

# The Psychology of Remote Control Warfare

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## Introduction

The development of robotics for use on and above the battlefield has allowed soldiers to distance themselves from dangerous, dirty and mundane tasks. During 2007, the United States conducted approximately 250,000 hours of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) operations in theatres around the globe, a fraction of that expected in years to come. UAS operations have brought a new dimension to the idea of Remote Control Warfare (RCW). The UAS operator today controls multiple Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), potentially in multiple areas of operation, connected to a community of warfighters in and outside the theatre through a virtual network, all from his comfortable office just a short distance from home. No longer does the warrior need to face the enemy in combat, to relate to his enemy or try to understand his motives, nor does he need to deploy forward, to live in austere conditions or even to dress for the occasion. In terms of its social connection to the network of warfighters, the RCW scenario is strikingly similar to online gaming, albeit the latter is, for the moment, artificial. The concept of the virtual warfighter is being pursued through the Joint Expeditionary Force Experiments and, to some extent, NATO's exercise Warfighter Alliance in a Virtual Environment.

RCW is reality, so what are the psychological implications of this new art of war? Does this development change the concept of modern warfare, is the change inevitable and what, if anything, should Commanders be doing to address the issues?

This article will examine some aspects of RCW under the generic headings of political, legal, operational and human factor implications with a view to identifying some possible consequences for military commanders to ponder.

## Political Aspects

**Public Opinion.** The risk of casualties is a very real constraint on the foreign policy ambitions of political leadership.<sup>1</sup> RCW has much potential to reduce friendly loss of life simply because its warriors may no longer need to *go* to war. Moreover, a society that gets accustomed to RCW will become less and less capable of accepting friendly loss of life in battle. As long as boots on the ground are still required, the more risk averse a society becomes and the less likely it is to tolerate friendly casualties on enemy soil. For those nations with RCW capabilities, this reduced propensity to risk friendly loss of life, while improving a government's ability to impose its foreign policy objectives must be a good thing. However, with less risk of collateral, governments may also become more willing to start wars to achieve their political ambitions. Thus, the likelihood of proliferating world conflict could increase.

**Economic Considerations.** Defence budgets remain under perpetual scrutiny and Western multi-national military manpower levels continue to

recede. Contractorisation of military tasks is now widespread. Recently, an enterprising Defence Industry company offered to provide, deploy, operate (remotely) and maintain UAVs in operational theatres in accordance with military requirements. Under this 'UAV by the Hour' concept, the military would simply order and receive required surveillance information from the UAV Company and pay accordingly for the service. This company was able to offer this concept for sale because the UAS offers 'minimum risk to the air vehicle operator.'<sup>2</sup> Again, this reduced risk to friendly military lives is welcome and, ultimately, the intelligence information provided could be cheaper than employing full time military operators to acquire it. However, the consequently reduced need for military risk-takers could prove irresistible to decision makers seeking to minimise front line military manpower levels and budgets. This dilution of military manpower in theatre could adversely affect a Commander's flexibility to manoeuvre when 'boots on the ground' are needed.

**Reconstruction.** Every conflict is inevitably followed by a reconstruction phase, when legitimate government is restored, legal systems are empowered, public services are re-established and economies are re-built, in order that internal stability can prevail; eg, Iraq and Afghanistan. External governments, who may have been the protagonists of bringing down a regime by RCW, could not then expect to occupy a fallen nation in order to begin this reconstruction process. At some point the RCW must stop and the real live, hands-on, in-theatre 'man on the ground' confidence building activities must start. The transition from RCW to this face-to-face contact will be tricky.

## **Legal Aspects**

The legal aspects of RCW are complex. Specifically, RCW Commanders should consider their responsibilities under the Geneva Convention and whether or not Rules of Engagement (ROE) for Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAV) have been developed sufficiently.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, RCW forces will require sophisticated (and different, possibly more stringent) discipline to abide by ROE from a remote detached environment with only media images of the effects being perpetrated. Importantly, the increased possibilities of 'Blue-on-Blue' in an RCW situation must be very carefully considered.

## **Operational Aspects**

**Morale.** Deploying forward with like-minded colleagues, dressing in uniform and living in austere conditions give military forces identity and a sense of belonging. Both are good for military morale and, therefore, the achievement of military objectives. Military commanders will need to devise means of replicating this collective morale for the RCW warrior, who may never physically meet his contemporaries in combat.

**Situational awareness.** The Effects Based Approach to Operations requires that warriors at all levels have a profound understanding of the effects they are aiming to achieve. Learning by seeing, feeling and 'suffering' alongside one's adversary all contribute to this situational understanding. From his 5-legged computer seat in a warm isolated office, the RCW warrior gets none of

these inputs. Again, the discipline required of these UAS operators and their Commanders to raise their staff's battle situational awareness to the same level as 'in-contact' forces will be extraordinary.

