more heavily in the computations – but nonetheless, for the crew, this killing event remains a matter of calculations.

In this fascinating discussion of tallying unseen dead bodies, the Marines must imagine the results of their actions through such calculations because they cannot experience them firsthand – there is no encounter with the human other. This is inherently a form of creating narrative, only it is different than the forms of narratives discussed in the first chapter in that this constructed narrative is purely conjecture and involves group responsibility. Each Marine is responsible for “a torso and a head. *Or maybe* a torso and a leg” (emphasis mine, 272). In this math-narrative “the enemy” is only the sum of a “platoon-size” collection of body parts. As such, this enemy is divisible beyond the whole units of individual humans: the gun crew has killed “6.6 people” which equates to each Marine having killed “zero point seven something” enemy (272). Incredibly, the Marines create an absurdly precise narrative out of total ambiguity. In order to do this, the Marines must conceive of the human enemy as a divisible integer which may be killed in parts, not as a whole, although that is certainly not true: you can blow off an arm, but that does not necessarily kill the person. The implication is that human recognition demands a base level of imprecision which the artillerymen exceed through mathematics.

Not all the Marines agree with the concept that the actions of the whole should be equally dispersed among each of the individuals. The question of individual responsibility becomes a point of disagreement. Jewett in particular complicates the concept that each of them has killed “zero point seven something people” by stating that he doesn’t *feel* like I killed anybody. I think I’d know if I killed

somebody” (emphasis original, 273). Voorstadt likewise claims different responsibility for himself when he tells Jewett that “I’m the one that pulled the lanyard [...] I fired the thing. You just loaded it” (274). To insist on individual responsibility in this scenario is to insist on one’s own individual humanity by resisting absorption into the collective. Voorstadt does this to claim credit for himself. Yet the issues of responsibility and credit are complicated further in that five other gun crews fired and the Marines of Gun Six cannot be entirely certain that the enemy was not already dead by the time their first round landed on target. Jewett again asks the contrarian question about the other guns in the battery and if “their rounds could have hit first. Maybe everybody was already dead” (273). Pressing the issue of responsibility further, the crew then debates what crimes each person would be charged with had they “used a howitzer to kill somebody back in the States” and conclude that it would be murder. Yet the narrator asks: “but for each of us? In what degree? [...] If I loaded an M16 and handed it to Voorstadt and he shot somebody, I wouldn’t say I’d killed anyone” (274). He explicitly states that his actions as a member of the crew would not constitute murder, and that if he is guilty of murder, then so are the ammunition handlers at the ammunition supply point.

Sergeant Deetz, their leader, disagrees, asking sarcastically: “why not the factory workers who made the ammo” (274).³⁰ Instead, Deetz insists that, as a crew, the members act in unison to form a machine-like organization. Deetz denies individuality to the crewmembers, saying that “we’re Gun Six. We’re responsible for that gun. We just killed some bad guys. With our gun. All of us” (275). He does not allow the Marines to distinguish among their individual actions and thus to distinguish individual responsibility. Furthermore, he instrumentalizes all of the Marines by conceiving of them as parts of the cannon. Within his math narrative, the Marines are not only a crew, but they also equate to the gun itself. In his construct, the Marines are a collective in which the individual disappears into a role. Gun Six is a machine, and in Deetz’s proclamation it is indivisible, and the responsibility for its actions rests with the collective. If each Marine does not perform his function perfectly, then the system fails. Thus the narrator

³⁰ Deetz reminds us that nations and societies go to war, not just armies. Klay makes this point more emphatically in his New York Times essay “After War, a Failure of Imagination.”

explains that “putting those rounds downrange takes nine men moving in perfect unison. It takes an FDC, and a good spotter, and math and physics and art and skill and experience” (279). He furthermore describes the crew’s actions matter-of-factly, with terse prose: “we got round and time and Jackson had gotten powder and we moved smooth, like we trained to” (277). Again, as in the previous chapter, training creates machine-like “smoothness” or performance from the Marines: “I had trained to load those rounds. Trained so much I had scars on my hands” (277). With so much movement in unison and training, Deetz’s argument against individual responsibility seems natural – the cannon cannot be fired without a crew moving in “unison,” therefore no individual is more or less responsible than another.

The Marines’ debate about individual responsibility within the crew evokes and problematizes Grossman’s notion of group absolution during killing. This killing event, for Grossman, constitutes “maximum range” killing, and the Marines should be “protected by the [...] powerful combination of group absolution, mechanical distance, and, most pertinent [...], physical distance” (*On Killing* 108). The individuals on the crew, according to Grossman, should experience both a sense of accountability and anonymity (*On Killing* 150). Sergeant Deetz argues this point, emphasizing over and over again for a “we” which is not only a collective (a crew) but also an inanimate object (Gun Six). This, too, is how the Marines arrived at “zero point seven something” enemies apiece. Yet when the Marines begin discussing what crimes they individually would be charged with in the U.S., the text challenges the notion that group absolution works cleanly. The narrator creates a hypothetical parallel narrative – what if he loaded a gun and gave it to Voorstadt to kill someone? *That* would not be murder. Likewise, when Jewett argues that he does not feel like he has killed anyone, it is less an argument of group absolution than a matter of individuation within the group: Voorstadt perhaps has killed someone, but he, Jewett, has not. In the narrator, Jewett and Voorstadt’s construct, there is not anonymity but varying degrees of individual action and therefore different amounts of responsibility. Group absolution does not occur.

Of importance to this study, when the narrator and Jewett deny anonymity and insist on their own limited participation, they do so to distance themselves intellectually from the responsibility of killing. Furthermore, the crew members’ reworking of the killing event into a question of crime deflects the

ethical issue of responsibility into a legal issue of lawbreaking. Jewett explains that he does not feel like he killed anybody – and indeed the crew’s conversation reveals that the event was devoid of emotional intimacy with the enemy for all the crew members, not just him. They performed, machine-like, the execution of their duties. Without a presented enemy and given the calculated and routinized nature of artillery firing, a certain amount of emotional detachment seems unavoidable. Yet the crew members intellectually still understand that their collective actions resulted in death – thus the narrator and Jewett’s effort towards a rationalization that their particular actions did not directly result in killing. Already emotionally distanced from the responsibility of killing, they attempt to create intellectual distance as well through a constructed narrative which absolves them of responsibility for killing any enemy. This constructed narrative is not group absolution founded on anonymity but rather self-absolution centered on the individual’s limited role in the action. Whereas Voorstadt seeks credit, the narrator and Jewett seek pardons.

Yet the narrator is uncomfortable with this abstract view of the enemy; he searches for a different narrative. Hypothetically calculating the number of unseen dead is not sufficient for him – the event seems unreal. He leaves his crew in order to sort through the day’s events on his own. First, he returns to his crew’s howitzer. There, recalling the events of that morning, “it didn’t seem as though any of it could have happened” (280) because

there’s no indication here of what happened, though I know ten kliks south of us is a cratered area riddled with shrapnel and ruined buildings, burned-out vehicles and twisted corpses. The bodies. Sergeant Deetz had seen them on his first deployment, during the initial invasion. None of the rest of us have.

I turn sharply away from the gun line. It’s too pristine. And maybe this is the wrong way to think about it. Somewhere, there’s a corpse lying out, bleaching in the sun. Before it was a corpse, it was a man who lived and breathed and maybe murdered and maybe tortured, the kind of man I’d always wanted to kill. Whatever the case, a man definitely dead. (280)

The “pristine” gun line affronts the narrator’s sensibility that someone – perhaps a great many somebodies – has been killed, and thus there should be some “indication” of it. The cleanliness, the unchanged state of the cannons offends and repulses the narrator who is seeking to discover the human toll of his actions: he turns sharply away from the gun line. He is no longer “Gun Six.” What he seeks, he cannot find there. Instead, he must imagine. The narrator imagines not just the bodies but a singular corpse and the “man” who lived “before it was a corpse.” This created narrative is an attempt to remove the mathematics and instead to restore the humanity of both the enemy and himself. Importantly, in creating this image of the enemy, the narrator makes several “interpretive leaps.” This is an even more remote form of “narrativization” than that of the drone pilots Gusterson describes. It is in effect, a blind leap. The man maybe murdered and maybe tortured, in which case he would be the “kind of man I’d always wanted to kill” (280). Yet the narrator cannot know – his interpretive leap is purely a guess which he must fit within his own narrative to make sense of the event. He just as easily might have killed some other “kind of man.”

His crew and leadership rebuff him for this line of thought when he returns, insisting that their job is to provide bodies, not care about the humans associated with them. Back with his crew, the narrator asks Sergeant Deetz “don’t you think, maybe, we should have a patrol out, to see if there were any survivors?” (281). Deetz and Voorstadt ridicule him: “there weren’t any survivors” (281). The narrator, however, persists: “what about the bodies? Doesn’t somebody have to clean up the bodies?” (281). Sergeant Deetz again rebukes him: “I’m an artilleryman. We *provide* the bodies. We don’t clean ’em up” (emphasis original, 282). The conversation ends:

“And what are you Lance Corporal?”

“An artilleryman, Sergeant.”

“And what do you do?”

“Provide the bodies, Sergeant.”

“You’re goddamn right, killer. You’re goddamn right.” (282)

“Providing a body” is essentially a way of thinking about killing which avoids the living status of the enemy: it conceives of killing as a production or service rather than destruction. By avoiding the once-alive enemy and instead focusing on the dead bodies, Sergeant Deetz demonstrates how to dissociate oneself from the reality of killing, which is to take life, or make dead. “Providing a body” allows for a mental picture of something which was already or perhaps was always dead because it elides the alive status of the human body altogether. This narrative is the opposite approach to the one attempted by the narrator at the gun line when he seeks to imagine the “man” before it is a “corpse.” This narrative aims to suppress the emotions of killing – to remain numb or stoic in the face of battle: to simply provide bodies is to perform a function without feeling. Searching for survivors and bodies risks undoing this abstraction; it is therefore someone else’s job.

Yet that is exactly what the narrator does. Instead of an abstract narrative, the narrator searches for a concrete narrative, one with a human face: he goes to the morgue in search of the bodies. There, he is disappointed to learn that insurgent bodies are not brought to the American base. While talking to the Mortuary Affairs “gunny,” the narrator confides that “I just never killed anybody before” (284).³¹ Despite previously arguing that he would not be charged with murder for loading a weapon, the narrator has accepted responsibility for his actions and is attempting to work through his emotions. Importantly, I would add, in so doing he reasserts his own humanity. He sorts through his emotions with “gunny” because his own crew and leadership rejected his attempts to do the same with them. As a result, he is not just a non-individuated member of a crew who accepts the math-narrative of group absolution but rather an individual who resists total transformation into a machine-like being by maintaining or reasserting his own capacity to feel and empathize.

Here it is important to note the opportunity missed by Sergeant Deetz to facilitate an open and mature discussion within his crew – to allow emotions and affect back into the equation. The Army now calls this failed collective discussion “Battlemind Debriefing” which has been clinically shown to reduce

³¹ Gunny is short for the Marine Corps rank of Gunnery Sergeant, the rank above Staff Sergeant.

post-traumatic stress symptoms in soldiers when properly conducted (Love 15). Previously, when the crew spoke flippantly about “how many” they may have killed and their individual responsibility, Sergeant Deetz took that as an opportunity to reiterate their unit cohesiveness. However, here, when the narrator approaches Sergeant Deetz this second time, Sergeant Deetz is in a position to lead the more serious discussion about how his soldiers are responding to having killed. In fact, when the narrator earlier goes to the gun line and imagines the results of his actions he thinks of the bodies and then immediately of Sergeant Deetz: “The bodies. Sergeant Deetz had seen them on his first deployment, during the initial invasion. None of the rest of us have” (280). Fittingly, then, the narrator tries to make sense of things by approaching his experienced leader – but, unfortunately, that effort is stymied and his effort to voice his emotions is cut off. Sergeant Deetz chooses bravado instead. For all the characters except Sergeant Deetz, this is their first experience with killing in combat: it is not an overestimation to infer that the characters are looking to Sergeant Deetz for an example of how to respond. Klay presents this important chance to integrate feelings with action as a missed opportunity which sends the narrator on a long, unresolved journey through the base, back to the site of the incident and ultimately to the morgue. Taken symbolically, this short physical journey around the base is but a small one compared to the much longer psychological journey awaiting the narrator if he cannot make sense of his experience.

