

# War on video: Combat footage, vernacular video analysis and military culture from within

Michael Mair

*University of Liverpool*

Chris Elsey

*De Montfort University*

Paul V. Smith

*University of Manchester*

Patrick G. Watson

*Wilfred Laurier University*

## ABSTRACT

In this article we present an ethnomethodological study of a controversial case of ‘friendly fire’ from the Iraq War in which leaked video footage, war on video, acquired particular significance. We examine testimony given during a United States Air Force (USAF) investigation of the incident alongside transcribed excerpts from the video to make visible the methods employed by the investigators to assess the propriety of the actions of the pilots involved. With a focus on the way in which the USAF investigators pursued their own analysis of language-in-use in their discussions with the pilots about what had been captured on the video, we turn attention to the background expectancies that analytical work was grounded in. These ‘vernacular’ forms of video analysis and the expectancies which inform them constitute, we suggest, an inquiry into military culture from within that culture. As such, attending to them provides insights into that culture.

## INTRODUCTION

A number of studies in recent years have examined war on video from a range of different angles (see e.g. Gregory, 2011, 2015; Jayyusi, 2011; McSorley, 2012; 2014; Mieszkowski, 2012; Nevile, 2013; Kirton, 2016; Kolanoski, 2017; Wilke,

2017).<sup>1</sup> In this article we make an ethnomethodological contribution to this emerging body of work by approaching war on video, following Garfinkel (1967), as a member's phenomenon, i.e. as something taken up and examined within the military by the military in particular ways under particular conditions for particular practical purposes. Drawing on Garfinkel (1967; 2002), Sacks (1992), ordinary language philosophy (e.g. Wittgenstein, 1953; Austin, 1962) and recent work by Vertesi (e.g., 2015), we do this with reference to a case of military action gone wrong: a 'friendly fire' attack during the Iraq War that became the centre of a transatlantic controversy in 2007 when video footage from the incident was leaked to the public during a legal inquest in the UK. In what follows, we present and analyse transcripts from the video as well as transcripts of exchanges which centred on the video between United States Air Force (USAF) investigators and the pilots involved in the incident. Pairing the video with the vernacular 'video analytic' work the USAF investigators were engaged in (Tuma, 2012; Elsey, Mair, Smith and Watson, 2016; Mair, Elsey, Smith and Watson, 2016), we argue these exchanges make visible certain background expectancies against which soldierly conduct in war is assessed. Through an examination of the methods the USAF investigators employed to make sense of the events captured on the video, we are interested in exploring how it is possible to find someone to have exhibited 'competence' despite having done something no 'competent' pilot should do, namely kill their fellow soldiers. We are interested, in other words, in exploring "what is at stake" (Vertesi, 2015: 8) in particular ways of methodically working through instances of war on video. That analytic work, we will argue borrowing from Vertesi, shows us "where ... commitments lie" (Vertesi, 2015: 97).

## VIDEO AND THE ANALYSIS OF MILITARY CULTURES

Video is now recorded as a matter of course during military operations and can be pressed into service for a range of projects and ends, from surveillance and targeting through diagnostics and error-finding to public relations and propaganda. Depending on the circumstances and the hands it happens to be in, the same footage can show, highlight or focus attention on different things; it is not typically exhausted by the uses to which it is put on any particular occasion but remains open to alternative uses (Mair, Elsey, Smith and Watson, 2016). Given the range of possibilities in play, the specific ways in which particular videos are *actually* used on any particular occasion not only therefore say something about the

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<sup>1</sup> These are profitably read alongside studies which reflect on the accountable intelligibility within the military of such things as cultural awareness guidance issued to soldiers (Brown, 2008; Ansonge and Barkawi, 2014), counter-insurgency field manuals (Ansonge, 2010), maps and representations of the battlefield (King, 2006; Saint Amour, 2011) or military memoirs (Woodward and Jenkins, 2018).

specific situation they are used within but also about who is using them. As Vertesi (2015: 101) puts the point:

If seeing is social and ... [different] practices produce and reproduce ... [particular] *modes* of seeing, then how we [see the world] ... is not just a question of what ... [the world] is like ... it is about what *we* understand ... [the world] to be like.

