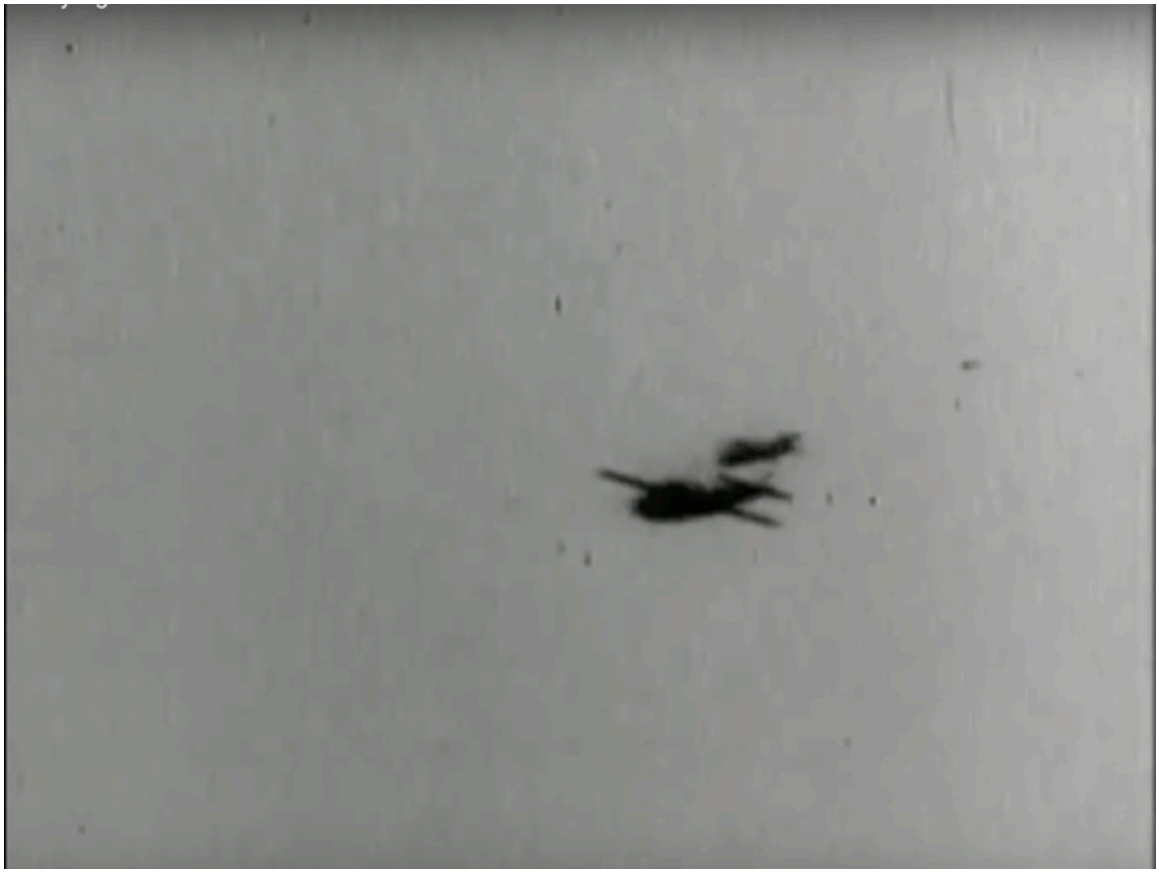
REACH FROM THE SKY

Derek Gregory

BOMBER: I remember our last sortie: the 21st of June 1944. We took off from our aerodrome near Lincoln, and as our Lancaster crossed the Channel we spotted a robot-plane flying the other way towards London.



DRONE: I started flying the Predator on 21 June 2004. Some people call it a drone, but the Air Force called it a UAV, an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle.

BOMBER: We were going to bomb one of the launch sites in France. This was our first daylight trip. The Americans did it all the time, but we had become such furtive creatures of the night that now I felt naked and exposed. At night a flak burst is just a small bright red light that flashes and then it's gone, but now I could see the large puff of black smoke each one leaves behind, and in a few moments it looked like we were motoring along on a huge blanket of them.

DRONE: I converted to the Predator from the F-15, but these days kids are coming straight in to the Ground Control Station after just nine months. They might get twenty hours in a Diamond, but then it's straight to the simulator and

the war in Vegas. They start out running the mission once the Pred is airborne without knowing how to take off or land. They learn that later, and then forward deploy to the launch and recovery section in Bagram, where all day they lob Preds in the air and catch them on the way back.

