

## Risks, Robots, and the Honorableness of the Military Profession

*Peter Olsthoorn*

### 1. Introduction

Somewhat reminding of Japan's kamikaze pilots from the same era, the Japanese navy armed in World War II some of their submarines with manned torpedoes that offered no chances of survival for its one-man crew.<sup>1</sup> The pilots of these Kaitens, sacrificed for what proved to be a rather modest increase in accuracy, did not have much of a choice, given the all-pervasiveness of the Japanese shame culture of that time. More recently, video testaments have maneuvered potential suicide bombers into a position that is somewhat akin to that of the Kaiten or Kamikaze pilot. Such testaments function not only as propaganda; they also make it difficult to abort one's mission without massive loss of face. Today, we see the rise of what is essentially the *opposite* of the manned torpedo or suicide bomber: the rise of unmanned vehicles that make it possible to engage the enemy from a very safe distance – the pilots of drones like the Predator or Reaper, for instance, although wearing flight suits, do “service their target” without leaving their cubicle in, say, Nevada.<sup>2</sup>

This use of unmanned systems, although reducing the risks for military personnel involved to about zero, is on first sight not *very* different (as long as such systems are not fully autonomous that is) from using an aircraft to drop a bomb from a high altitude. Their rise seems to be part of a larger trend: several authors have noted, probably foremost Martin Shaw in his *The New Western Way of War*, that politicians and militaries in the West generally see casualties among the local population as less important than casualties among own military personnel or among Western civilians liv-

---

1 Ian Miller, *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 273–276.

2 Peter Singer, *Wired For War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 329.

ing in the country of deployment.<sup>3</sup> Although “we consider it a worse moral error if the police were to injure or kill innocent bystanders than for them to fail to apprehend suspected criminals at large,” in military missions in far-away countries it is not considered a worse moral error to kill or injure innocents “than to fail to apprehend suspected terrorists, or even belligerents,” writes military ethicist Timothy Challans.<sup>4</sup> The general public, weighing the safety of its own society against that of faraway individuals, appears to accept this development. This stands in rather strong contrast to the universalist ambitions behind many of such interventions, yet most politicians, militaries and populations at large in the West do see it that way, and that explains the contemporary emphasis on maximum force protection and relatively safe ways of delivering firepower, such as artillery and high-flying bombers. This reduction in risk for own military personnel, by the use of UAV’s and otherwise, raises some ethical questions, of course.<sup>5</sup> One could imagine, for instance, that the military profession becomes a less honorable one, as honor often involves acting against one’s own self-interest to further a higher interest.

Some militaries are aware of that problem, and attempt to draw the use of drones into the realm of honor. In an article in *The New York Times*, for instance, we read how

[f]or years, the military’s drone pilots have toiled in obscurity from windowless rooms at bases in suburban America, viewed by some in the armed forces more as video game players than as warriors. But in a reflection of their increasingly important role under President Obama, the drone operators will now be eligible for military honors akin to those given to pilots who flew over the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

---

3 Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 79–88; see also Peter Olsthoorn, *Military Ethics and Virtues: An Interdisciplinary Approach for the 21st Century* (London/New York: Routledge 2010).

4 Timothy Challans, *Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 17–18.

5 See for an overview Peter Olsthoorn and Lambèr Royakkers, “Risks and Robots – some ethical issues,” Conference paper for The Ethics of Emerging Military Technologies, The International Society for Military Ethics, held at the University of San Diego, 2011, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://isme.tamu.edu/ISME11/Olsthoorn-ISME2011.pdf>.

6 Michael S. Schmidt, “Pentagon Will Extend Military Honors to Drone Operators Far From Battles,” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2016, A 15.

This new award can also be conferred to operators who launch a cyber-attack, the article continues. Although all of this – honoring what are sometimes somewhat derogatively called cubicle warriors – might sound somewhat odd to many people, it fits well with the just mentioned development of ways of war fighting in which soldiers run less risk – in the same article we read that “[a]ccording to the Pentagon, the first seven Medal of Honor awards for service in Iraq and Afghanistan were given to those who had died. But since 2010, all 10 people who have received the Medal of Honor have been living at the time it was awarded.”

This chapter delves into the question to what extent risk and honor are related pillars of the military profession, and whether eliminating risk would thus make the profession a less honorable one. To that end, the next two sections explain briefly what honor is and what role it still has in today’s military. The section thereafter elaborates on the topic of drones and the potential consequences to the honorableness of the military profession, and is followed by a short conclusion.