After the exchange with “gunny,” the story ends with the narrator remembering corpsmen carrying an American flag-covered stretcher. In that instance, all the Marines in the area stood in rigid silence and saluted as the corpsmen passed: “there was no sound or movement except for the slow steps of the Corpsmen and the steady progress of the corpse” (287). The narrator imagines Marines standing in similar silence as the corpse travels through Kuwait and then Germany and finally to Dover Air Force Base. The juxtaposition of the total disregard for the enemies’ bodies which he and his crew have just created and the paramount respect for their own dead could not be more clearly made. It is the same paradox highlighted in *Yellow Birds*, in which Sergeant Sterling desecrates insurgent bodies after battle and Bartle empties magazines of bullets into another dead insurgent. Yet when they discover the body of Murph, they choose not to recover it, because it has been desecrated by the insurgents. Better to discard

the body into the Tigris, they determine, than for Murph's mother to see his mangled body and disfigured face. They commit this war crime out of concern for Murph's mother, to keep her from "in a moment of weakness [turning] up the lid of the casket and seeing her son, Daniel Murphy, seeing what had been done to him" (207). Their decision demonstrates their diminished capacity for moral reasoning, or moral inversion, which denies Murph's body the same respectful journey through Kuwait and Germany to Dover (207).

Jess Goodell writes extensively about caring for American bodies in her compelling 2011 memoir *Shade It Black*. Having spent a deployment as a mortuary affairs specialist, she explains how hard she and her platoon worked to align body parts with their proper bodies (108). Contrary to Sterling and Bartle's decision, she writes that "we wanted to send every piece home" no matter how disfigured (52). To her, the body parts were not indiscriminate heads and torsos, but essential parts of the humanity of the fallen. On more than one occasion, she details how she and others "tried to sort out and organize the body parts and bits and pieces into coherent wholes" (108). Further, she explains that she and others avoided looking at the faces and eyes of the dead because "our minds would play tricks on us when we looked at the faces" (71). To overcome this, they would cover the face "so we didn't have to see the eyes" (71). Here one might remember Levinas' ethics of the face-to-face encounter with the other, which demands responsibility in the self. In covering the face, Goodell and her comrades might symbolically and literally have been attempting to refrain from taking on the responsibility of the death and absorption of the loss of another Marine. I take from Goodell's insistence on the importance of bodies (and particularly faces) and both Powers' and Klay's similar portrayal of respect given by soldiers to corpses en route to Dover Air Force Base that when the narrator of "Ten Klikes South" goes to the morgue in hopes of seeing the bodies of the dead insurgents, it is an effort to see or feel the humanity of those he has participated in killing. In seeking the face of the other, he is seeking to feel the responsibility for the other's death. It is an effort to piece back together the torso, head, and leg into a whole human and to thereby piece himself back together in the process. While unconventional, it is a much better approach than not reflecting on one's actions at all.

Comparing these two very different forms of killing from similar bases reveals a distinction between the narrator of “Ten Kliks South” and the soldiers in the operations center in *The Good Soldiers*: that of perceived risk. In *The Good Soldiers*, as I have already discussed, the soldiers of 2-16 perceive risk to self and their comrades and identify that risk to be located in the individuals they kill: insurgents in a building firing at US soldiers and an insurgent firing “Rambo-style” at a convoy. Not only is their base consistently being attacked, but the insurgents they kill are actively attacking other soldiers. Not so for the narrator in “Ten Kliks South.” Talking with Jewett about their first killing experience, the narrator asks what he is supposed to tell his new wife about the day’s events, explaining that “she thinks I’m a badass. She thinks I’m in danger” (276). Jewett reminds him that “we get mortared from time to time” but the narrator only responds by giving Jewett “a flat look” (276). Clearly, while he perceives some risk, the narrator does not perceive the same kind of risk to himself as the soldiers of 2-16. Just as importantly, he does not associate the “target” with an immediate risk to others in the same way the soldiers in the operations center view the enemy they kill: this enemy only “might have” been a murderer or torturer. This difference, I argue, is a factor in the narrator’s ability to conceive of the enemy as human even as he cannot see that enemy. Conversely, the atmosphere of continual violence surrounding the soldiers in the operations center acts as an obstacle to viewing the enemy as human, even though that enemy is presented to them via television screens.

What this chapter reinforces is that the perceived threat of the other – to either the soldier or his/her comrades – affects the encounter with that other and the decision to humanize or dehumanize. In both texts, technology affects the encounter with or presentation of the enemy, yet the soldiers themselves determine how to respond to that information. These texts likewise demonstrate again that physical distance is not directly correlated to the difficulty or ease of killing: “Ten Kliks South” is so titled precisely because “the enemy” is ten kilometers to the south, yet its narrator is the one who sorts through the emotions of killing while the soldiers in the operations center celebrate death at an unknown, though conceivably similar, distance portrayed on television screens. Finally, both of these texts portray soldiers within complex crews and organizations, but group absolution only occurs when those soldiers choose not

to reflect as individuals on their actions or to view their actions as affecting individuals or persons.

Recalling that Brian Turner's speakers humanize the women they observe while eliding the humanity of the enemy who fires the round at him in "Here, Bullet," we begin to see the extension of two trends across chapters: first, that one is much more likely to intentionally humanize the other when that other does not present perceived direct threats, and, second, that passive dehumanization in the moment of killing can be just that – a momentary thing. However, *Yellow Birds*, *The Good Soldiers*, "Ten Kliks South," and "After Action Report" all demonstrate the ethical trap of intentionally dehumanizing both the self and the enemy. Whereas Sergeant Sterling and Bartle in *Yellow Birds* become incapable of moral reasoning and commit war crimes as a result, similar movement away from ethical conduct occurs in *The Good Soldiers* as the narrative for conceiving of Iraqis degrades from "good" to "scumbags" and finally to "monkey." Soldiers and leaders preparing for war must confront the similarity between Bartle's choice of "delight" as the adjective to describe his emotions upon killing on his redeployment questionnaire and the euphoria within the operations center portrayed by Finkel when the "monkey" is "blasted to smithereens." While I cannot say whether or not some movement towards passive dehumanization of the soldier or the enemy in the moment of killing is inherent in killing, I do know that intentional, active dehumanization is not necessary. It is in fact doubly harmful both to the conduct of war and for the soldier's recovery from it as it adds to the trauma of war an increased possibility for moral injury.

What I have advocated across two chapters now is that, for the soldier, attempting to hold an image of him or herself and the enemy as similarly human is an essential part of successfully and ethically conducting a counterinsurgency. Such a mindset respects the enemy. It is the best way for the soldier to approach killing in that it resists the soldier's total transformation into a machine-like or numb being for the duration of the war. It is a way of countering the description Gray gives of most soldiers at war "as automatons, behaving almost as mechanically as the machines they operate" (102). Such soldiers experience an "absence of feeling" because "machines cannot respond; they can only perform" (180). Gray himself experienced low points, but was able, through reflection, to overcome them and restore his capacity for feelings and observation. That the artillery crew of Gun Six in "Ten Kliks South" performs

cohesively and smoothly because it had trained to do so, should be an encouragement for soldiers and leaders preparing for combat. This is an appropriate “machine-likeness” resulting from proper military training. Yet “Ten Kliks South” is more concerned with how one should respond after the fact, not in the actual moment of killing. The narrator of “Ten Kliks South” responds and also performs his function at war. He does not remain an automaton. While I don’t advocate that soldiers go searching through morgues, the urge to reflect on one’s actions and to make sense of them in a way that respects oneself and the other is precisely what I think is needed in today’s soldier.

I conclude with veteran author Karl Marlantes’ description of a killing event in Vietnam, when he similarly dehumanized the enemy upon whom he was directing napalm fire as “Crispy Critters” (40). He writes: “the advancing enemy was no longer human. I didn’t kill people, sons, brothers, fathers. I killed ‘Crispy Critters.’ It could have been krauts, nips, hunks, boche, gooks, infidels, towel heads, imperialist pigs, yankee pigs ...” (40). In reflecting on his actions, he concludes that he would do the same thing again if placed in that situation because the Vietcong were attacking American soldiers, but “I’d hope that I’d remember to respect my enemy’s pain and agony” (42). The impetus for this study is the desire to help future soldiers anticipate such moments, that they might not look back in retrospect and wish they had respected their enemy’s agony instead of mocked it. While the insurgent shooting at the convoy no doubt was justifiably killed, chanting in anticipation of and celebrating his death in an operations center will likely present the same problems for the soldiers Finkel observed as Marlantes experienced for decades after Vietnam. Respecting the enemy and oneself requires that different metaphors and narratives be employed to reinforce that one should sort through emotions and make sense of one’s actions. Such narratives require that leaders do a better job than Sergeant Deetz at facilitating that communal conversation.

The military leaders in this chapter – Sergeant Deetz, Major Cummings, and the battalion commander of 2-16 – are portrayed as having a firm grasp on building or insisting upon unit cohesion yet also as failing to intentionally address underlying psychological and representational issues in their

soldiers and themselves.³² Deetz insists that each of the individuals is a member of the crew, that they are all “Gun Six.” He refuses to allow any one individual to feel responsible for the actions of the whole. In this, he does what he should by reinforcing to his soldiers that they are part of a team. Yet Sergeant Deetz fails to engage in dialogue with his subordinates after this traumatic event, even when those subordinates reach out to him for counsel. Instead, he relies on bravado and detachment to avoid an uncomfortable conversation. So “Gun Six” is a team, but not one that encourages communication. Similarly, the atmosphere within the operations center is certainly united. Yet Finkel chronicles the slowly changing attitude towards Iraqis of Cummings and the battalion commander in *The Good Soldiers*. It is not that they intend to hate Iraqis; to the contrary Cummings at first insists that they are “good people.” Yet with time and frustration, they do develop a hatred. Left unchecked, Finkel portrays that hatred or indifference as directly linked to the two instances in which the battalion commander and Cummings mock those they kill. Unfortunately, these officers are leaders and they say these things publicly. By every indication, as Finkel portrays these men, they are good leaders and “good soldiers.” Yet in these instances, their soldiers mimic them, and conform to their examples. One cannot help but wonder if those soldiers and officers could go back and participate in these events again if they would not, like Marlantes with his “Crispy Critters,” wish to “respect [their] enemy’s pain and agony” (42). That these leaders are not presented overtly negatively (like Sergeant Sterling in *Yellow Birds*) offers a stark warning to military leaders: the tendency to dehumanize the enemy and oneself is pervasive even in those who set out to see others as “good.” It may well be the default setting of the soldier. To resist this, to be reflective warriors, leaders must be intentional about the narratives they create and tolerate in their units.

³² Sebastian Junger has written an excellent book on the importance of community and cohesion in war: *Tribe: on Homecoming and Belonging* (2016).

CHAPTER 3 NO PERCEIVED THREAT TO SELF

The previous two chapters examine killing events in which the soldiers involved perceive a risk of bodily harm against themselves, beginning with high risk and then looking at instances of less risk. In those chapters, I argue that the perceived threat from an enemy to oneself and others affects the soldier's encounter with that enemy. I note that conceptualizing the enemy during a counterinsurgency is particularly difficult because that enemy can be indistinguishable from civilians, and that constructed narratives perform an important role in that process. In this chapter I turn to a new experience in the history of warfare: that of no perceived risk to the soldier during a killing event. In these instances, the soldier is physically located outside of the traditional "combat zone" yet participates in combat through Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPAs), more commonly referred to as drones.³³ While other forms of remote combat exist, drone warfare has particularly captured public imagination and debate. This is in part because there is no physical risk to the drone-operating soldier, so he or she is presumed to be safely and thus mechanically killing others without cost or emotion, and because there are serious concerns about how to distinguish enemy from civilian without being physically present.