BOMBER: We were a rum lot in Bomber Command. Grammar school boys, mostly, all volunteers. It took two years to qualify as a pilot. After initial training – in my case learning to fly an Anson in Gimli, Manitoba – we graduated to an Operational Training Unit in the UK. We were thrown into a hangar with a couple of hundred other chaps and told to 'crew up'. Seven-a-side for Lancasters. Our bomb-aimer told me afterwards that he'd felt like a girl at a dance and cringed at the thought of being a wallflower. But it was more deadly earnest than any dance-hall: it was like a marriage market – except that assembling a good crew was far more important than finding a good wife.

DRONE: Now we call it an RPA, a Remotely Piloted Aircraft. Because 'unmanned' it isn't: it takes just two of us to fly a Pred from the Ground Control Station at Creech Air Force Base, me and a sensor operator who controls the magic ball, but there's another 190 guys supporting each combat air patrol. And I barely know any of them. Even my sensor operator.

BOMBER: It sounds odd, an arbitrary collision of strangers, but somehow it worked. I was closer to my chaps than I was to my own brother and sister. Officers and sergeants had separate messes, naturally, but we usually spent our evenings and days off together.

DRONE: We aren't regular partners on the same shift: we're paired up when we arrive for each mission and assigned to an RPA already in the air. It changes with each roster. Plus I'm an officer and my sensor operator is an enlisted airman. We don't play volleyball together in our down time. Flying the Pred is shift work. After the mission briefing, we go in to the box and do the changeover. Seat doesn't even have time to cool down. Right now we're working 12 or 13 hours, six or seven days at a stretch. When I'm done, I check out and head down the 95 to my wife and kids as fast as I can. 30 minutes back to Vegas. A different world – but just as unreal. I remember going to the Christmas party one year and meeting guys in my squadron for the first time.

BOMBER: *We* were close, but our circle was drawn around our own aircraft and never extended far beyond V-Victor. Other crews were constantly joining the squadron, and then they left when they had completed their 30 missions or failed to return from ops. Our crew was like a family but the squadron was more like a railway station with constant arrivals and departures.

DRONE: I'm unusual I guess, because I still try to 'feel' the airplane. I can't hear the wind break over the canopy to judge the speed or listen to the engine telling me how everything is doing. I've no sense of the wings, no vibration or movement in my body to tell me what's going on. All I've got is sight. In the F-15

my eyes could sweep the sky in a 140-degree arc but now all I've got is a 20-degree view fixed on the Pred's nose. But I do have body memory and I do have imagination. I remember one hard landing, the wind pushing the Pred every which way, and I was leaning back the whole time, canting in my seat like I'm actually in the Pred. The new guys don't move around in the seat except to fart. That's the only air sense they have.

BOMBER: Flying at night is a boring business much of the time: once you have levelled out there is no sense of speed; you are just shaken about in a cold metal box four miles up. We were all in our own spaces, doors shut or curtains drawn, with only the occasional sentence over the intercom. And yet we were welded together, dependent on each other, almost parts of the aeroplane, seven of us joined by metal and rubber and wires. We put our oxygen masks on at 5,000 and we were plugged in to the electrics. It could reach 40 or even 60 below at 20,000 feet. You often got ice from your oxygen mask down to your knees. Eventually our flying suits were heated, but you had to be careful: our rear gunner never left his turret even to use the Elsan, and once he peed himself and shorted everything out. Silly bugger.