## 2. *What honor is*

After a long period of near neglect, honor has recently received quite some attention from political philosophers.<sup>7</sup> To most people, however, the notion will probably still seem somewhat out of date – sociologist Peter Berger famously wrote about honor’s obsolescence.<sup>8</sup> It is easy to overlook how novel this obsolescence is. Honor was deemed very important in the West all through the nineteenth century, and the honor driven practice of dueling – getting a shot at revenge after being disrespected – even survived well into the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> But especially insofar as it is seen as something that depends on the good opinion of others, honor has lost much of its ap-

---

7 Six fairly recent examples are Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Anthony Cunningham, *Modern Honor: A Philosophical Defense* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Sharon Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Peter Olsthoorn, *Honor in Political and Moral Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015); Robert L. Oprisko, *Honor: A Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2012); and William Sessions, *Honor for Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation and Defense* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

8 Peter Berger, “On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honour,” in *Liberalism and its Critics*, ed. Michael Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

9 See also Mika LaVaque-Manty, “Dueling for Equality: Masculine Honor and the Modern Politics of Dignity,” *Political Theory*, 34 (2006): 715–740.

peal since then. The notion is thought to have become seriously out of date, at least outside the military and some other pockets of resistance, while the term itself has just about disappeared from our moral language. We tend to think that people are to do the right thing for their own sake, and not for the sake of keeping face. That it allows the opinions of others to have a role in determining what is right and moral discredited honor probably more than the fact that in the past honor often endorsed rather eccentric behavior (dueling, for instance). At the same time, it is evident that the wish to be well thought of still motivates many people, but this is seen as regrettably falling short of the ideals of autonomy and authenticity. Most modern philosophy mirrors (and to some extent feeds) these modern ideals. It is remarkable that despite the recent increase in attention for honor, most philosophers and ethicists still do not have much to say on this wish to be well thought of as a motivator, both for the good and the bad.

This somewhat old-fashioned sounding notion of honor is rather different from the more modern notion of conscience. Especially in its modern understanding as an “inner voice,” conscience is more demanding than honor, requiring a fair amount of moral autonomy (it might prompt someone to go against social norms). Honor, different from conscience, has an important external component as it concerns both the value that someone allocates to himself *and* the value others place on him.<sup>10</sup> It is only in his or her relationships with others that it becomes clear whether someone is a man or woman of honor. This inauthentic side of honor also shows from the fact that honor can be a reward for making the right choice between higher interests and self-interest. In its ultimate form it might mean the choice between life and death. The honorable choice is often, although not always, the choice against life and honor is the reward for making the right choice. As Leo Braudy put it in *From Chivalry to Terrorism*: “Historically, it is the concept of honor that mediates between individual character and outside forces, as well as the body that wants to survive and the mind that seeks other goals, including a glorious death”<sup>11</sup>. After the arrest of Captain Francesco Schettino for abandoning his passengers when his ship, the Costa Concordia, sank on 13 January 2012, the chairman of the Swedish Maritime Officer’s Association stated that “[i]t’s a

---

10 See for instance Charles H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, Revised Edition (New York: Scribner, 1922), 238.

11 Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 49.

matter of honor that the master is the last to leave. Nothing less will do in this profession.”<sup>12</sup>

That such utterances about honor sound somewhat archaic to us nowadays is partly a result of Thomas Hobbes’ theory that people are mainly driven by self-interest,<sup>13</sup> thus reducing honor to an important yet selfish (and dangerous) motive that is hard to distinguish from vanity; this fatally undermined the ethic of honor that had been very important in the intellectual thought of the two millennia before Hobbes. His economic view of man proved so influential that two centuries after Hobbes, Alexis de Tocqueville noticed that people in his time saw only self-interested motives at work in their own behavior, even when it was according to Tocqueville clear that in fact more noble motives were involved. As far as honor still has a role in modern times it is the quiet virtues that are held in honor, at the expense of the “turbulent” ones that bring glory but also trouble to a society. Especially “martial valor is little esteemed,” Tocqueville noticed.<sup>14</sup> According to Francis Fukuyama, the “struggle for recognition has shifted from the military to the economic realm, where it has the socially beneficial effect of creating rather than destroying wealth.”<sup>15</sup> Although some domains of modern life, such as politics, business, and sports, are still difficult to understand without taking honor into account, our present-day understanding of ourselves is to a great extent colored by this economic view.