**UAS Flight Safety.** The crew members of a manned aircraft routinely check the weather, terrain, performance hazards and flight parameters of every proposed flight plan because, *inter alia*, their very survival depends on it. The life of the UAV Controller is not subject to the same inherent dangers. However, the consequences of getting it wrong could be equally lethal; possibly not to the operator himself but to third parties! It takes a massive leap of self discipline to apply the same dedication to any activity that one would apply if one's life depended upon it – compare how carefully a rock climber looks after his safety equipment and procedures with how carefully a computer operator routinely boots up his computer. This presents a significant supervisory challenge for RCW Commanders.

### **Human Aspects**

**War is about 'People.'** Military forces exist as a tool of government to inflict the will of one regime on that of another. This can be accomplished peacefully through humanitarian support, at one end of the spectrum of conflict, to aggressive kinetic intervention at the other; either way, face-to-face human contact is most often the most effective persuasive force. Ultimately, rather than fear of the sledgehammer,<sup>4</sup> it is the respect of one nation for another that changes political will. That respect is difficult to generate if the attacked perceives that his attacker is sitting at home (metaphorically) in his carpet slippers! Moreover, it is indeed difficult to imagine how a UAV operator will win a medal for gallantry.

**Non-Technological Solutions.** History tells us that no matter how technologically superior one force may be over another, the less technologically able will always find a way of attacking stronger or opposing nations' *people* centres (eg, 9/11) as a means of imposing their will. It could be argued that the more technologically advanced nations remove the human factor from their fighting capabilities, the more they perpetuate asymmetric warfare and terrorism.

**Selection and Training.** An overweight computer geek with green hair who misspent his youth playing 'war' games on a *Play Station* may make a better UAS Controller than an athlete. He or she may have all the coordination skills for the job and possibly the capability to assimilate and react to multiple inputs in a potentially high workload and high pressure environment. Moreover, *Play Station* games simulate conflict, violence and loss of life – good virtual warfighter training. On the other hand, would that same computer geek have the equivalent self discipline and decision making ability of today's military warrior? Moreover, as UAS technology improves with time, the need to employ UAV operators with live flying experience will diminish. Could a Commander rely upon a *Play Station* expert without actual flying experience to make consistently safe aviation-related judgement calls for his vehicle in the air?

## The Future

There is, of course, a need to apply perspective. Advancing technology is a familiar, welcome and inescapable fact<sup>5</sup> and UAS and other means of achieving effects remotely will, at least for the foreseeable future, only be one club in the military golf bag, which will be used alongside other capabilities, including traditional fighting. The increasing capabilities of not only UAV and UCAV in particular, but also of reach-back command centres, Cruise Missiles, Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles, Space, Satellite and Net-Centric communications links, High Altitude Airships with endurances up to 18 months, the Internet, reducing military manpower levels and the CNN factor will all contribute towards a move away from traditional, territorial warfare and towards increased RCW in the future. However, we would be prudent to exercise caution by considering the ethics and effects of this progress. Once the real effects of RCW become apparent, multi-millions will have been spent on development of remotely controlled weapon systems. At that point, it will be politically very difficult to scrap those systems for ethical reasons.

This article is intended to provide food for thought, rather than all the answers to how we should address the challenges that advancing technology will inevitably bring. JAPCC will continue to follow up work on this subject. If you have a view or information on the subject, we would be delighted to hear from you. Please send your comments to [journalads@japcc.de](mailto:journalads@japcc.de) .

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<sup>1</sup> Body bags returning home bring the harsh reality of warfare into the public eye and have the potential to turn public opinion sharply against the operations themselves. Ultimately, this can be a 'vote loser' for the politicians, who made the decision(s) to get the home nation involved. This is especially relevant when those operations pose no perceived direct threat to homeland security. Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan are contemporary examples.

<sup>2</sup> It is recognised that UAV maintenance and launch/recovery crews (military or civilian) would need to operate forward, but in most cases they could operate at a safe distance from the JOA and 'out of harm's way.'

<sup>3</sup> Consider a tactical situation where the crew of a manned aircraft can 'see' that the required effects of an attack have been accomplished using a part weapon load and that further attack would result in unnecessary loss of life, which could, ultimately, have an overall detrimental effect on achieving the strategic effects. A UAV operator denied this 'eyes on target' information, may continue to prosecute further attacks with obvious negative effects on the overall mission.

<sup>4</sup> For example, during WWII neither German bombing attacks on British cities nor the British counter bombing of German cities succeeded in changing the stance of either Nation. Instead, both increased the resolve of respective populations to overcome their aggressor.

<sup>5</sup> RCW began with the development of the longbow!