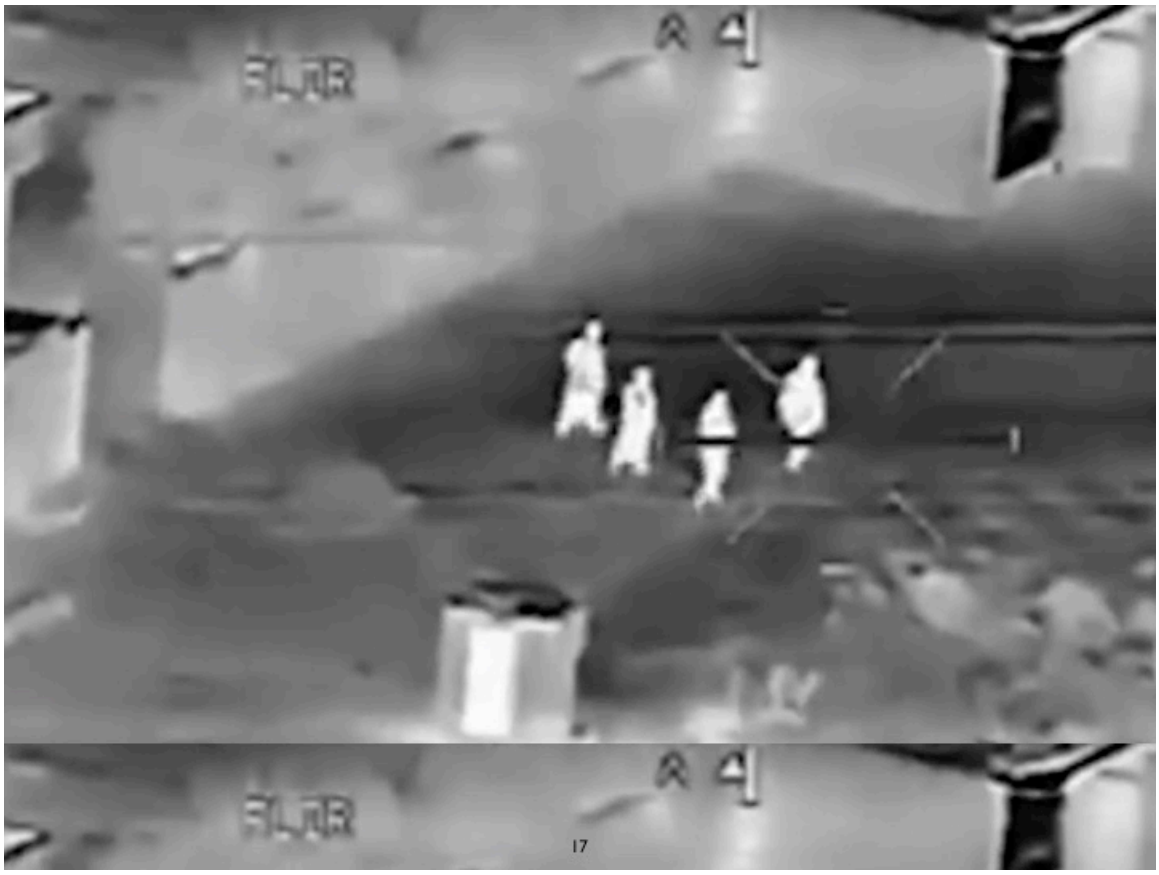
DRONE: My fighter buddies sneer at us as 'cubicle warriors' in the 'Chair Force'. They can't understand why I've crossed over to the other side. It's true I'm sitting in a box on the ground, air con at 68 degrees, staring at screens. And I spend as much time in there communicating in secure chat rooms as I do flying the Pred. But when I'm in the box I forget I'm in Nevada.

BOMBER: Most of the time we inhabited a silent world. The four engines filled the aeroplane with sound, but apart from take-offs and landings you didn't notice it. But when we came under attack the noise from the anti-aircraft guns and shells from the fighters was absolute mayhem. And the smell of the cordite was cloying, lingering in your nostrils like the stench of death itself.

DRONE: You get so in to what's going on. As the JTAC is talking to me on the radio I can hear the bullets whizzing over his head and all of a sudden I'm pitch in the middle, talking to the inbounds, talking to the Forward Air Controller that's trying to get fast-movers on scene, talking to the guy that's being shot at, trying to coordinate with his Ops Center and the CAOC in Qatar and get assets to these guys. It is a *total immersion*. At that moment – *in* that moment – I'm not thousands of miles away, just eighteen inches – the distance from my eyes to the screen.

BOMBER: Most of the time Butcher Harris, as we called him, ordered area bashes – flattening cities – and to me, quite frankly, they were simply coordinates on a map. 'Essen' and 'Berlin' had no further substance. It was all an exercise in applied geometry. Even more so for my navigator, who elected to wage *his* war from behind his blackout curtain. He preferred not to know what was going on outside. He said he was better off concentrating on getting us to the target and then getting the hell out of there, wrestling with his infernal triangle: course and

airspeed, track and ground speed, wind speed and direction. This triangle of mathematical calculations defined the boundaries of his world. I once persuaded him to put out his navigator's light and open his curtains while we were over Gelsenkirchen. He saw the wall of flak, shouted, "Fuck me!" and never emerged again.



DRONE: We're almost always going after individuals or small groups. Warheads on foreheads. There's nothing abstract or remote about hunting them. My sensor operator juggles the video-feed. Full colour during the day and IR at night when everything turns fuzzy, all whites and greys, and we follow the glowing shapes of bodies. Like ghosts. It's a silent movie. We can't hear anything they might be saying, and even if we could we wouldn't understand it. So there is a limit to how much intimacy you can achieve. But when we're tracking a High Value Target for days on end we get to *know* these people.