It is in line with that economic view of man that Michael Walzer observes that “honor and chivalry seem to play only a small part in contemporary combat,” supposedly because “popular passion overcame aristocratic honor.”<sup>16</sup> And to a certain extent, Walzer seems right: when honor is mentioned in a military context, such as in the well-known West Point credo “Duty, Honor, Country,” most of the times something else is meant: honor at West Point is closer to the modern notion of conscience as an inner voice, outlined above. Cadets are expected to adhere to the code of honor (a cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do) because they accept it, not because they are concerned about what others might

---

12 The remark can be found at <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/skippers-embarrassed-costa-concordia-captain-failure-article-1.1008626>, accessed March 26, 2019 [in the U.S.].

13 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 1988).

14 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 620–622.

15 Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 7.

16 Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 35.

*Peter Olsthoorn*

think of them when they breach it. A closer look, however, shows that the military might be one of honor's few remaining strongholds in our time.

### 3. *Honor in the military*

In more than one aspect, the ethos of the military is somewhat at odds with that of Western society at large. The military has a rather collectivist outlook,<sup>17</sup> and its ethic traditionally stresses the supremacy of the group over the individual. This ethic centers for an important part around values like duty, honor, and country, and emphasizes the notion of self-sacrifice. Moreover, military men and women seem to share a rather pessimistic and conservative outlook on human nature, seeing man as essentially selfish and weak.<sup>18</sup> That probably explains why honor still finds a more fertile ground in the military than in larger society: in the military honor is deemed necessary as both an incentive to overcome the inherent weaknesses of man and a check to the "softening" influence of a society that is sometimes seen as lacking in order, hedonistic, and materialistic.<sup>19</sup>

This hedonism and materialism is what some see as characteristic of the competing economic (and individualistic) view of man, mentioned above, which is thought to prevail today in general society, and that has some glaring shortcomings when it comes to understanding the motivation of military personnel – basically, it is much too narrow. Aristotle already stated that professional, salaried soldiers who attach more value to their own safety than to their good name fight well against weaker opponents, but are the first to fly when the danger becomes too great.<sup>20</sup> That in real life professional soldiers do not run away is because they are evidently not motivated by the wish to save life and limbs alone. Especially in the military, courage often springs from a concern for one's personal honor.

This is a very old insight indeed, going back to, at least, the Romans; Cicero wrote, perhaps somewhat pompously to modern ears, that "brave men do not feel wounds in the line of battle, or if they feel them, prefer death rather than move one step from the post that honor has appoint-

---

17 Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 79.

18 Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 63.

19 See for instance Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier, a Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960), 248.

20 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1116b.

ed.”<sup>21</sup> They thus did not only discern something noble in the longing for honor and a name that never dies, they also (as the Cicero quote already indicated) ascribed an important function to it in war. The Romans thought that no one would risk his or her life for the greater good, unless there was honor to be lost or won. In the view of the Roman historian Sallust, the greatness of Rome was a result of the competition for glory by young men who entered the battlefield with a burning desire to beat their peers by being the first to slay an opponent. In this view, soldiers, although not per se self-interested, cannot be expected to risk their lives from a sense of duty alone. Courageous acts should therefore be seen and, more importantly, praised extensively.

One of the most insightful authors of (early) modernity on military honor is the now somewhat forgotten Bernard Mandeville, who explained to his eighteenth century audience that all men ‘love glory,’ and although “they set out differently to acquire it,” traditionally military exploits have been the default manner.<sup>22</sup> To that end, military commanders flatter and praise the bold, reward the wounded, and honor the dead to help soldiers to overcome their natural fear of death. Uniforms, decorations, and fine phrases about the justness of the cause, despising death and the bed of honor, provide against little cost the courage money cannot buy; just “put feathers in their caps, and distinguish them from others (...) and every proud man will take up arms and fight himself to death.”<sup>23</sup> The wish to avoid being considered a coward was in Mandeville’s judgment by far the strongest motive for courageous behavior, though: “One man in an army is a check upon another, and a hundred of them that single and without witness would be all cowards, are for fear of incurring one another’s contempt made valiant by being together.”<sup>24</sup> Increasing their fear of shame makes soldiers mindful about their honor.<sup>25</sup> Every military commander will therefore make sure that

The men are praised and buoyed up in the high value they have for themselves: their officers call them gentlemen and fellow-soldiers; gen-

---

21 Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* II.58.

22 Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or Private Vices, Public Benefits* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924), 63. Equally traditionally, however, most philosophers have bemoaned this way to glory.