Again, in this project, I am primarily interested in the soldier's experience of war; this chapter will not engage with the larger debates surrounding the existence or effectiveness of drone warfare. However, I do note that, beyond the major concerns raised about civilian casualties, much of the moral and ethical criticism of drone warfare centers on the lack of risk to the soldier: the non-reciprocal nature of remotely inflicted violence. Drone warfare is too much like a video game, critics observe; it makes killing "too easy" and is perpetrated by "cowards." The military itself expressed a similar sentiment in 2013 when it overturned its decision to create a Distinguished Warfare Medal for soldiers who made

³³ "Combat zone" is one of the terms which, I argue, in a respatialized war, or network-centric war, is rapidly losing meaning.

“extraordinary achievements [...] that do not involve valor or physical risk” (Shanker). The medal was nixed only two months after it was introduced in part because of “outraged reactions among many military veterans” (Gusterson 53). Yet the literature offers a different perspective than this stereotype of an emotionally-detached and unaffected drone pilot. In this chapter I ask, “what is the experience of the soldier involved in drone warfare and how is it portrayed in film?” Such a line of inquiry reveals just how easily the humanity of the soldiers engaged in this new kind of warfare is forgotten in the debates surrounding the use of drones in war. It also raises the question of what distinguishes a warrior: contribution to military effectiveness or physical bravery in the face of danger?

Not surprisingly, then, the two films I discuss in this chapter engage this stereotype of a detached and inhuman soldier killing from afar, but both do so only to challenge that image. Instead, the films offer emotional portrayals of drone pilots and sensor operators, who watch safely and yet intimately as they kill from thousands of miles away.³⁴ The films clearly show that the soldiers are troubled by their participation in killing. I argue these portrayals, supported by Air Force studies, upend Grossman’s distance and resistance to killing analysis and instead demand a new way of conceiving of the experience of killing. In its place, I continue to argue that one’s perception of the self and the other as human or sub/inhuman is the far more influential factor, which is consistent with the previous two chapters. Yet, in this chapter, because there is no risk to the soldiers, the soldiers are always confronted by the idea of their own “cowardliness.” Soldiers perceive cowards to be dishonorable and thus less than the military ideal, so the soldiers in this chapter are always at risk of perceiving themselves as being or becoming lesser humans. Further, the lack of risk can complicate the soldiers’ ability to create narratives about their killing experiences which validate their actions. So I continue to argue that perceived risk is an instrumental part of the soldier’s experience of killing, and that narratives continue to play an essential role in making sense of killing in combat, even when mediated by screens and remotely-controlled technology.

³⁴ The pilot flies the Remotely Piloted Aircraft, the sensor operator controls the “sensor” or camera and other aiming and detection equipment.

It is important to note, too, that killing by remote control will increasingly be a part of the future of warfare.³⁵ In his 2009 book *Wired for War: the Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, P. W. Singer chronicles the rise of robotics in the military, including drones. Singer calculates that in 2008 there were 5,331 drones in the US military, but claims that in future conflicts there will be “tens of thousands” of drones (37). He concludes that “man’s monopoly of warfare is being broken. We are entering the era of robots at war” (41). Singer notes that this is especially true of asymmetric war in which exists “a huge intellectual battle [...] between US technology and the insurgents” to develop a technological upper hand (218). Further, in January 2017, Islamic State fighters “crossed a threshold” and used small aerial drones not only to kill Iraqi Army soldiers, but also to film the attack (Warrick). Separately, in *Winning the War on War* (2011), Joshua Goldstein argues that small, asymmetric wars will be the most common wars of the future (6). So, while this chapter may seem limited in scope and application, it may well be the most forward-looking of the three. The way the world – not just the US – wages war is changing; our understanding of war as a “human endeavor” ought to be changing too.

Based on Dave Grossman’s method of thinking about killing, drone warfare should be the least traumatic and least difficult form of killing for the soldier. Because 168 people are required to operate a single drone in the air and the killing happens at great distance, no one person *should* feel individually responsible (Gusterson 30). The military’s reaction to the introduction of an award for drone operators certainly echoes this line of thinking. I have argued in previous chapters and continue to argue in this chapter that neither of Grossman’s claims about distance and group absolution is actually true. This is in part due to technology, but more importantly reflects the fact that perceived risk and the soldier’s mental narrative regarding his or her humanity and the humanity of the enemy are far more influential than physical proximity in the experience of killing in combat. Yet, because we have wrongly correlated physical proximity and the psychological trauma and/or moral injury associated with killing, drone

³⁵ Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley testified to the Senate Armed Forces Committee early 2016 that “I do see a very, very significant increase in the use of robotics, both manually controlled and autonomous, in ground warfare over the coming years” (Association of the United States Army).

operators must contend against years of entrenched attitudes to validate their experiences and emotions to themselves and others.

As discussed on page 13, Paul Virilio argues for a different conception of distance. For him, military technology has “obliterated distance” in war in deference to “instantaneous time” (*Vision Machine* 4). In this chapter, drone pilots in Nevada enter doors marked “you are now leaving the United States” to fly drones thousands of miles away, reinforcing this loss of “real space.” Yet the drone feeds are only near-instantaneous; their two-second lag hinders their effectiveness, reiterating Virilio’s emphasis on the importance of instantaneous time over physical location. As also discussed, for Virilio, “the image prevails over the object” (*Vision Machine* 73). In this chapter, the drone pilots’ “square horizons” present such images, yet the pilots choose whether or not to “see” the object behind the image. This complicates Virilio, demonstrating that a human’s moral judgement is not instantaneous and that while machines may not “see” the “object” behind the “image,” humans certainly still might. In light of this, one might critique Virilio by stating that he may accurately describe the radical new realities of technologically advanced war, but he underestimates the persisting realities of the “human dimension” of war.

Hugh Gusterson offers a more nuanced explanation of military technology’s effect on distance, space and the human than Virilio’s term “obliterated.” He argues that technology has “scrambled” and “respatialized” war because “drones have disarticulated the spatial relationship between weapon and warrior,” allowing the soldier to “be at home” and yet “at war” (48, 45). While pilots watch a suspected enemy from 8,000 miles away, Gusterson notes that many experience a sense of proximity with the human other, an effect he terms “remote intimacy” (72). This results from “remote narrativization” in which the observers make “interpretive leaps, fill in informational gaps” in order to help “make sense of the people they watch” (66). Gusterson notes that the “remote intimacy of drone operations plays havoc with Grossman’s model” by taking “the straight line in Grossman’s graph and twisting it into a Mobius strip where beginning and end, although still separate, cross” (72). According to Gusterson, when drone pilots kill, it can be “more psychologically proximate than that of other soldiers, who are physically closer

to the enemy” (73). In this chapter, Gusterson’s terms “scrambled” and “respatialized” more accurately describe the effect of technology on distance and space as it relates to humans than does Virilio’s “obliterated.” Since the American soldiers are invulnerable to reciprocal violence, one might also argue that the experience of distance is as “asymmetric” as the type of war being waged: drone pilots may experience a “remote intimacy” but this is always a one-sided emotional proximity.

In this chapter, how the drone-operating soldier conceives of him/herself and the “enemy” is greatly influenced by representative language and the narratives created both before and after a killing event; both greatly influence the soldier’s experience of and recovery from the trauma of war. The importance of narratives is only amplified by the lack of risk to the remote soldier, because the soldier does not act reflexively to a direct threat, but rather intentionally to an indirect threat. The soldier has time to think. In this chapter I again argue that upholding one’s own humanity and respecting the humanity of the enemy is – while difficult – the goal towards which soldiers and leaders must aspire, while relying on training and discipline to equip themselves to kill when necessary. In other words, it is possible to maintain one’s individuality while also subordinating one’s individual action to military requirements. Both before and after killing, soldiers must communicate constructively – that is they must build a narrative with which they can be at peace.³⁶ This chapter reveals how difficult building such a narrative can be when the soldier does not perceive risk to him/herself or immediate risk to others.

This chapter examines several killing events in film while also relying on a biography of a former drone pilot, Matt Martin, to link the films to a combat veteran’s experiences. This chapter builds on the previous two in that it will ask how the experiences differ and why. I propose that the experiences principally differ because of risk perceived by the soldier, but this study also reveals that one of the greatest differences is that “combat” for these soldiers enters into their “home” in a very new way. Whereas Elizabeth Samet describes soldiers returned to America for good or in-between deployments as

³⁶ On the importance of narrative or simply being able to share one’s experience in recovering from traumatic events and moral injury see Edward Tick’s *Warrior’s Return* and Jonathan Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam* and Robert Jay Lifton’s *Home From the War*.

in a “no man’s land” psychologically, the soldiers in this chapter literally drive home from war every day (*No Man’s Land* 36-9). Thus their attempts to make sense of their combat experiences are complicated by the confrontation of “normal” life at “home” clashing with “combat” in a daily intersection of seemingly incompatible worlds separated only by a drive to work. I will begin with *Good Kill*, a 2014 film by Andrew Niccol starring Ethan Hawke. After that, I will examine *Eye in the Sky*, a 2016 film starring Helen Mirrin. Both present the issue of remote killing, but do so very differently. I argue that *Eye in the Sky* exemplifies the right way for the reflective soldier to think about taking life: concern for the life of the other, wrestling with the ethics and morality of one’s action and inaction, concern for the greater good of humanity and the accomplishment of military objectives, and sadness at the loss of life.

In *Good Kill*, Hawke plays the character of Air Force Major Tom Egan, who, after six combat tours as a jet pilot, now flies RPAs out of Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. Throughout the film Egan and his crew observe a little boy and a female housekeeper while waiting for a “high value target” (HVT) to show up at the compound. Over the course of the observation, they develop an intimacy with the two: noting that the boy improves at soccer and watching in horror as the woman is repeatedly raped by an armed intruder. The first killing event is the opening scene of the movie, in which Egan conducts a daytime attack against six armed men in Pakistan. The second event is a night-time attack mediated through the infrared drone camera: Egan engages a moving truck with a heavy machine gun in the back along with armed men. The third killing event presents two children running into the frame after Egan has fired his missiles at an improvised explosive device factory and its armed guards in Afghanistan. These three instances demonstrate that Egan’s ability to “make sense of what he is doing” is predicated on his ability to construct a narrative which justifies the killing. Not being exposed to risk complicates this effort; he even says he feels like a “coward.” In several of the ensuing killing events, he is ordered to kill what appear to him to be civilians along with the HVTs. Finally, he refuses. Demoted, he takes justice into his own hands and kills the rapist. In this interesting twist, Egan does what he believes is ethically right, even though it is clearly a war crime.

Good Kill begins with an establishing shot from an overhead camera angle of a Pakistani village. Moments later, however, the shot cuts to Nevada, thus introducing the central tension of the film: the problem of establishing where Major Tom Egan (Hawke) is psychologically will be represented by the repeated straight cuts from an overhead camera angle shot in Afghanistan or Pakistan to an eye-level, close-up shot of Egan in Nevada. The film employs similar montage techniques throughout to collapse time, space and distance. Overlaid on the overhead image of the arid, dusty village is a replication of a drone camera's feed as seen by a drone pilot: cross hairs in the center of the frame, GPS coordinates in the bottom-right of the frame, and flight data in the top right and left of the frame. Egan flies the drone from inside a Ground Control Station (GCS) – or a small metal container designed to control RPAs. Egan is only a foot and a half away from the same image the viewers see, only it is presented to him by his computer screen. He is directed to fly to another target; the camera cuts back to the overhead angle presenting Pakistan, which is also Egan's screen, as the frame again duplicates a drone's feed to its pilot.