BOMBER: We'd fly over the blacked-out continent for hours, and then suddenly in the distance I would see lights on the floor. The Pathfinders had dropped target indicators like huge fireworks, brilliant flowers blossoming and colliding, and the Master of Ceremonies would be circling and in a voice so calm you'd think he was sitting in a deckchair at the seaside he would instruct us by wireless to bomb on the red or the green.

DRONE: With our laser designator we can fix the target. With night vision goggles the beam looks like a finger from the clouds stabbing at the ground. It turns into a brilliant circle once it hits the target, but of course the enemy can't see it, doesn't know anything until it guides the Hellfire in. The Marines love it – they call it 'the light of God'.

BOMBER: The fires looked like sparkling diamonds on black satin. Rivers of gold and red, and black, acrid smoke. We were often flooded with light: searchlights waving their fingers across the sky, groping in a controlled frenzy, and German night-fighters dropping chandelier flares high above us to illuminate the bomber stream. I'd bring us in straight and level for four or five long minutes, the bomb-aimer whispering instructions to me over the intercom. We always felt very vulnerable once the bomb doors were open. Stupid really, because they were only an eighth of an inch thick and wouldn't stop anything.

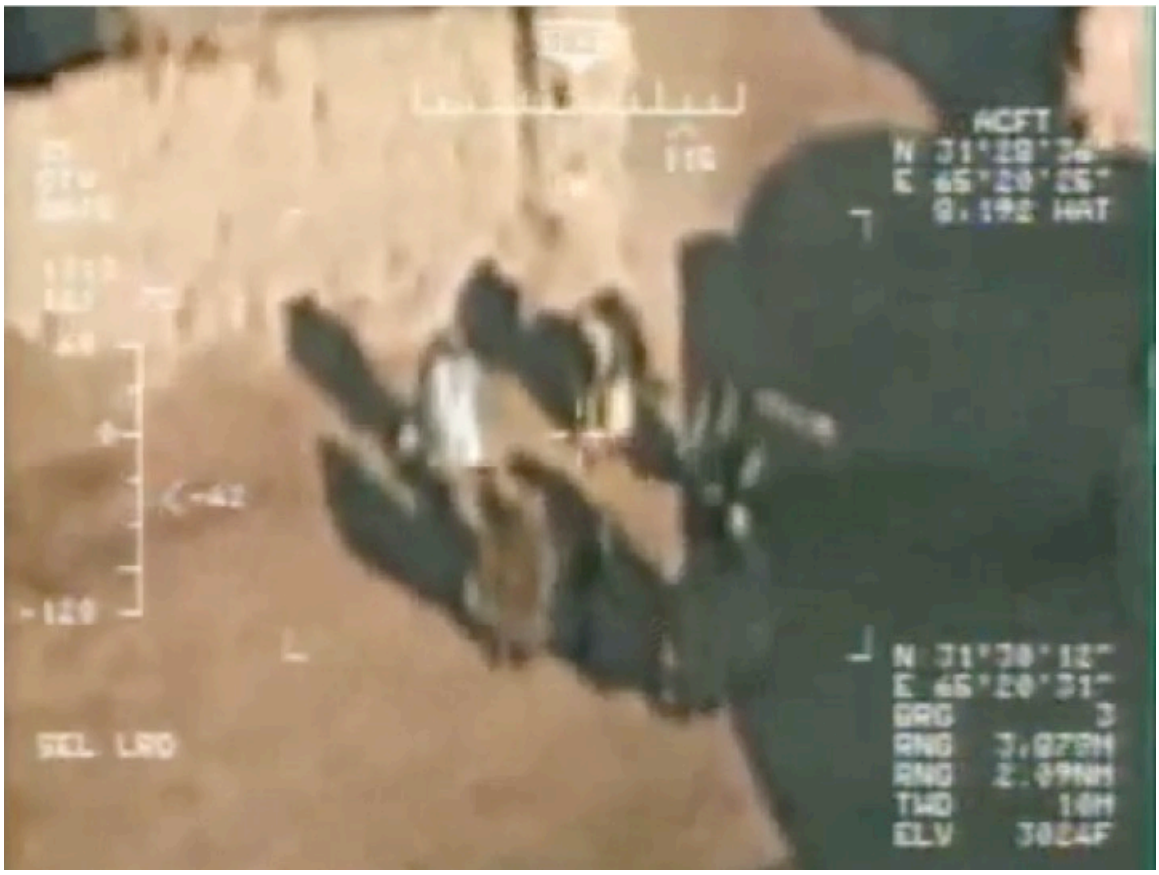
DRONE: As soon as the missile leaves the rack the Pred is so flimsy it bucks – when they first tried it they thought it would rip the wings off.