23 Mandeville, *Fable* vol. I 233.

24 Mandeville, *Fable* vol. I 233.

25 Mandeville, *Fable* vol. II 125.

erals pull off their hats to them; and no artifice is neglected that can flatter their pride, or inspire them with the love of glory.<sup>26</sup>

Nowhere has pride been more encouraged than in the army, and “never anything had been invented before, that was half so effective to create artificial courage among military men.”<sup>27</sup> Militaries make soldiers courageous by inspiring them “with as much horror against shame, as nature has given him against death.”<sup>28</sup> But Mandeville himself saw honor definitely not as something worth dying for, and he cynically rhymed that “The soldiers that were forced to fight, if they survived, got *honour* by’t.”<sup>29</sup>

Modern military sociology corroborates the findings of Mandeville, pointing to the importance of peer pressure and the concern for one’s reputation among colleagues as motivations for physical courage. Only five percent of the enlisted US men in the Second World War named idealistic reasons as incentives for courage; they mentioned religion, the wish to end the war, and strong group bonds much more often.<sup>30</sup> According to journalist and military historian S. L. A. Marshall, that latter factor was the most powerful. As he wrote in his highly influential *Men against Fire*, soldiers “do not aspire to a hero’s role, but they are equally unwilling that they should be considered the least worthy among those present (...) personal honor is the one thing valued more than life itself by the majority of men.”<sup>31</sup> The motivation behind many acts of physical courage thus partly boils down to being more afraid of being considered a coward than of dying. A more recent study by the Israeli Defense Force showed that letting dependents, comrades or the unit down was considered “the most frightening aspect of battle” by well over forty percent of soldiers and officers,

---

26 Bernard Mandeville, *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* (London: Cass, 1971), 161. He also stressed that Christian ethics is incapable of inspiring soldiers to sacrifice their lives. Where the honor ethic expects a man to adore himself and to be prepared to fight all others if necessary, the gospel wants men to worship God and “to make war with themselves.” Mandeville, *Enquiry*, 104.

27 Mandeville, *Enquiry*, 60. It is this same artificial courage, incidentally, that, according to Mandeville, also explains the willingness to duel. Mandeville, *Fable II*, 78.

28 Mandeville, *Fable* vol. I, 231–232.

29 Mandeville, *Fable* vol. I 6.

30 Samuel Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, second volume (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 108, 150.

31 Samuel L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire* (Washington: Infantry Journal, 1947), 149.



whereas death and loss of limb scored considerably lower.<sup>32</sup> A 2003 study into the motivation of US soldiers in Iraq reached similar findings: the researchers found out that soldiers fought for each other, not for abstract notions, including patriotism.<sup>33</sup> Armed forces have adapted their organization on the assumption that the existence of strong bonds between soldiers is the most important factor in combat motivation, and every military promotes loyalty to the honor group.<sup>34</sup>

But honor not only serves as a motive for valor; it can also prevent soldier from acting unethically. According to military historian John Keegan, for instance, there is still “no substitute for honor as a medium of enforcing decency on the battlefield, never has been and never will be. There are no judges, more to the point, no policemen at the place where death is done in combat.”<sup>35</sup> Military ethicist Shannon E. French thinks that “when there is no battlefield, and warriors fight murderers, they may be tempted to become the mirror image of the evil they hoped to destroy. Their only protection is their code of honor.”<sup>36</sup> According to Nancy Sherman,

Honor, especially in its Homeric mode, where it is linked with machismo and the glory of decoration – still the archetype for many in the military today – can be a misplaced warrior virtue. But it needn’t be. It can produce a willingness to take risks to protect those who are not themselves trained to take risks (2010).<sup>37</sup>

The first part of Sherman’s remark, however, reminds us of the fact that there are drawbacks to the way militaries use honor as a means of instilling courage. Mandeville already pointed out that honor can also have very destructive consequences, as a cause of war, and as a cause of atrocities in war – he regularly refers to the English Civil War of 1642–1651, and the way Oliver Cromwell turned his soldiers into enthusiastic fighters in that war,

---

32 Ben Shalit, *The Psychology of Conflict and Combat* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 10–13.

33 Leonard Wong, Thomas Kolditz, Raymond Millen and Terrence Potter, ed., *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 9–14, 19.

34 John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993), 53 and 72, 73.

35 Cited in Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior’s Honor* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 118.