This first killing event is presented as the emotionally detached experience many associate with drone warfare. The crosshairs center on a group of six armed men, standing in a dirt street. In a monotonous voice Egan states “eyes on the objective” (0:02:20). The men appear to be armed with rocket propelled grenades and AK-47s. Egan is ordered by Lieutenant Colonel Jack Johns to engage. Egan scans the street, evidently checking to be sure no civilians are on their way to the group of armed men. A bus in fact is, but it is “one klik” away (0:02:30). Egan again mechanically remarks “I can get it” (0:02:35). Suspense builds as Egan methodically “lines up” the shot – the camera shot viewed by the audience and the Hellfire shot by Egan are one and the same. The no-longer-visible bus is still approaching. Seconds tick by. The camera shot focusses on the technical aspects of launching the missile: the checks, the switches, the toggles – the human soldiers appear as mechanical extensions of the distributed drone network. Finally Egan fires, saying “Rifle, rifle, rifle. Missile away. Time of flight: ten seconds” (0:02:56). Film time and narrative time converge – ten tense seconds tick by before an orange burst fills the frame (and thus also Egan's screen), consumed almost immediately by a grey then brown dust cloud which “browns out” the screen just as the bus enters the frame. Moments later the dust dissipates and

Egan, again without emotion, states “good kill” (0:03:25). Egan’s facial expression does not change, nor does the tone of his voice. The film demands viewers recognize that Egan is droning as much as he is piloting a drone.³⁷

The shot cuts back and forth between the overhead angle of burning bodies and the eye-level close-up of the inside of the GCS, suggesting that the effects of the drone attack and those who conduct it are inextricably linked. Still, Egan’s face is expressionless. The attack is in daylight, so the drone feed presents the burning bodies in full color, yet the experience is only visual: there is no sound, smell, taste, or feeling. The on-screen experience for the viewer and the drone pilot is in effect the same, only the viewer is privileged in that he or she also observes the pilot. The viewer is asked to reflect on the pilot’s experience, but in this instance, the film itself does not portray the pilot doing so. Watching the burning bodies, Lieutenant Colonel Johns quips “they don’t call it a Hellfire for nothing” (0:03:40). He orders a damage assessment and the airmen count the burning bodies: six. Within a minute, Egan’s shift is over and he steps out into the Nevada desert. Another pilot flies the still airborne drone. On Egan’s way home, he stops by the gas station to buy charcoal and milk. Responding to the cashier’s question if he has ever flown in war, Egan cavalierly says: “blew away six Taliban in Pakistan today. Now I’m going home to barbeque” (0:05:37). Egan appears to feel nothing, to be as robotic as the machine he flies.

The second killing event occurs at night in Afghanistan. Egan and his new sensor operator, Vera Suarez (Zoe Kravitz), follow a moving truck with at least five armed men and a large caliber machine gun mounted in the back.³⁸ In the black and white infrared image, the truck appears chalky, the road beneath it is a slightly different shade of black than the ground, the armed men appear as off-white, ghostly forms, and their weapons appear as only slightly greyer than the metal bed of the truck.³⁹ The Hellfire shot is difficult because the drone feed actually lags “real time” by a little over two seconds – requiring Egan and Suarez to fire two seconds in advance of the image in order to hit the actual object. Because of this

³⁷ To “read” Egan this way, viewers must interpret Egan’s face.

³⁸ Martin recounts following a similar “technical” in Iraq in his book *Predator* (42).

³⁹ Infrared cameras detect radiation in the infrared light spectrum and reproduce that in a digital form to make the “image” visible to the human eye. These images often appear as outlines of objects, as infrared stresses distinction.

latency, instantaneous time does not occur, and they must see beyond the image to understand where the moving object really is. Without instantaneous time, geospatial location returns to the foreground, and Egan directs Suarez to aim in front of the image of the moving truck. Writing about a similar Hellfire engagement, Martin explains that he thought only about “the shot and its technical aspects. Right range, right speed, locked in. The man wasn’t really a human being. He was so far away and only a high-tech image on a computer screen” (44). The same thing occurs here, as the technical demands of “getting the shot right” overwhelm any image of the human forms in the frame; the viewer’s eyes are drawn to the moving truck and the cross hairs leading it, not the non-individuated white forms of humans.⁴⁰ The missile strikes on target; the screen “whites out” because of the infrared light created by the explosion; Suarez remarks “good splash.”⁴¹ Again, the film displays Egan – and Suarez – as devoid of emotion.

Here Egan has destroyed a vehicle with humans in it, but the experience is mediated by the black and white infrared image which presents “silhouettes” or “forms” or, as I characterized them, “ghosts” rather than “humans.” Additionally, he may conceive of firing at the truck, not even the individuals – it is a ballistic problem rather than an ethical one. This is a very different event than the opening, full-color scene which displayed very detailed human bodies burning. Of course, the infrared-mediated forms still “burn,” but the image of them burning is not visceral, but blurred, as the emitted infrared light of the fire appears to be radiating out of the forms, rather than fire consuming them. There are no flames, only different amounts of infrared light: the bodies glow a brighter white on screen than before. Lieutenant Colonel Johns declares “TARFU” which he explains to Suarez means “totally and royally fucked up. I believe those gentlemen qualify” (0:14:55). This second engagement is reminiscent of both Suba’s experience through the night vision goggles and Waguih watching the “heat signature dying” through thermal imagery in that advanced optics technologies mediate all three experiences (Klay 187). However, contrary to Waguih’s experience of watching heat dissipate, when killing with a Hellfire, to kill is not

⁴⁰ Here, viewers are also invited, or tempted, to make abstract the act of killing by conceiving of it as a technical problem, not a moral one.

⁴¹ “Splash” is a military term for an observed impact from an indirectly fired munition.

simply to take away the body's heat, but rather to first apply a large amount of additional heat to it, although through the infrared medium this is manifested through the appearance or application of additional infrared light. The missile's explosive light and the body's reflection of ambient light conjoin into one light, and this new infrared light eventually dissipates, obscuring any clear moment of death. Nonetheless, Johns still calls the enemy "gentlemen": he understands the images to be human even as they do not fully appear to be.

In both of these instances, however, neither the viewer nor Egan views the face of the killed. Here it is important to remember Emmanuel Levinas' insistence that ethics originate in the encounter with the other's face. For Levinas, that encounter compels the "taking upon oneself of the fate of the other. That is the 'vision' of the Face" (*Entre Nos* 103). This vision of the face of the other reveals the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (*Entre Nos* 104). In *Good Kill*, the overhead camera angle offers glimpses of the face – but in these first two engagements certainly not an encounter with it, not a Levinasian vision of it. This occlusion of the human face renders the enemy less personalized even though their individual forms are presented. In the opening scene, each enemy is presented in distinctly colored clothing, carrying distinct weapons. Yet the camera shot does not offer distinct faces. Likewise, in the truck engagement, the infrared black and white picture blurs the image of the human, certainly making opaque the faces, presenting them as off-white spaces. Without a presented face, Egan must fill in the blanks to create a narrative about who they were. In these instances, that, evidently, was not so difficult.

Interestingly, the film withholds from the plot any backstory on these two drone strikes. The attacks just occur. This is true of eight out of the film's eleven drone strikes. The film presents only drone-mediated violence, which hinders the viewer's ability to process the events. Likewise, the characters also are presented as mostly uninformed about their "targets." Why these particular "enemies" are killed is never divulged. Thus, viewers must conduct the same "narrativization" that Gusterson assigns to drone pilots – the images in both of these scenes appear to be armed, so they also appear to be "enemy" and therefore are likely legitimate military targets. Yet for a viewer to conclude that the images in the frame include weapons and therefore the men are "bad" likewise demands an "interpretive leap" which

may or may not be true.⁴² I have argued that these “interpretive leaps” occur at all levels of warfare, from the “frontline” soldier, to the soldier in an operations center, to the drone pilot on the technological “frontlines,” and now especially even to the viewers of war films who must act as those very same soldiers by “filling in informational gaps” (Gusterson 66). The viewer can deduce that these armed men mean to harm others, and therefore it is for the greater good or militarily necessary to kill them – but as viewers we really have no way of knowing. To propose that “narrativization” is unique to drone pilots is simply misleading: in war and life we make similar assumptions all the time.

Since “narrativization” is not unique to drone warfare, it is worth examining how these two killing events compare to those of previous chapters to see what is unique, if anything, to this new mode of waging war. Upon examination, several differences can be noted. Having discussed the similarities between the portrayals of advanced optic technology’s influence on Klay’s characters Suba and Waguih, one should also account for a primary difference in that, for Egan, this is a purely visual experience – whereas Suba hears his machine gun fire, smells the gunpowder, feels the concussion in the air, even tastes the gunpowder, Egan only sees the images. That full-embodied experiences certainly differ from an on-screen experience is evident, but it is unclear to what effect. Passive dehumanization via an obscured or elided humanity of the enemy appears to work the same in all three examples. Yet another difference is that Egan is presented with the results of his actions. In fact, he must conduct the “battle damage assessment” which is to examine and count the dead; here one should remember Suba and the crew of Gun Six speculating about the results of their actions because none see the dead bodies. Because Egan lingers safely “overhead,” he knows for certain the results of his actions. In this sense, Egan is more psychologically proximate to his victims than both Gun Six and Suba, although less proximate than Timhead, who kills the young boy in front of the even younger girl. However, Egan insists that he alone is the one who kills, despite Johns’ insistence that “we all pull the trigger” (0:30:02). Johns’ argument

⁴² David Finkel in *The Good Soldiers* describes at length an AH-64 engagement in which the pilots are convinced they see a group of armed men, but at least two of the people they kill turned out to be reporters with video cameras. Notably, they viewed and engaged the enemy through infrared screens as well – “narrativization” is not unique to drone pilots (113).

echoes Sergeant Deetz's argument to Gun Six – that, as a crew, they all killed. Egan, just as Voorstadt and the narrator of “Ten Kliks South” do, rejects this construct. Again, individuation within the crew prevents group absolution or diffusion of responsibility. Nonetheless, for Egan, the experience is purely visual with no sensation of risk, little to no sense of comradery, and yet he is compelled to view the results of his actions. In these examples, drone warfare seems a distinct experience.

Yet how do these two drone strikes compare to the operations center, where killing is likewise a purely visual, on-screen experience enacted by networked and not co-located individuals? Again, Egan perceives no risk to self, so, as the film progresses, he becomes more self-reflective rather than less, as David Finkel portrays Major Cummings becoming in *The Good Soldiers*. Secondly, importantly, as I have argued that soldiers fight (and kill) for the men and women next to them, Egan is largely denied this community by his isolation within the GCS with only the two or three others who are likewise not in danger.⁴³ In general, there are more soldiers in an operations center and at the very least there is some element of mutual risk. Egan does not experience any risk. He in fact says “I feel like a coward everyday” (0:48:30), which is to say that he does not feel like he is killing in order to protect, or “for,” the soldiers next to him. In this representation of himself, Egan is a lesser form of human, rather than a fully honorable, brave human. Conversely, when Egan does support American soldiers in Afghanistan, even though it is only to provide security for them as they sleep, he returns home to tell his wife, almost excitedly, “I did something good today” (1:00:02).⁴⁴ If only for a moment, his warrior identity as protector is restored to him. One can infer from this that, on the other days, he does not feel he is doing “good,” which is to say he does not feel like a warrior or honorable soldier. The difference then between Egan and the operations center is that Egan feels isolated and must confront his feeling of cowardliness.

Military officers need to be aware of the potential psychological hazards inherent to this decentralized form of warfare; one of the main coping mechanisms in war, the team or “unit,” has been

⁴³ Sebastian Junger explains the importance of this community in *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (2016).

⁴⁴ In *What It Is Like To Go To War* (2011) Karl Marlantes writes that the basic psychology of a warrior is to “feel oneself to be the protector of lives in one’s relevant unit” (150).

physically broken apart and scattered across the globe, isolating the soldier physically and psychologically. Sebastian Junger explores military communities at war in his 2016 book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*. In it he explains that unit cohesion and communal sleeping at war has been clinically correlated to lower rates of psychiatric breakdowns (84, 95). He concludes that soldiers “experience this tribal way of thinking at war, but when they come home they realize that the tribe they were actually fighting for wasn’t their country, it was their unit” (110). Yet, he also warns that “whatever the technological advances of modern society—and they’re nearly miraculous—the individualized lifestyles that those technologies spawn seem to be deeply brutalizing to the human spirit” and often lead to alienation and higher rates of PTSD (93). These warnings should be ever present in the leaders of units conducting the kind of killing that Egan does in *Good Kill*.⁴⁵ How to build unit cohesion, trust, and camaraderie in a spatially dispersed, virtually connected unit is more than just a unit performance issue, it is a personnel health issue as well.

