

PM: Drones: Death by Execution

by Polly Mann

Drones, known in the aerospace industry as unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs were born, as with most military hardware, in secret and were in use before the average American knew anything about their existence. They have been under development for decades in the United States. The CIA acknowledges that it developed a dragon-fly-sized UAV known as the "Insectohopter" for laser-guided spy operations in the 1970s. The military first used drone technology during the U.S. war against the democratically elected government of Nicaragua in the early 1980s.

Drones have been and are being used in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The estimated deaths from U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan from 2004 to 2011 is estimated at from 1,372 to 2,125. Civilian deaths in 2004 were estimated at 25% and in 2010 at 6%. On February 20 of this year, the Washington Post reported: "Drone attacks in Pakistan killed at least 581 militants last year, according to independent estimates. The number of those militants noteworthy enough to appear on a U.S. list of most-wanted terrorists: two." Casualty figures for drone use in Afghanistan are not available, but the U.S. has announced it plans to use a new drone there that can "see everything."

Other branches of government are also interested in drones. A small pilotless vehicle, capable of hovering and "staring," is expected soon to be in the skies over the Florida Everglades. If use of the drone wins U.S. Federal Aviation Administration approval, the Miami-Dade Police Department will start flying the 14-pound drone over urban areas with an eye toward full-fledged employment in crime fighting. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency has been flying drones over the Arizona desert and southwest border with Mexico since 2006 and will soon deploy one in North Dakota to patrol the Canadian border as well.

Drone missions are executed by military crews. One such operation is at Creech Air Force base, 45 miles north of Las Vegas and about 7,500 miles away from the targeted battlefield in Iraq or Afghanistan. The planes aren't launched at Creech Air Force Base. They take off from runways in the country of origin, controlled by an "on the ground" pilot, nearby. But for the pilots at Creech Air Force base, the fight is on a video screen. Alongside each one of them is a crew member who operates the plane's onboard camera, and a behind-the-scenes team of intelligence analysts. In one mission, a truck full of insurgents in Afghanistan was being tracked. When the ground commander gave the order, a Hellfire missile was fired, hitting its target. The trigger is pulled in Nevada, inside cramped, single-wide trailers and small offices where 250 pilots work in shifts around the clock. But once many of the UAVs are airborne, teams inside Creech Air Force base and other U. S. sites begin to control them.

The use of drones is heavily debated. Investigative journalist Tim Shorrock* says that corporations direct the program and that people are leaving their national security and counterterrorism jobs for positions where they are basically doing the same jobs they once held at the CIA, the NSA and other agencies to work at for-profit corporations at double or triple the salary. It's privatization of the highest order, in which our collective memory and experience in intelligence—our crown jewels of spying, so to speak—are owned by corporate America. Yet, there is essentially no government oversight of this private sector at the heart of our intelligence empire. And the lines between public and private have become so blurred as to be nonexistent.

As the drone attacks have expanded, they have attracted increasing criticism from human rights organizations and international legal scholars some of whom claim aspects of the program violate international law and risk generating a backlash in Pakistan and other countries where the strikes are carried out. At a recent meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, New York University law professor and the UN's special rapporteur on extra judicial killings, Phillip Anston, said recently that the escalating campaign of CIA drone strikes against suspect militants in Pakistan has made the United States "the most prolific user of targeted killings" in the world today. On January 15, 2011 a group of about 70 people led by anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan rallied near CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia to protest the use of drones. She called the use of drones "cowardly" and "immoral." A member of the group was a 26-year old Navy veteran who wore a T-shirt that read, "A drone attack is an execution without a trial." On January 27 of this year, Jim Haber, coordinator of the Nevada Desert Experience; Fr. John Dear, a Jesuit priest; Kathy Kelly, co-founder of Voices for Creative Non-Violence and 11 others were found guilty of trespassing at Creech Air Force where they were protesting the use of drones. Kelly said that it was "criminal for the U.S. people to spend \$2 billion per week for war in Afghanistan that maims, kills and displaces innocent civilians who've meant us no harm."

* "Spies for Hire," a project of CorpWatch, maintains an online database of intelligence outsourcing (www.crocodyl.org/spiesforhire)

Polly Mann is a co-founder of WAMM and continues to be active with the organization. Her column appears regularly in the WAMM newsletter. Also find her writing at www.worldwidewamm.org in the Middle East Committee section and on the WAMM Blog.