36 Shannon E. French, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 241.

37 Nancy Sherman, “The Guilt They Carry: Wounds of Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Dissent*, Spring (2010): 80–84. Cf. Peter Olsthoorn, *Honor in Political and Moral Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 191.

while at the same time letting them believe they were good, pious Christians.<sup>38</sup> Although in Mandeville's view principally a self-regarding drive, honor is clearly something that can induce people to act against their own immediate interests. Honor can be used in a manipulative way, putting pressure on soldiers to do things that are definitely not in their own interest. A commander motivated by a desire for fame might endanger both his men and his mission. David Hume pointed out that although most people applaud military glory, those 'of cool reflection are not so sanguine in their praises of it. The infinite confusions and disorder, which it has caused in the world, diminish much of its merit in their eyes.'<sup>39</sup> Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery forms an excellent illustration: resentful after General Eisenhower took over Ground Forces Command against his wish, Montgomery, in his pursuance of personal glory, took irresponsible risks with the failed Operation Market Garden; it should have brought him back to the top position yet in reality spilled the lives of many allied soldiers.

Another drawback of the honor ethic is that it is rather particularistic. Because honor depends on group norms that not everyone shares, honorable behavior and moral behavior are not the same. To what degree honorable behavior and moral behavior overlap therefore depends on the peculiarity of group norms. And they can be peculiar: Tolstoy described in *Anna Karenina* that for officers the rule is

that one must pay a cardsharp, but need not pay a tailor; that one must never tell a lie to a man, but one may to a woman; that one must never cheat anyone, but one may a husband; that one must never pardon an insult, but one may give one.<sup>40</sup>

In former days it was considered quite honorable for an officer not to pay his tailor, to flog a soldier, or to be drunk. Not paying his gambling debts or not adequately responding to an insult was however deemed very dishonorable. Mandeville noticed, somewhat similar to Tolstoy, that a man of honor

must punctually repay what he borrows at play, though the creditor has nothing to show for it; but he may drink, and swear, and owe

---

38 Mandeville, *Enquiry*, 163–164.

39 Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature III.iii.ii*. Honor caused more deaths than the plague, as John G. Peristiany and Julian A. Pitt-Rivers state in a foreword to their *Honor and Grace in Anthropology* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

40 Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Part III, Chapter 20.

money to all the tradesmen in town, without taking notice of their dunning. (...) He must make no attempts upon his friend's wife, daughter, sister, or anybody that is trusted to his care, but he may lie with all the world besides.<sup>41</sup>

Even though these are (apart from the flogging) relatively innocent examples that can be remedied, such a particularistic ethics of honor might also take less harmless and more persistent forms. Some hold, for instance, that some insight in the way breaches of *their* honor can cause offense to the local population, might lead to a better understanding of the mechanisms behind both terrorism and the rise of the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan in previous years.

So it seems that the military's dependence on honor has a final downside in an occasional lack of respect for outsiders.<sup>42</sup> As one author put it polemically: "in so far as honor is a relative good, the easiest way to go up is to push others down. Honor can thus encourage people to humiliate those over whom they acquire power."<sup>43</sup> Military honor, in its modern guise of social cohesion, can lead to the kind of group loyalty that is potentially dangerous to those who fall outside the honor group. And it seems that a soldier's honor group is nowadays smaller than it used to be: where an aristocratic warrior of old – say, a knight – would consider an opponent of an equal social status as belonging to the same honor group, this is different for a modern soldier: most Western soldiers in Iraq in 2003, for example, did in all probability not consider enemy combatants as belonging to the same honor group, let alone local civilians; their honor group would consist of, first of all their fellow soldiers, and, second, their fellow countryman. Troops who are trained for combat can therefore experience difficulties in adopting less aggressive ways of working needed during the rebuilding phase that starts after major combat is over. Using the old honor ethic to motivate military personnel is not always in the interest of the peo-

---

41 Mandeville, *Fable* vol. I 246. Cleomenes, Mandeville's spokesperson in the second volume of the *Fable* and the *Enquiry*, thinks it very unreasonable 'that a debauched fellow, who runs in every tradesman's debt, and thinks himself not obliged to pay anything but what is borrowed or lost at play, should claim the same regard from us [as a man of justice, integrity, temperance, and chastity], for no other reason than because he dares to fight.' Mandeville, *Enquiry*, 90.

42 See also Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Ethic of Honor in National Crises: The Civil War, Vietnam, Iraq, and the Southern Factor," *The Journal of The Historical Society* 5 (2005): 4, 449–450.