In the construct of the film, another problem facing Egan is a failure of language. Hawke explains that the “ethics behind killing for your country change a little bit when you’re not in danger. I think that’s the major ethical conundrum for [Egan ...], and he doesn’t have a vocabulary or an understanding to make sense out of it” (Extra Scene, 0:04:50). In his in-brief to new recruits, Johns notes how the language used to represent drone warfare fails to accurately describe it: “we like to dress it up in fancy language. Prosecuting a target. Surgical strike. Neutralizing the threat. Make no fucking mistake about it. We are killing people” (0:10:40). Johns attempts to confront this vocabulary deficit in his new recruits by admonishing them that “this ain’t Playstation” even as he acknowledges “war is now a first-person shooter” (0:10:44). Ironically, emblematic of the limitations of language to conceive of and represent drone warfare, rather than “dressing it up in fancy language,” Johns can only employ video game terms to insist that drone warfare is not like a video game. He reintroduces the problem he is trying to avert by linguistically representing drone warfare as a “first-person shooter.” Even so, he demands that his young

⁴⁵ It is also a political and social issue as well, as the soldiers involved are citizens at the same time as they are “at war.”

recruits understand the human cost of what they do: “you pull the trigger here, it’s fucking for real. Ain’t a bunch of pixels you’re blowing up; it’s flesh and fucking blood” (10:50).⁴⁶ Johns pushes back on Virilio’s claim that image prevails over the object – it ain’t pixels which are blown up, but “flesh and blood.” Even so, he perpetuates the failure of language to represent this new warfare by introducing a narrative which can only represent drone killing by contrasting it with video games. Evidently, he has no other way to conceive of it. No wonder soldiers engaged in this type of warfare have trouble making sense of their actions, and no wonder they are thought of as being emotionally detached.

Having introduced drone killing as this stereotypically emotionally detached, technologically mediated act after which one can simply “go barbecue” – seamlessly transitioning from burning bodies to burning charcoal and searing meat – the remainder of the film problematizes the “good kill” through other killing events, which increasingly become “less good” with shorter and more problematic transitions. The video game fun becomes a horror film. The film’s third killing event is framed much the same as the first: an overhead, daytime color shot of an arid village – perhaps Pakistan, maybe Afghanistan, the viewers are not oriented; “real space” is lost in the virtual world of the first-person shooter. Egan lines up a Hellfire shot against two armed guards sitting outside a garage inside of which is an IED factory (0:26:00). The dirt street is otherwise empty. Egan’s digital link to the drone is disrupted; he reestablishes the connection, examines the two guards and compound again and fires (0:26:55). Almost instantly, two boys enter the left of the frame, rolling a bicycle tire towards the garage. Egan, Suarez, and Johns watch in horror, their faces paralyzed. Johns asks for the “time of flight” and Egan responds “seven seconds.” Again, narrative time and film time converge. Johns exhorts the boys to hurry: “run, you little shits” (0:26:59), but there is nothing to do – after seven seconds the frame is consumed by the full-color explosion, just as in the first drone strike. Vera Suarez searches desperately for the boys as the dust dissipates, and eventually the drone’s crosshairs linger on their bodies. A nearly identical scene appears in Martin’s memoir, only instead of a tire, it is an actual bicycle, and after the dust clears a wheel is still

⁴⁶ Matt Martin recounts a nearly identical speech given to his class of new recruits in his memoir *Predator: The Remote-Control Air War Over Iraq and Afghanistan: A Pilot’s Story* (18).

spinning while the “bodies of the two little boys lay bent and broken among the bodies of the insurgents” (212). In another instance, Martin engages an insurgent who had fired several rockets at soldiers and civilians, yet at the last moment an elderly man enters the blast area in much the same way. Of that event, Martin notes “Rocket Man had it coming. The old man did not” (54).

Interestingly, both the film and Martin’s memoir indicate that an essential part of justifying remote killing is a belief that the other “deserved” to die – the boys do not, neither does the old man, thus their deaths are harder to process, harder to conceive of as for the greater good or militarily necessary. I have called this the influence of narrative on the soldier. Egan struggles to create a narrative in which it is acceptable for the boys to die and for him to kill without “skin in the game.” Which of the two is more influential is impossible to tell, but, increasingly, the film portrays him as “miles away.” Johns insists that Egan is a uniquely good pilot because “everyone else is trying to act like they’re in a plane in Afghanistan. Egan fucking is in a plane in Afghanistan” (0:12:53).⁴⁷ Those words turn out to be too true – when Egan bodily exits the GCS and symbolically returns to America, he does not entirely emerge from the container. The drone is an extension of Egan (or Egan of the drone), and although Egan bodily returns “home,” an essential part of “Tom Egan” does not. His mind, his soul (here I am referencing Tick’s “soul” as a center of identity), *he* is elsewhere. The effect is the opposite movement of Brian Turner’s speaker, who is “transported” from Iraq to the United States by viewing a beautiful woman through his lens: Egan is transported from Nevada to Afghanistan via the drone’s lens and the violence he inflicts through it. Although physically home, he is not at home. Without the risk, without physically being in the plane, Egan struggles to make sense of what he is doing. Contrary to Johns’ assertion, Egan bemoans that “I am a pilot and I’m not flying. I don’t know what it is that I am doing, but it’s not flying” (0:24:45). This is specifically a narrative breakdown: Egan cannot describe what he is doing. He knows he is killing people, but he is not “in combat” which is his main problem; he imagines himself “in the plane” and “over there” to cope with this, and yet he is not. His identity is fractured.

⁴⁷ Likewise, Matt Martin writes that “I was already starting to refer to the Predator and myself as ‘I,’ even though the airplane was thousands of miles away” (34).

This crisis of identity leads to a dissolution of distinction between home and combat for Egan. On multiple occasions, his wife, Molly, comments that he “looks miles away” as his body begins to reflect his mind and/or soul. Combat has extended into Nevada. This is Gusterson’s “respatialized” war in which there are no clear boundaries (45). The film, too, mimics this respatialization through visual representation – slowly raising the camera angle and increasing the camera distance from Egan’s Las Vegas neighborhood from one scene to the next until his home is presented through the same extreme long, overhead shot as the Afghan villages are – the arid Nevada desert and dusty Afghanistan are at times indistinguishable and the comparison certainly unmistakable (1:03:05). In the final scene of Egan in his house, Egan stares into a shattered mirror, his own face is doubled and broken, like the bodies of his targets and his own fractured identity (1:30:20). Egan is either both “over there” and at “home” at once, or nowhere, lost. Either way, his identity is in crisis; it has shattered – a moral injury or “soul wound” which Edward Tick directly links to post-traumatic stress disorder (152). Said differently, Egan is betraying what he believes to be “what’s right,” which for Jonathan Shay often leads to soldiers “going berserk” which is more commonly referred to as a psychiatric breakdown (84).

Whereas in both of the first two killing events Egan is portrayed as not feeling, as being numb, clearly the death of the two boys weighs on Egan.⁴⁸ Even before their deaths, it becomes evident that Egan, contrary to “being numb,” is actually suppressing feelings, in large part through alcohol, but also by refusing to speak about or acknowledge them. Despite his wife prodding him to share his experiences with her, he refuses: “I don’t want to rehash it” (0:23:45). Even if he did want to “rehash” it, the film insists that he does not have a vocabulary to do so. Johns likewise tries to ensure that Egan is psychologically well, which Egan brushes aside with bravado (0:29:44). Instead, Egan delays addressing his feelings until he is beyond the “breaking point” or Shay’s moment of “going berserk.” Once again attempting to be a mechanically numb, emotionless being who refuses to acknowledge, reflect on and talk

⁴⁸ Importantly, Egan and his wife have two young children of their own.

about one's experiences ultimately only delays the consequences of moral injury to a later time, setting the table for a much more dramatic confrontation.

As the film continues, the pace of drone strikes increases, and thus challenges the viewer to finish processing one strike before another occurs. This mimics the soldier's experience of war. In a montage of unexplained violence, the film transitions from one killing event to the next. As a result, the violence appears senseless. Of course, at home viewers can pause the film and reflect on it, but soldiers cannot pause war, regardless of whether or not they have the vocabulary to make sense of it. *Good Kill* thus reveals that humans cannot always form a moral judgement instantaneously, or even as quickly as events unfold – “real time” outpaces moral reflection. When dealing with technology and war, instantaneous time may be desirable, but the human soldiers and viewers require much longer to process events and actions. While the body's temporality can be adjusted to technology's temporality via training, *Good Kill* argues that the “soul's” temporality is not as adjustable. This divergence between technology's capability to inflict nearly instantaneous death over and over again and the human's much longer intellectual and emotional processing requirements only widens as the film progresses, suggesting that our logistical and technological capacity to wage war now exceeds our ability to process it.

After several drone strikes in which Egan is required knowingly to kill what appear to be civilians in addition to “the target,” Egan refuses and sabotages a mission. Demoted, he enacts his own justice, using a drone to assassinate the rapist on the latter's way into the compound, presumably to rape the housekeeper again. In this killing event, Egan sends his crew out of the GCS and locks the door from the inside. As he operates alone, military police appear at the door, cueing the viewer that he is no longer acting legally. In this extraordinary twist, even though viewers may cheer the result, Egan's ethics have become totally twisted – he exacts vigilante-style justice as he sees fit, but he does so illegally and against the laws of war. The act is clearly a war crime. Even so, the film presents this act as morally acceptable; Egan is presented as finally sober, level-headed, self-aware, no longer emotionless, and finally no longer just an extension of his machine. He, at last, exerts his own moral agency and “takes a stand.” He does not fit Shay's “berserk” category perfectly, though one could easily read his actions that way. After choosing

not to kill the perhaps morally innocent, Egan chooses instead to kill the still legally innocent rapist, turning himself into the compromised instrument of justice he sought not to be in the first place. Egan, like Bartle and Sergeant Sterling in *Yellow Birds*, commits this war crime because his moral compass has been so distraught and challenged that he believes this last action to be the “right thing to do.” The viewer is drawn into this paradox in that this final killing event is gratifying; the viewer likely celebrates this act even if it is illegal. Ironically, in this twist, drone warfare is ethically or morally problematic not because it is too impersonal, but rather because it is emphatically too personal.

The issue of knowingly killing an innocent person in addition to the guilty potentially in order to save more lives is also explored by *Eye in the Sky* (2016), only *Eye in the Sky* is more concerned with presenting both sides of the ethical dilemma than is *Good Kill*. *Eye in the Sky* constantly probes how and when one can kill – all while holding up an image of the soldier, the enemy, and the civilian as human. The film portrays the reflective soldier’s dilemma: to kill requires dealing with the terrible consequences of one’s actions, yet not to kill also may require dealing with the terrible consequences of one’s inaction. One can never know beforehand which might be worse. In the film, British Colonel Katherine Powell (Helen Mirrin) and Lieutenant General Frank Benson (Alan Rickman) attempt to coordinate from separate locations in England the capture of a female British citizen, Susan Danford, and her husband – both senior leaders in the terrorist group al Shabab – in Nairobi, Kenya in part by using an American drone crew operating out of Creech Air Force Base, Nevada and imagery analysts in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Where the drone is launched from is not disclosed. This is certainly a “respatialized” war.

Contrary to *Good Kill*, which disorients the viewer by not locating or explaining scenes of violence, *Eye in the Sky* is very concerned with precisely locating each element of the distributed war network, precisely identifying the “targets,” and explaining why they are “enemies.” *Eye in the Sky* goes to great lengths to ensure that the characters and viewer understand all the stakes – that both have as complete a narrative as possible from which to make sense of and judge the actions which unfold. This distinction is important, especially for military leaders and for my argument that narrative is essential to processing killing in war. The violence in *Good Kill* appears senseless in part because the film makes no

effort to explain it. Whether or not one agrees with the decision to kill in *Eye in the Sky*, the viewer and characters are at least equipped to make sense of why it occurs. Military leaders must make the same effort to equip their subordinates to make sense of the violence of war; it is an integral part of the soldier's individual narrative. Leaders must endeavor to explain not only what the unit's mission is but also why it is the mission. Yet, to stop there is simply not enough. Leaders also should convey, to the best of their knowledge, why the enemy is fighting. Without this narrative, soldiers are presented with only violence and threat of violence, which is disorienting, as *Good Kill* demonstrates. Notably, in *Eye in the Sky*, this narrative is constructed before the violence begins and continues through and after the killing event. The same should be true for military war narratives: the more accurate, objective and holistic the information before, during and after war, the better one can make sense of it.