BOMBER: As soon as we dropped our eggs the aircraft would soar up into the sky above us, which was full of Lancasters we couldn't see. We usually dropped a mix of High Explosives and canisters crammed with incendiaries. The HE tore the buildings apart and the incendiaries set everything alight. The whole city was

picked out in fire like the set piece of a Brock's firework display, clearer than any target map.

DRONE: At 20,000 feet we can see a lot of detail –

BOMBER: At 20,000 feet we couldn't see much detail –



DRONE: I can remember my first kill. As the cross-hairs touched him, his face looked back at me, almost as if he *knew*. No other pilots get to see a target like that. The fast-movers get the call and arrive on station. The images on their targeting pods are tiny and fizzy and they can't see very much: they just zoom in, rifle and then out. The Predator is much slower but our Hellfire missiles are supersonic: if I do it right they get a two second warning from the sonic boom – no time to run.

BOMBER: A German city was always this hellish picture of flame, gunfire and searchlights, unreal because we could not hear it or feel its breath. Perhaps if I had seen the white, upturned faces of people, I'd have felt uneasy. But I never did. We were just doing a job, and we never thought of casualties. Those sparkling lights on the velvet background weren't people to me, just the target.

DRONE: Afterwards the Pred remain on station and we carry out a Battle Damage Assessment. An inventory of body parts. First time I had to do that I was shaking.

BOMBER: The good thing about being in an aeroplane at war is that you never touch the enemy. You never see the whites of their eyes. You drop a four-thousand-pound cookie and kill a thousand people but you never see a single one of them. It's the distance and the blindness that enables one to do these things.

DRONE: The brass constantly warns us about civilian casualties. We have Rules of Engagement and Special Instructions, and these days there's usually a military lawyer in the loop watching our feed before we are cleared hot. But it's not always easy to tell a civilian from an insurgent at 20,000 feet. We make mistakes. Our weapons really are precise – but our intelligence isn't always accurate.

BOMBER: Of course we got it wrong sometimes. Bombing is a science, but it's not an exact science. If the navigator miscalculated the winds we could be dozens of miles adrift and bombing God knew where. A smudge on the radar screen but you had no idea if it was Dusseldorf or Cologne. And even when you were in the right place you were often several miles off the aiming point. The flak made a lot of crews release too early.

DRONE: I know I'm never in any danger. But neither are my fighter buddies. The United States hasn't lost an airplane in combat for over 40 years. The worst thing that could happen to me is carpel tunnel. Most dangerous thing I do each day is drive home on the freeway.

BOMBER: Butcher Harris was stopped for speeding near Bomber Command HQ at High Wycombe and the officer cautioned him that he could have killed somebody. Harris told him he killed thousands every night.

DRONE: The thing about the Pred is that it's deadly but it's also defenceless. It's so slow and noisy that you can only use it against guys who can't fight back.

BOMBER: After we'd bombed the launch site we banked and suddenly I felt the whole airframe shake. I could see flames coming from the port outer and I knew we'd been hit. We started to slide and lose altitude fast. I ordered the chaps to bale out. Last one to go, I unhooked myself from V-Victor, wriggled out of my seat and crawled forward to the escape hatch. It was blowing a gale and I could see the waves below. Checked my harness, shut my eyes and jumped.

DRONE: I've never been shot down. I never will be. I can't be.

[Music: Anne Shelton, 'Coming in on a wing and a prayer']

Lancaster pilot DEREK GREGORY

Predator pilot TOPH MARSHALL

'Comin' in on a wing and a prayer' ANNE SHELTON

Sources: Patrick Bishop, Bomber Boys; Frank Broome, Dead before Dawn; Alan Card, A Bomb Aimer's Story; Omer Fast, 5,000 feet is best; Peter Jacobs, Bomb-Aimer over Berlin; Wally Kasper, Letter to a new grandson; Frank Musgrove, Dresden and the heavy bombers; Matt Martin, Predator; Mark McCurley, Hunter-killer; Jack Myers, Shot at and missed; Murray Peden, A thousand shall fall; Mel Rolfe, Bomber Boys; Daniel Rothenberg, Interview with a US drone pilot; Philip Swan, Diary of a Bomb-Aimer; Kevin Wilson, Bomber Boys; Harry Yates, Luck and a Lancaster