43 Paul Robinson, "Integrity and Selective Conscientious Objection," *Journal of Military Ethics* 81 (2009): 34–47.

ple whose hearts and minds are to be won if it means that they are considered outsiders that are somewhat less worthy of respect. According to a 2006 report of the U.S. Mental Health Advisory Team, just 47 per cent of the American soldiers and 38 per cent of the marines in Iraq were of the opinion that one should treat non-combatants with dignity and respect. That marines were even less inclined than soldiers to see noncombatants in Iraq as worthy of respect is probably because group ties among them are stronger than among soldiers. Marines in Iraq were also less willing to report a colleague who acted unethically than army soldiers. Only 40 percent of the marines were willing to report a unit member who injured or killed an innocent noncombatant, against 55 percent of the army soldiers.<sup>44</sup> Strong group ties can lead to a form of in-group favoritism that harms the people the military is supposed to protect, and to a lack of moral courage, as speaking out against colleagues brings moral disapprobation from one's peers.

Cases in point are the Belgian paratroopers and Canadian airborne troopers that seriously mistreated members of the local population when on humanitarian mission in Somalia. One Belgian paratrooper urinated on the face of a dead Somali civilian, and two of his colleagues held a Somali civilian over an open fire. Both incidents took place in 1993. In that same year, Canadian airbornes from 2 *Commando*, known for its strong in-group loyalty, tortured and murdered a Somali teenager that had tried to access the Canadian camp – and kept silent about it. Canada disbanded its elite airborne regiment because of this incident.<sup>45</sup> In the well-known Haditha incident in 2005, in which US Marines shot 24 unarmed civilians after the death of one of their colleagues in an ambush, the marines involved initially claimed that 15 civilians were killed by the same roadside bomb that killed their colleague, and that eight others (at that moment the Iraqi death toll was thought to be 23) were insurgents killed in the firefight following the attack on their convoy. There have been more of these cover-ups in recent years, and both the misconduct as the covering up following it might well be to a large extent consequences of stressing social cohesion. That the interests of colleagues and the organization are deemed more important than the safety of the local population might well be an unavoid-

---

44 Mental Health Advisory Team IV, *Operation Iraqi Freedom 05–07 Final Report*, 2006, accessed March 27, 2019, <http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/2007/images/05/04/mhat.iv.report.pdf>.

45 See for the role of group bonding in this incident: Donna Winslow, "Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne," *Armed Forces & Society* 25 (1999): 3.

able consequence of stressing group loyalty. In larger society, there seems to be a general tendency that works in the same direction: we already noted in the introduction of this chapter that, when it comes to losses, civilian casualties among the local population count for less than Western military casualties. The most recent example of the tendency to reduce risks for military personnel, sometimes (but certainly not always – more on that later) at the cost of increased risk to the local population, is the increasing use of unmanned vehicles in the air, commonly called drones.

*4. The use of robots and the honorableness of the military profession*

This reduction of risks for military personnel, might have consequences for (the image of the) military profession. In earlier days, bows, catapults, and firearms were seen as the weapon of choice for cowards, yet it seems that robots push things even a bit further by eliminating risk altogether – which raises the interesting question whether risk is fundamental to the military profession, and if the exclusion of risk will change it. Now, some see only advantages in riskless warfare: “I never, ever want to see a Sailor or a Marine in a fair fight. I always want them to have the advantage,” the US Admiral Roughead stated after the demonstration of the Rail Gun with a range of more than 200 miles.<sup>46</sup> One could imagine, on the other hand, that the military profession becomes not only a safer, but also a less honorable one: we already noted that honor often involves acting against one’s own interest (including the preserving of life and limb) to further a higher interest. Incurring risk to oneself seems to be a vital part of it. It is probably this idea that led to Susan Sontag’s infamous remark that the 9/11 attackers were more courageous than the pilot who drops his bombs from high altitude.<sup>47</sup> As Alexander Welsh expressed it in his book on honor:

For men to join in battle is generally thought to be honorable, but not if they are so situated as to be able to kill others without exposing themselves to danger whatever. On the contrary, the willingness to risk

---

46 See Global Security, “CNO Observes Successful Rail Gun Demonstration,” accessed March 27, 2019, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2008/02/mil-080201-nns04.htm>.

47 Susan Sontag, “Talk of the Town,” *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001.

one's life – it could be in an act of passive resistance – comes as the test of honor we most often hear invoked.<sup>48</sup>

Welsh' remark points to the fact that running no risks and running a limited risk are not the same, and the difference is not merely gradual. In Waziristan, the region in Pakistan that has seen a lot of drone attacks on Taliban leaders, this riskless way of fighting is certainly seen as dishonorable.<sup>49</sup> Although most people will understandably see that latter fact as their problem, not ours, it might become our problem too: Baitullah Mehsud, the Pashtun commander of the Pakistani Taliban, claimed that each drone attack brought "him three or four suicide bombers," mainly from the families of the victims of the drone attacks.<sup>50</sup> Using drones is an effective method, though, killing Mehsud in August 2009.