In establishing why she is targeting the two individuals, Powell demonstrates that the personal nature of asymmetric war at times complicates Levinas' argument that the face reveals the commandment "thou shall not kill." Powell supplies close-up photographs of the two individuals and demands that her team establish "positive identification" (PID) before they act (0:09:20). The imagery analyst in Pearl Harbor "calculates" PID by using facial recognition software. Yet, as with *Good Kill*, such facial recognition is difficult from the overhead shot, so Powell employs Kenyan Special Forces equipped with two micro-drones: tiny RPAs built to look like a bird and a beetle.⁴⁹ A Kenyan Special Forces operative flies the "beetle" inside the house in order to identify the people by their faces. Here we see an astounding twist in Levinas' ethics of the face, one common to special operations, asymmetric war and counterinsurgency in which particular persons are "targeted": the face condemns its owner rather than commands its observer not to kill. This totally inverts the meaning of "taking upon oneself of the fate of the other" (*Entre Nos*, 103). The Levinasian response to this claim would be that this is not the type of face-to-face encounter that Levinas envisions – if it was, then one could not kill. Yet I would contend that in a technology-mediated world such face-to-face encounters are under ethical pressure by the

⁴⁹ While this may seem like science fiction, the US Army intends to field similar micro-drones down to the squad level (Jahner). Some of these drones may even be chemically "grown" in labs (Rogers).

“obliteration” or “respatialization” of distance, and one can hardly arbitrate between “authentic” encounters and “inauthentic” ones on the basis of proximity. Thus, if Brian Turner’s speakers encounter the face of the other in his poems, and Timhead encounters the face of the girl in “After Action Report,” then one should consider this remote encounter as a recognition of the other as well. The targets in *Eye in the Sky* are totally differentiated, known individuals with identifiable faces – and yet the recognition of those faces compels the soldiers to take life rather than preserve it. That soldiers are able to do this leads me to conclude that symbolic language is not, as Levinas suggests, secondary to the recognition or comprehension of the face, but rather at least simultaneously as important. That is, ethics is not pre-symbolic but (post)symbolic in that “the face” must be interpreted. In the film, the narrative Powell relays is sufficiently convincing that the “targets” deserve to die that this linguistic representation of the two individuals is or becomes more influential than the “command” of their faces.⁵⁰

When Benson’s team is able to identify the targets’ faces through the remotely-operated “beetle,” they also see that the terrorists are arming two suicide bombers with suicide vests. Powell immediately lobbies Benson to authorize her to kill them with Hellfires before the suicide bombers can attack. This is a “change of mission” from capture to kill. After Benson debates with several members of the British government, approval is given, although not without disagreement from Angela, a Cabinet member. By this time, however, a nine-year-old girl, Alia, has sat down outside the compound, selling bread. She is within the collateral damage estimate, meaning she will likely die. Steve Watts, the American pilot in Nevada, asks for clarification on the legality of the strike; he questions the morality of risking the life of one to save the life of many.

Powell and Benson argue that lethal force can still be used since it is for the greater good; they are willing to risk the life of one perhaps in order to save many more. Steve is reluctant to do so. The

⁵⁰ Although this twist of Levinas’ theory did not show up in the texts I examined in the earlier chapters, I would note that, in my experience (which would fall into those chapters), it was always easier to kill an individual who we knew had killed Americans or our allies than a totally unknown individual. Knowing the terrible things the individual had done to others helped me make sense of things – it helped complete the narrative process or “de-ethicize” the “face.” Matt Martin similarly explains he “found it easier” when he knew the things that a certain member of al Qaeda had done (72).

viewer is actually privileged in *Eye in the Sky* in a way *Good Kill* does not allow: *Eye in the Sky* includes on-the-ground scenes in Nairobi, not just drone-like overhead footage. The viewer sees the suicide bombers donning their vests and yet also knows that Alia's father (not an insurgent) is teaching her to read and allowing her to play without her hijab despite al Shabab's restrictions on both for girls. It is impossible not to encounter her humanity. Even without this information, Watts and his sensor operator, Carrie, clearly likewise uphold Alia's humanity and attempt to preserve her life. Doing so is a gamble, however; the bombers could feasibly depart and the opportunity to prevent a mass killing could at any moment be missed. Once again the cost of action and inaction confront the soldier; the moral dilemma cuts both ways.

Importantly, within Virilio's framework, this debate would never occur. The networked coalition positively identifies the enemy using the exact kind of software Virilio anticipates. They have the capacity to fire quickly, not instantly, but certainly within seconds. Yet they do not. They debate; they question the morality of their actions. Here we see that not only has technology's capability to wage continuous and instantaneous war outpaced humans' ability to process those events, but also that technological advances now allow action at a much quicker rate than human capability for moral judgment before an event as well. In this case the humans (thankfully, one might note) override the technological imperative and slow down the technological process to come to a moral conclusion. When a moral judgment has to be made, the problem is not that instantaneous time is not achievable, but that it is not desirable. For this reason, when killing with automated and remote technology, most agree that a human should be "in the loop."⁵¹

A remarkable back-and-forth among the civilian and military leaders follows, as they constantly "refer up" for approval rather than making the life-or-death decision themselves and bearing the responsibility for the outcome. Powell's lawyer advises her to "refer up" to the Attorney General in order

⁵¹ In *Wired For War*, P.W. Singer argues that, eventually, humans will be "out of the loop" because warfare will be so automated that even a microsecond's delay will be costly. For example, the best fighter pilots need .3 seconds to respond to a simple stimulus, whereas a robotic pilot needs less than a millionth of a second (127). While it is the "Issue-That-Must-Not-Be-Discussed" (123), he concludes that "autonomous armed robots are coming to war. They simply make too much sense" (128).

to protect herself. The Attorney General, who is with Benson, states that because of the girl's presence "there is no law covering a situation quite like this. It's one thing to release a missile while the street is clear in the hope that it will remain so, it is quite another thing knowing that this girl will at worst be fatally wounded and at best severely wounded" (1:01:40). The Cabinet members decide to "refer up" to the Foreign Secretary, who is in Singapore. In that video conference, Angela, a member of the Cabinet argues against the strike:

Brian Woodale: "As I understand it there is a legal argument that we need not wait and a military argument that we should not wait."

Lieutenant General Benson: "If we don't act now we risk losing the lives of up to 80 people."

Angela Northman: "You can only assume those deaths. What is certain is that, if we do act now, this one girl will suffer."

Foreign Secretary: "You would save her and risk 80 others?"

Angela Northman: "Yes, I would take that risk." (1:04:20-40)

The Foreign Secretary waffles and decides to "refer up" as well, to the Prime Minister. Even the Prime Minister refuses to make the call. No one wants to bear the responsibility.⁵²

I highlight this fascinating ethical debate and unwillingness to bear responsibility one way or the other, not to critique the government officials, but because it needs to be pointed out that once the decision is made, Steve and Carrie do not have the option to pass the responsibility for killing on to someone else, as these civilian leaders do. They cannot "refer up" or defer to someone else to pull the trigger. This is true of nearly every soldier presented with a requirement to kill, and ideally every soldier will have worked out ahead of time whether or not he or she can live with the requirement to kill, as hesitation in the moment may be catastrophic. It is part of the individual's preparation for war. The cost of inaction in war can be as great as or worse than the cost of action. This is the essence of combat service –

⁵² In *Eye in the Sky*, the traditional separation of *jus ad bellum*, or Just Resort, and *jus en bellum*, or Just Conduct, disappears. Here, there is hardly any distinction as the decision for "war" constitutes a single killing event.

bearing the responsibility for the conduct of our nation's wars, which is to bear the responsibility of killing in those wars. Yet modern asymmetric wars make this ever more complicated. *Eye in the Sky* presents this complexity. Not only is America not at war with Kenya (and neither is Britain), but British officials order an American officer to kill American, British and Kenyan subjects. This opens up an entirely different legal and ethical debate which I won't pursue, but which I feel I must acknowledge because soldiers must prepare intellectually and psychologically for this "scrambled" war. This is the interconnected world of war with alliances and networked technologies across international borders without war zones or declarations of war in which we live, and it is not an easy one for soldiers to navigate or make sense of. Still, despite this complicated command structure and the stimulating legal, moral and ethical debate throughout the film, no part of the debate questions whether or not the drone pilot will shoot as ordered – it is simply assumed. We take for granted that soldiers will kill when told.

Eventually Powell does order Steve Watts to fire. This is his first Hellfire engagement. The camera presents him in an extreme close-up, eye-level shot, inviting "facial recognition" by the viewer. He swallows and says "arm weapon" followed by "check" (1:18:55). The scene cuts to the cabinet members and Benson watching, then back to Steve and Carrie who complete the pre-attack check list. The camera presents an extreme close up of just Steve's hand gripping the joystick and bright red trigger as he says "three, two, one," and then pulls the trigger (1:19:30). The scene focusses on the mechanics of the shot. Immediately after, Steve says "rifle, rifle, rifle, weapon away; time of flight 50 seconds" (1:19:33).

At this point *Eye in the Sky*, contrary to *Good Kill*, slows down narrative time in relation to film time; much longer than 50 seconds of action passes before the explosion, as the narrative temporality tracks the ethical, not the technological, temporality. In this elongated time, the film details the contradictions and complexity of the decision to kill, forcing the viewer to encounter each of the participants and the many emotions seemingly suspended in time. This forces the viewer to reflect on and process the unfolding event. The viewer encounters fear, dread, anticipation, hope, and suspense in the faces of all involved, not to mention the innocence of Alia, which "calls" the viewer into the ethical dilemma. When the missile's impact does finally occur, the camera follows the flight of the Hellfire to the

compound and then cuts to a shot from the street level (1:20:48). A tremendously loud explosion sends rock and debris rocketing past the camera, and flames consume the frame. The scene straight cuts to the drone's overhead view and the film becomes instantly silent, mimicking Steve Watt's entirely visual experience (1:21:02). Steve swallows again; Carrie cries; Benson and the members of Cabinet watch silently. The scene cuts back and forth between the street-level perspective of the destruction and the faces of the networked individuals. There is very little, if any, "remove." It is undeniably an intimate experience, aside from Powell's pacing and apparent callousness.⁵³ Carrie Gershon trembles as she identifies Alia and zooms in on the girl; Alia moves her hand (1:21:50).⁵⁴ Powell orders that the drone identify the dead, so Carrie shifts the camera off the girl, and the imagery analyst in Pearl Harbor conducts facial recognition of the bodies (1:22:44). This analysis only produces a "probable" and an "unknown" as now the faces are unrecognizable, broken, and covered in dust and debris. Yet Danford is still clearly alive and attempting to crawl out of the rubble. Powell orders a re-engagement: "target the moving body" (1:23:25). Steve appears to be nearly crying – but not – when he fires a second time (1:24:13). Alia's father runs into the frame from the top of the screen followed by her mother, and Steve drops his head. Somehow the second explosion does not harm them. Carrie continues to openly cry; the shot zooms into an extreme close up of her face (1:26:18), and Steve must jolt her back to work so that they can "identify the body" (1:26:40). Carrie searches until at last she zooms in on a fragment of Danford's face; the imagery analyst and computer software PID Danford's ear as the faces of the dead confirm their guilty status, while the faces of the soldiers reveal a different kind of guilt as well (1:27:09).

This killing event is notably different from those of the last chapter, and even those in *Good Kill*. It is perhaps the most psychologically traumatic and emotionally proximate of all the killing events I have

⁵³ New York Times movie reviewer Stephen Holden labels Mirrin the undisputable villain of the film, yet I think the film portrays the Foreign Minister in a far worse light. One can conclude from our different opinions that part of viewing a film involves "recognition" of facial expressions conveyed by characters to viewers. This recognition, I argue, is actually an interpretation rather than a "command."

⁵⁴ She eventually dies, although this information is presented to the viewer only, not the participants in the killing event, who are thus implicitly left with an incomplete narrative which they will have to complete via Gusterson's "interpretive leap."

discussed. Steve and Carrie intimately encounter the costs of their actions before, during, and after killing. Neither their faces nor their voices allow an interpretation of either as “droning” through the killing event as Egan is portrayed early in *Good Kill*. The drone allows, and Powell requires, that they zoom in on the shattered faces of their victims. These faces are presented in full color: Danford’s struggle to escape the rubble is viscerally presented to the man and woman who fire a second time at her “moving body.” Yet there is no exhilaration in the spectacle of power, no celebration in the death of others, no dehumanization of the enemy, only sadness in all of the characters except Powell, who is the leader of the operation, so some level of remove can be expected from her given her position. Even she is not celebratory, simply business-like. The government officials, military officers and soldiers involved literally weigh the legality, morality and ethics of this killing event before acting. They do so from secure locations, but the drone transports Steve and Carrie psychologically and emotionally, providing a more intimate view and experience than could be affected “on the ground.” Indeed, because of the “minimum safe distance” required for US forces to be away from the impact of a Hellfire, Steve and Carrie are in more ways than one significantly closer to this killing event than any American soldier on the ground could be.

Interestingly, film as a medium requires the viewer to perform acts of facial recognition or interpretation of characters. This interpretation of characters’ faces inherently includes a judgment of some sort: are the characters good or bad, sad, happy or emotionless, innocent or guilty? This evaluation places the viewer in the position of the computer software determining identification, only the viewer evaluates subjectively from experiences and memories, by comparing the characters’ faces to faces experienced before and stored in his or her memory, as Virilio explains. Viewers must conduct this interpretation of films in order to make sense of the film’s actions and words, much as soldiers must interpret the faces of others in combat. As such, the face is perhaps the integral part of the visual vocabulary and grammar of film. Yet because every viewer’s experience is different, each of these interpretations results in a different, although perhaps equally valid reading of a character. The same is true of soldiers, which is why in *Eye in the Sky* it is important that Powell insists that the facial recognition software positively identify their targets before they act – Powell is unwilling to kill based on

human assumptions, which might lead to Gusterson's "overnarrativation." When killing remotely, *Eye in the Sky* argues, even the smallest error of interpretation can be catastrophic.

It is worth noting that both films employ females in the role of the sensor operator. Both women embody sensitivity in their respective films: Carrie and Vera both cry on-screen and in close-up. I think this is to the detriment of both film's messages, which are meant to challenge preconceived ideas of drone warfare. Typecasting females in this role reinforces stereotypes that women in combat are too sensitive to handle the killing, while men are more capable of suppressing their emotions and thinking clearly. Steve has to startle Carrie back into action (1:26:40). This does neither gender benefit. I have been arguing for soldiers to be more open about their responses to killing: these films reinforce a masculine ideal which suppresses such openness and presumes feminine inadequacy for combat. One could even read Egan's demotion and eventual "berserk" moment as a warning against allowing emotions to surface. If you cannot control and contain your emotions, *Good Kill* warns, you might just go mad. Instead of this portrayal, war films should be reinforcing that there is nothing wrong with soldiers crying – indeed one might argue that crying at Alia's death is demanded by the *Eye in the Sky*. But that both films choose exclusively to portray the female characters as crying and not their male counterparts who are sitting right next to them is an insightful commentary on our contemporary culture, which influences how American soldiers conceive of war. Taken together, war movies create a military ideal, one which many soldiers consciously or subconsciously feel they have to live up to. These films, for all their insistence on rethinking the complexities of drone warfare, unfortunately fall very short in their portrayal of gender roles in military, perpetuating the conventional warrior narrative as the emotionless John Wayne.

Powell is an exception to this, in that she is direct and calculating throughout and never emotional. In fact, for everyone other than Steve and Carrie, this killing event is mostly one of calculations first and emotions second. Facial recognition software "calculates" Danford's identification to begin the killing process. Powell calculates the loss of one innocent girl's life to be worth saving perhaps 80 others. In order to legally fire, however, Powell's targeteer must calculate the collateral damage estimate to be "low," so she has him manipulate the impact point on the drone feed. Still, this

does not change the calculation significantly. Angela is worried about political calculations – even stating that, politically, it would be better for al Shabab to kill 80 innocents than for England to kill one innocent girl and thus lose the propaganda war (1:05:14). Benson, ever the soldier, questions the calculation that 80 lives are worth a propaganda win. When the calculated chances of the girl’s death are 65 percent, the Attorney General will not give definitive legal approval, but at 45 percent he will, even though the film makes plain that nothing has changed other than this fictitious number, which Powell has forced her targeteer to fudge. In this, Powell makes a second calculation: that it is ethically better to lie about the collateral damage estimate than to allow the two suicide bombers and the high value targets to leave the building, destroy their unknown targets, and continue to perpetuate terror. Finally, the facial recognition software “calculates” positive identifications of the dead bodies to conclude the event (1:27:09). Read this way, only Steve and Carrie seem truly empathetic rather than just mathematicians manipulating equations to arrive at a desired or acceptable answer.

In its closing scenes, the film does insist that the soldiers’ calculations differ from their government counterparts’. In the second to last scene, Angela and General Benson are the last two to leave the conference room from which they have watched and participated in the drone strike. Angela criticizes Benson’s actions: “In my opinion that was disgraceful. And all done from the safety of your chair” (1:28:40). Benson slowly replies: “I have attended the immediate aftermath of five suicide bombings. On the ground. With the bodies. What you witnessed today with your coffee and biscuits is terrible. What these men would have done would have been even more terrible” (1:28:48). He pauses before finishing his thoughts: “never tell a soldier that he does not know the cost of war” (1:28:55). Benson insists that while the killing is terrible, inaction would have been morally worse. Whether or not one agrees that it was ethical to risk the girl’s life, Benson insists that the soldier’s experience of responsibility for killing is not something to be disregarded, even at a remove. He is aware of the consequences of action and inaction, and he implicitly says he is unwilling to have a sixth suicide bombing on his conscience. This killing event is not a matter of dehumanizing the enemy, but rather

protecting others. For Benson, the burden of inaction outweighs the cost of action; he has done the math ahead of time.

I've written this thesis in hopes that not all soldiers will need to experience five killing events in order to have an idea of what to think about killing, of how to approach it. In the film, Steve and Vera are presented as experiencing their first killing event with little or no pre-thinking. The closing scene cuts to Nevada where Steve and Vera leave their GCS. In the film, they do not know whether Alia lives or dies, so they will have to complete their own narratives based on assumptions and interpretation. They have few words to describe their experience. Yet their commander meets them outside, in the desert. After encouraging them, he sends them home "to rest" because he needs them back in twelve hours (1:32:40). Surely they will need more time to process this experience, but that is not built into their schedule. The demands of the technological temporality trump those of the ethical. For Steve and Vera, the most complex calculation of the film might be how to allocate their time in such a way that they can make sense of what they have done, rest, and return to potentially do it all over again in twelve hours. Whether or not they thought about killing before, that will be a challenge, but I insist that if they did think about it before, it might be a more easily approachable and less foreign challenge, more akin to algebra than to calculus. What is certain is, if they do not reckon with this experience, if they do not create a narrative that makes sense of it but rather become numb, then the fate of Egan – even if not so extreme – lingers in the future. Yet *Eye in the Sky* does not leave that as a lasting impression. One feels that their trajectory is different, that these are reflective soldiers who will uphold both their own humanity and that of those they kill. The film points towards the conclusion that while the experience was certainly traumatic, Steve and Carrie have not been morally injured. Therefore, somehow, one believes that they will be affected, but not destroyed.

These two films both treat preconceived notions of drone warfare, but do so in very different manners. The apparent senselessness of the violence in *Good Kill*, in contrast with the deliberate though much more intimate killing in *Eye in the Sky*, is something I believe must be stressed in the military. The technical aspects of killing in the films are the same. The ethics of killing a civilian in addition to a known

terrorist or insurgent are the same. The cost of action and inaction are conceivably similar. The difference in the films is the narratives surrounding those events. Neither Egan nor the viewer can process the killing in *Good Kill*, but whether or not one agrees with the decision to kill in *Eye in the Sky*, at least it makes sense and is the result of ethical reflection. Unfortunately, because of the classified nature of drone warfare, narratives of actual killing events are largely withheld from the public. As a society, as a global community, we cannot make sense of them. The same does not need to be true within the military; whether killing with “boots on the ground” or remotely, this remains profoundly true.

In this chapter I have argued that soldiers may view themselves and the other as human and kill if they believe the act saves other human lives, accomplishes military objectives, or is for the greater good of humanity. I have also agreed with Glenn Gray that most soldiers do not do this, but rather become numb or conceive of themselves and/or the enemy as something other than wholly human. Karl Marlantes calls this “pseudospeciation” (110). I think this is how war crimes begin. Obviously, not everyone who goes to war and holds an image of themselves and/or the enemy as something other than human commits a war crime, but it is still the first movement away from ethical action. For many this begins long before they even consider joining the military. For others, it is a defense mechanism against the horrors of war. At times, even those who strive to see themselves and the enemy as similarly human may find it impossible, but I maintain that the effort is vital to protecting one’s moral center, or what Tick would call the soul. A tremendous part of that is understanding how the language we use to describe and think about killing and the narratives we create to make sense of killing affect our ideas of ourselves and others. We must always be on guard about how we make sense of such a profound experience. Sooner or later we start to believe the things we tell ourselves, or we certainly behave that way. This is even more important in war when there is no risk to self. Egan feels like a coward. Angela makes a similar accusation against Benson in that he has killed “from the comfort of his chair.” Some in the military make fun of the Air Force as the “chair force.” Egan lacks a narrative that makes sense of his experience. Benson, however, can live with the narrative he creates and the choices he makes in the film. This is a fundamental difference.

Physical distance can no longer be conceived of as coupled to the trauma and/or moral injury of killing; the characters in this chapter demonstrate that. The world is so interconnected, or “flat” as Tom Friedman is fond of writing, that all boundaries, not just war zones, are becoming more and more permeable or “scrambled.” War and society have become “respatialized,” network-centric, and incredibly complex. If we are to account for this new world, then soldiers need a new warrior narrative, one that accounts for the progress we are making at valuing all life and the advancements of technology. That does not mean that there will not be death or killing at war, or a place for warriors in it. Simply put, not everyone values all human life. Some oppose the idea. Some oppose it violently and terribly. When that happens, it is not philosophers or politicians who fight and kill the enemy, but soldiers, who, as this chapter makes plain, cannot defer that responsibility to someone else. There will be debates about the ethics and morality of and in war, and those debates are essential and healthy for our democracy. Yet when the debates are over and the decision is made, it is the soldier who shoulders the responsibility for not just winning the war, but conducting that war justly.⁵⁵ In war, if our ideology is one of hate, then no matter whatever limited objectives we accomplish, we will be losing ground. American soldiers are no fools. They understand this, and yet we send them off to war (or, in the case of this chapter, do not send them anywhere) with a pop culture-built and military-endorsed image of the soldier as a man (and it is a man in these representations) who fights valiantly, feels nothing, and is unchanged by the experience. We know better and yet we let soldiers go off to war (or drive to it) as if this were so, as if they can deal with the intellectual and psychological aspects of war after the fact and be no worse for the wear. That is a great illusion.

⁵⁵ In military ethics, this is known as *jus en bellum*, or Just Conduct. Again, most agree that it is the soldiers’ responsibility to carry out the war justly, that is, they are not responsible for the cause of the war, but rather executing it justly (Walzer 21).