What's more, it is rather hard to imagine how one can respect the local population, a vital element of the hearts and minds approach, from, for instance, a control room in Nevada (where many pilots of Predators and Reapers work from). Social psychologists point out that dehumanization, that is, seeing people for something less than human, can open the door to more serious forms of unethical conduct.<sup>51</sup> Social-psychologist Albert Bandura counts it among the "many social and psychological maneuvers by which moral self-sanctions can be disengaged from inhumane conduct."<sup>52</sup> Reducing enemy combatants to mere blips on a computer screen might amount to such dehumanization. As was also shown by the famous Milgram experiments on obedience, it is more difficult to be cruel, or indifferent, when the other has a face.<sup>53</sup> At a time that unmanned aerial vehicles take out insurgents from afar, with someone at the remote who thinks that his job is "like a video game. It can get a little bloodthirsty. But it's fucking cool,"<sup>54</sup> that face is most probably not always there. With such a distance – physical, but also psychological – between a soldier and the horrors of war,

---

48 Alexander Welsh, *What is Honor? A Question of Moral Imperatives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4.

49 Mark Thompson and Bobby Ghosh, "The CIA's Silent War in Pakistan," *Time*, June 1, 2009.

50 Thompson and Ghosh, CIA's Silent War.

51 Albert Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (1999): 200.

52 Bandura, Moral Disengagement, 194.

53 Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

54 Singer, *Wired for War*, 332.

some fear that killing might get a bit easier.<sup>55</sup> But then again, Peter Lee describes in a nuanced article how “the emotional and physical separation of the remote pilot from events on the ground brings the benefit of increased objectivity. (...) Physical separation from the combat zone does not, for example, automatically lead to emotional disconnection. The crew of a Tornado flying at low level above an enemy contact may be *more* emotionally disengaged than the Reaper crew (...).”<sup>56</sup> A remark that reminds us of the important fact that drone pilots do run risks, albeit not to life and limbs: they are prone to suffer serious amounts of stress, or suffer PTSD or moral injury.

Finally, one could argue that fighting honorable is fighting within the limits set by the just war tradition – at the minimum. Now, the risk-transfer by means of UAVs will generally remain within the limits of the “double effect” clause of the just war tradition: civilian casualties caused by the use of drones are an unintended (and can be a proportional) side-effect of attacks on legitimate targets. It possibly falls short, however, in light of Walzer’s famous restatement of that clause holding that soldiers have a further “obligation to attend to the rights of civilians,” and that “due care” should be taken, and that soldiers have to do this “accepting costs” to themselves.<sup>57</sup> This adds up to what Walzer calls the idea of double intention, with the first intention being that it is the intention to hit the target and not something else, while the second intention consists of two rather separate aspects: 1) efforts should be made to reduce the number of civilian casualties; 2) when needed at increased risk to oneself. It is of course the second aspect that is rather demanding, and it is precisely because it is demanding that we want to see it: we tend to “look for a sign of a positive commitment to save civilian lives” that tells us that “if saving civilian lives means risking soldiers’ lives, the risk must be accepted.”<sup>58</sup> Although Walzer does not invoke the concept of honor here, his emphasizing of the importance of risk acceptance does remind us of that notion. Reminding of the earlier remark about the Costa Concordia that the captain is “is the last to leave,” Walzer writes that soldiers “stand to civilians like the crew of a liner to its passengers. They must risk their own lives for the sake of others.”<sup>59</sup>

---

55 See also Singer, *Wired for War*, 395–396.

56 Peter Lee, “Remoteness, Risk and Aircrew Ethos,” *Air Power Review* 15, No. 1 (2012): 14.

57 Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 155.

58 Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 156.

59 Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 305.