CONCLUSION
A “HUMAN ENDEAVOR”: KILLING IN CONTEMPORARY COMBAT

To be effective and moral fighters, we must not lose our individuality, our ability to stand alone, and yet, at the same time, we must owe our allegiance not to ourselves alone but to an entity so large as to be incomprehensible, namely humanity or God. Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like To Go To War* (144)

When the Constitutional Congress debated and signed the Declaration of Independence, it also, de facto, declared the first U.S. war. Imperfectly applied throughout our history, the founding claim of that document is that “all men are created equal.” It was this self-evident truth that compelled the congress to war and our nation into existence. I think we, as soldiers and a society, have somehow lost sight of this ideal in our vision of war and warriors, whether because of pop culture, violent video games, or, worse, prejudices like racism and sexism that limited the phrase’s application even when it was first written. Yet I do not know how one can go to war today and kill justly without holding to this ideal. If Glenn Gray is correct and in war “the typical image of the enemy is conditioned by the need to hate him without limits,” then I think we do ourselves and the world great disservice and harm (132). Gray wrote that almost sixty years ago about total war; today one can hardly imagine carpet-bombing entire cities, yet Gray’s ideas remain influential. I believe we need an updated “typical image of the enemy” and an updated narrative of the contemporary warrior. Hating without limits does not represent the boundless ideals of America – and I cannot imagine a time or place in which we should be fighting for anything other than our ideals. Soldiers are fond of saying that they fight to “protect the American way of life,” but I wonder if we have forgotten that how we fight is part of that “way of life.” The method and the purpose must align, especially in wars of competing ideologies. If not, how can we ever expect success beyond limited tactical victories?

In this thesis I have argued that distance should not be thought of as coupled to experience of killing in war. This is an important argument, in many ways a counterintuitive and countercultural

argument, because soldiers are always quick to doubt that a “FOBBIT” could be struggling psychologically with the horrors of war.⁵⁶ “S/he never even left the wire,” is a common refrain. Soldiers also frequently disparage other soldiers who fight remotely, soldiers like drone pilots, as evidenced by the backlash against the introduction of a service medal for soldiers like them. Such criticism fails to understand that physical distance in war is now either “obliterated,” “respatialized” or “scrambled,” and the term “front lines” fails to account for the multi-dimensional and multi-spectral nature of modern war. In many cases this extends globally, as network-centric warfare will be the norm, not the exception in the future. Yet these criticisms arise because we have mistakenly thought that the experience of emotional or psychological proximity is directly linked to physical proximity during killing, an argument championed for many years by Dave Grossman. The two are not directly linked.⁵⁷ I hope this study has convincingly uncoupled them. We do a great injustice to the vast majority of our soldiers who comprise the logistical and support units of our military when we continue the false narrative that their service is somehow not exposed to the psychological trials of war, that killing is or ought to be easy for them. Excluded from the “brave warrior narrative,” these soldiers have to contend against a narrative that does not allow them to experience the emotions of combat because they are not “close” to the action. This non-factual narrative hinders their ability to make sense of their experiences. It forces them into a lesser human and lesser soldier category of the “not brave” or “cowardly” which is not inherently true. Confronted by the tension between this false, though widely circulated narrative and their experiences, a crisis of identity can arise, which is, for Edward Tick, how we should conceive of PTSD. This is, in my opinion, a failure of communal representation, a failure of leadership to equip the soldier to make sense of his or her experiences.

⁵⁶ The term “rear echelon” is even under pressure as the derogatory “REMF” of previous wars has been replaced with other, more contemporary though equally pejorative terms like “FOBBIT” (a soldier stationed on a FOB, a forward operating base) or “POG” (person other than grunt).

⁵⁷ Ironically enough, we acknowledge this in society as we recognize that social media and technological screens are creating virtual communities which experience emotional proximity, even though many within these communities have never met “in person” and are geographically dispersed.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that narratives matter, that how soldiers conceive of themselves and their enemy influences their experience of killing and their ability to make sense of it afterwards. Narratives can hurt or help soldiers in and after combat. Depicting war and killing as “indescribable” or “beastly,” or advising the soldier to be a “machine” or “numb” does not prepare the soldier to make sense of his or her experiences of killing, and can become self-fulfilling prophecies. How we conceive of ourselves and the enemy and the experience of killing acts like a feedback loop between experience and representation: each influences and reinforces the other. Instead of a negative feedback loop, then, we ought to construct a positive one.

Is asking the soldier to think of the enemy as similarly human a tall order? It is. Can a soldier do that and kill? Of course. Soldiers will do what they have been trained to do, so long as they believe it to be legally and morally right, for the greater good, for protection of what they hold dear, and for the accomplishment of legitimate military objectives. Effective training prepares the soldier to subordinate his or her body’s actions during combat to function as necessary. In this, the body may perform like a machine, but this does not require that the soldier must likewise subordinate his or her conscience too. As Marlantes explains in this chapter’s epigraph, this requires expanding allegiance beyond oneself but does not require a loss of individual moral standing. Early in *Yellow Birds*, Bartle fires at an insurgent instinctively, as trained, while comparing himself to the insurgent. Even so, he kills the insurgent. Could he have done this for his entire deployment? I argue yes, but he needs a better leader than Sergeant Sterling to help him make sense of his experience, to validate and reinforce that narrative. Instead, Sterling tells him to be a deviant, and so Bartle deviates from the view of himself and the enemy as human. He changes his narrative, which influences his experiences until ultimately he commits several war crimes. In *Eye in the Sky*, Steve and Carrie go through their pre-shot checklist and fire the Hellfire as trained, even as they hold an image of Alia as human. How can they do this? Because they value other human life. This is true of all soldiers, whether they kill for the people next to them (the unit), people

“back home” (the country),⁵⁸ or, as Marlantes writes, “an entity so large as to be incomprehensible, namely humanity or God” (144).

Viewing the enemy as similarly human does several things for the military. First, it decreases the likelihood of unethical action during war. It decreases the likelihood of unnecessary killing because it adheres to the law of war principles of military necessity and proportionality. Second, it increases the likelihood of success in the “war of ideas” – as soldiers demonstrating that Americans value all human life will be more likely to “win hearts and minds” than soldiers who visibly disregard the humanity of others. Third, I hypothesize that it will decrease instances of long-term post-traumatic stress disorder because it will limit moral injuries incurred by the “betrayal of what’s right,” i.e. transgressions and unethical killing. As a result of this, it will, fourth, increase military effectiveness. It does not solve the problem of psychological trauma or acute post-traumatic stress (also called short-term post-traumatic stress), but I think it does have a role in preventing or limiting the longer-duration disorder because it limits unethical and immoral actions which lead to moral injury.⁵⁹ Why we have decided to describe war as a phenomenon with a “different moral code” than peaceful society I do not know. It ought to have the same or at least a similar moral code. Soldiers can recover from, endure, and even thrive in war if they are equipped with a narrative that translates between both war and peace.

Perhaps the better question, then, is why this “reflective warrior narrative” is not already the “contemporary warrior narrative.” I offer several reasons. First, it is easier on the soldier in the short term to avoid the question of his or her own humanity and the question of the humanity of the enemy. Many simply ignore this looming and complex problem. Most of us do this in our day-to-day lives as well. Yet doing this, not insisting on the humanity of oneself and the enemy, opens the door for the movement towards unethical action and dehumanization either of the self or the enemy or both. Doing this defers the problem of psychological trauma and moral injury until later. So why would a military officer or teacher

⁵⁸ Although as Chapter 3 reveals, today and in the future, not all soldiers will leave “home” to fight in war.

⁵⁹ In this, I apply Jonathan Shay’s argument in *Achilles in Vietnam* that moral injury is an “essential part of combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury” but that horror and grief are separate problems (20).

not confront this? Well, I think it is far easier to allow soldiers to self-motivate by hatred of the enemy than for an officer to motivate his or her soldiers to act out of concern for others. That is, it is easier to be motivated by self-interest than selflessness or concern for others, even if in the long term the self-interest option turns out to be against one's own interests. It takes time and deliberate effort to conceive of an enemy you might kill (or be killed by) as a human being like yourself. Time and energy are hard to come by when preparing for war. So this is not an argument many officers will make because, lacking the time and energy to complete this argument, they are worried their soldiers will be "soft" and not perform in combat. This worry stems in large part from the unsubstantiated claims of S. L. A. Marshall that 85 percent of soldiers did not fire their weapons during World War II and the equally unsubstantiated claims of Dave Grossman that all humans resist killing other humans, even in war. I disagree with Grossman. I spent far more time in combat trying to talk my soldiers out of killing when it was not necessary than into killing when it was necessary. In fact, I never did the latter, and I led four different platoons from four different companies and two different battalions over a span of five years in war, so I find it hard to believe that this was an organizational or periodic anomaly. The problem is not (and likely never was) that soldiers will not fire their weapons or kill humans in combat. The greater problem as I see it is that soldiers do not view the enemy as human in the first place.

This is a problem that is reinforced by Grossman's "Bulletproof Mind" training sessions given to the military and police forces around the U.S. today. Because Grossman believes humans are "innately" resistant to killing or harming other humans, he has to present a framework in which soldiers (and police officers) can conceive of how to overcome this human trait, which he terms "the Universal Phobia" (*On Combat* 273). Naturally, getting around this "universal" and "innately human" trait requires an inhuman turn. Although he makes many other great and compelling points, such as seeking "justice not vengeance" and confronting the requirement to kill ahead of time in order to prevent or limit psychological injury (*On Combat* 358, 148), he ultimately proposes that soldiers should view civilians as sheep, the enemy as wolves, and themselves as sheepdogs (*On Combat* 181). In my view, this creates an enormous amount of unnecessary representational problems for the soldier. It insists on an animalized narrative of killing, not a

human one: to kill in war is to be a dog of war, not a human soldier.⁶⁰ It creates a huge unnecessary and unbridgeable divide between the soldier and society, and an even larger and equally unbridgeable divide between the soldier and the enemy.⁶¹ The first divide leads to problems of reintegration back into society after war (indeed, in Grossman's model soldiers remain sheepdogs), and the second opens the door to unethical action and moral injury during war, as it is only one conceptual linguistic or metaphorical step past sheepdog to wolf or beast.

So it is time we update the warrior and the enemy narrative. I have advocated that literature has a role to play in that effort, an essential role in helping soldiers understand themselves and what it is to be a warrior and kill. Today, our military and society should no longer allow a narrative of the soldier as unfeeling, unthinking and unchanged by war. We should not encourage hatred or dehumanization of the enemy, but rather respect for the enemy. The image of the warrior must not exclusively be a square-jawed, brawny man. As importantly, we should no longer conceive of the psychological experience of killing as directly linked to physical proximity. Instead, we need to recognize that the experience of killing is profoundly linked to the perception of the other as similarly human and that narratives are how we make sense of the traumatic experience of war. Since that is the case, we must carefully represent the warrior through a new narrative. While this narrative may be immediately harder for the soldier to construct since it is more complex, once built, it will help limit unethical action and moral injury, although the soldier will remain exposed to psychological trauma. This is the narrative needed today: a reflective warrior is aware of him or herself as an individual moral agent and gives his or her allegiance to something greater than him or herself and therefore is willing to bear the responsibility of killing other humans (or being killed by other humans) for his or her country in order to achieve military objectives and protect country and comrades. This warrior understands that moral courage and emotional maturity

⁶⁰ I recognize that the distinction between human and animal is under pressure in the current academia. Grossman does not employ the distinction in this way, but rather pejoratively uses "sheep" and "wolf." For example, he "baas" during his presentation to mock civilians.

⁶¹ Grossman in fact writes that the "sheep," or nearly all of humanity, "live in denial" and "generally do not like the sheepdog" (182). Further, he writes that the "sheep pretend the wolf will never come, but the sheepdog lives for that day" (183).

are as (perhaps even more) important as the capacity to inflict violence. Confident in this narrative, the warrior displays strength by communicating his or her experiences and emotions in his or her own narrative, and through that communication is able to heal from the trauma of war and help others heal as well. Call him or her a reflective warrior, a modern or contemporary warrior, or even a warrior-poet, but do not call him or her John Wayne or a sheepdog.

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