Now, one could of course argue that the use of UAV's amounts to the efforts to reduce the number of civilian casualties that Walzer would like to see. An UAV can, because it is unmanned (and inexpensive compared to manned aircraft) fly low and slow, sending back high resolution images to its operator who should then be able to distinguish combatants from non-combatants; a technological feat that should make collateral damage in the form of civilian casualties less likely to occur, as does the fact that drone pilots, far from the actual battlefield, might be less affected by potentially hazardous emotions like frustration, boredom, and the (honor driven) wish for revenge. That drone pilots are in their cubicle perhaps less subject to the forces of peer pressure and group loyalty than other military personnel could makes it easier for them to raise the moral courage that is needed to make these decisions about life and death in an ethical way.<sup>60</sup>

Most observers, however, will see the use of UAV's as falling short in meeting the demand in the second term (incurring risk to oneself) of Walzer's notion of double intention as it boils down to a clear refusal to accept risks to oneself, and many authors have claimed that this absence of personal risk is in fact that what makes the use of drones less honorable. Fighting one's adversary from a low flying manned aircraft would amount to a sufficient indication of the acceptance of risk to oneself, but if that would also increase the risk to the local population one might ask what the point is. Walzer's emphasis on "accepting cost to oneself," stemming from his wish to see proof of a good intention, does not allow for the possibility that risks to the local population might be reduced without increasing the risk to Western military personnel. Dismissing the use of drones because their use is free of risk and thus dishonorable might thus boil down to accepting higher risks to oneself *and* the local population just to prove your honorableness. As that would be a rather unsatisfying option, we are left with the question whether the vocabulary of honor is suited to describe drone warfare to begin with.<sup>61</sup> That, as we have seen, the drawbacks of military honor are as numerous as the advantages might form another reason to leave honor out of the equation.<sup>62</sup>

---

60 Lee, Remoteness, 15.

61 See also Cora Goldstein, "Drones, Honor, and War," *Military Review*, November-December (2015): 75.

62 See also Robert Sparrow, "Drones, Courage, and Military Culture," in *Routledge Handbook of Military Ethics*, ed. George Lucas (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 390.



5. *Conclusion*

Niccolò Machiavelli held that in war nothing ever really changes, and he therefore thought that the invention of the firearm amounted to not much more than just a new variety of the age-old catapult.<sup>63</sup> It is tempting to think likewise about the use of unmanned systems: a development that does not really raise issues different from those raised a long time ago by artillery, and more recently by highflying bombers. In part, there is something to be said for this view. The use of unmanned systems is part of a larger tendency of risk minimization, or risk transfer. But in a way Machiavelli was, of course, wrong; the invention of the firearm proved as crucial for the way wars were fought as the spread of the stirrup some thousand years before. Possibly, the use of unmanned systems will prove to be equally significant, especially since the development of these systems has only just begun. Despite initial reluctance, probably due to the perceived dishonorableness of their use, militaries have now embraced the use of robots – just as they have embraced bows and catapults in the earlier days.<sup>64</sup> Developments in this area seem to go considerably quicker than those in what is essentially its reverse image: the development of non-lethal weapons that minimize risk for outsiders to the organization, such as opposing forces and the local population. What's more, as a result of a lot of money and effort spent, Western militaries seem to get better at this killing without getting killed than they already were. However interesting the matter of drones and honor is, worries about the honorableness of the military profession are not going to slow down this development. That, for instance, the future will hold autonomous systems – that is, systems without a man in the loop – seems almost a given, and that will raise a host of ethical issues that are truly new, especially concerning the question who can be held responsible.

Such questions about responsibility are in all probability more pressing than the question whether the use of drones is honorable or not. Juxtaposing allegedly risk adverse drone pilots with the supposed death wish of, say, the suicide bombers mentioned in the introduction is not particularly

---

63 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Modern Library, 1950).

64 Singer, *Wired for War*, 216–217. Nonetheless, it seems somewhat ironic that iRobot, a leading manufacturer of robots, named one of its land robots for the military “Warrior” – which, incidentally, was also the initial name of an upgraded Predator (the name Reaper for the Predator’s bigger brother, a drone especially designed as a “hunter-killer,” seems more adequate).

*Peter Olsthoorn*

helpful. It echoes the timeworn rhetoric of a feminine West that occidentalists like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri were eager to use. Buying into that “you love Pepsi, we love death” rhetoric not only implies that drone pilots are not honorable because their life is not at risk, but probably also that we should deem their mirror image, the death seeking suicide bombers, honorable – not a conclusion many of us would want to accept. Risk aversion is not bad or dishonorable in itself; it is only a problem insofar as it comes at the cost of increased risk to the outsiders the military should defend if it wants to live up to its professed ambition to be a force for good. The real issue at stake is that we are more concerned about casualties among our fellow countrymen than among unknown persons in far-away countries – this is perhaps to some extent understandable and natural, but certainly not moral. Or honorable, for that matter.