Extending this to the present context, we suggest exercises in viewing and making sense of, here, combat footage within the military can be treated as opportunities to explore how the military understands its engagements in and with the world. An examination of how the footage of the friendly fire incident introduced above was treated in the course of the military inquiry enables us to develop this point empirically. Showing the incident as it unfolded, the leaked footage highlighted not the military's successes but its internal operational fragilities – the difficulties associated with even such seemingly elementary combat-specific tasks as distinguishing friend from foe – and thus offers a rather different view to the videos released to the media during military press briefings or by soldiers on social networking sites (McSorley, 2014; Kirton, 2016). In order to open up issues of military culture with reference to that video, our aim is to examine how the USAF interrogated this footage in order to make sense of the incident and why it took place, focusing, in particular, on material from the published report of the principal military inquiry convened to investigate it – a USAF Friendly Fire Investigation Board. As an inquiry into the culture from within the culture, we are interested in working through what that inquiry might have to tell us about the culture (Garfinkel, 1967: 76-77; Coulter, 1979: 10-11; Eglin, 1980; Wieder and Pratt, 1990: 46; Hester and Eglin, 1997: 20; McHoul, 2004; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2009: 346; Sharrock and Anderson 2011: 47).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Our study also takes up and develops debates about the “extraordinary relations” between experience and testimony raised by Lynch and Bogen (Bogen and Lynch, 1989: 204; Lynch and Bogen, 1996, see Chapter 6 esp.) in relation to their study of the Iran-Contra hearings and by Goodwin's (1994) study of the video analytic work performed under cross examination by expert witnesses working for the Los Angeles Police Department on the Rodney King beating tape at the first trial of the officers involved. We have discussed these important studies in relation to this case elsewhere (Mair, Elsey, Watson and Smith, 2013), however, our analysis here moves in a different direction to both. Not all video analytic work is the same (Mair, Elsey, Smith and Watson, 2016) and it is important to note that the setting we are dealing with here was not an adversarial, public and highly politicised inquiry or courtroom but a behind-closed-doors ‘diagnostic’ session designed to determine what went wrong in this specific incident that was never intended to be made public – due to the known sensitivities surrounding such incidents, sensitivities we discuss further below. What struck us, and what we wanted to focus on for present purposes, is that this was a group of people analysing ‘themselves’ among ‘themselves’, something which itself fuelled public indignation when it

## INVESTIGATING MILITARY OPERATIONS FROM WITHIN

In the late afternoon of Friday the 28th March 2003, eight days into the invasion of Iraq, two US A10 warplanes launched an attack on a convoy of British armoured vehicles, which they had mistaken for an Iraqi force, killing L. Cpl. Matthew Hull, injuring five other soldiers and seriously damaging two of the vehicles they were travelling in. The incident, like many other ‘friendly fire’ attacks, proved highly controversial (see, e.g., Snook, 2002; Hart, 2004; Molloy, 2005; McHoul, 2007; Masys, 2008; Caddell, 2010; Nevile, 2013; Kirke, 2012; Mair, Watson, Elsey and Smith, 2012). However, in this case, the controversy was fuelled by the unprecedented level of access non-military observers gained to details of the incident itself.

Access was gained, first, via the leaked video, which showed the events that led up to the attack from the cockpit of one of the two pilots involved; the pilot who actually fired on the convoy having received clearance to do so from the flight lead. Second, and as a result of the mounting political pressure that followed the video’s release, the official incident reports produced by the US Air Force’s Friendly Fire Investigation Board (hereafter, ‘the Board’) and the UK’s Ministry of Defence Board of Inquiry were (partially) declassified, placing a wealth of additional information relating to the incident in the public domain.

The British and American militaries did not come out of the disclosures well (McHoul, 2007; Kirke, 2012). The official claim, jointly made, that no-one was ultimately to blame for the attack – because the attack was an accident – was subjected to fierce criticism, particularly as it seemed to ignore the evidence provided by the video which showed that the pilots had deliberately fired upon the convoy after failing to identify the vehicles correctly. The conclusions of the British Coroner, Andrew Walker, the UK legal official charged with establishing the cause of L. Cpl. Hull’s death in 2007, sought to overturn the military account. Focusing on the legal rights and wrongs of the initiation of the attack itself as the incident’s central and defining act, his verdict was that it had resulted in an “unlawful killing”, a killing for which the pilots *and* those whose command they were under could be held legally and morally responsible and criminally charged with by the relevant authorities should they have decided to proceed against them (Crown, 2007; Mair, Watson, Elsey and Smith, 2012).

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came to light during the Coroner’s inquest. In some respects, then, Goffman’s sketch of the “workshop complex” (1961: 293-297) and Wieder’s (1974) study of the practical work of telling the convict code as an example of culture-in-action are as closely related to this study as Lynch and Bogen’s analysis of Oliver North’s ‘practical deconstructionism’ or Goodwin’s examination of ‘professional vision’.

Fratricidal deaths, unintentional killings of soldiers by their fellow soldiers through ‘friendly fire’, breach ordinary expectations about death in combat.<sup>3</sup> It is a problem that is regarded with seriousness, one whose occurrence carries outwards from military into public domains. That friendly fire happens at all sits awkwardly with understandings about how soldiers are ‘meant’ to die, i.e. in battle against designated enemies rather than at the hands of those around them.<sup>4</sup> However, and at the same time, within military circles, it is also widely held to be unpreventable due to the ways wars are fought (Hart, 2004; Kirke, 2012). Perhaps in recognition of this, few soldiers are prosecuted when it occurs. Despite being estimated to account for somewhere between 10-15% of all combat deaths in all conflicts (Kirke, 2012), few friendly fire cases in the US military – one of the biggest and most active militaries in the world with the largest numbers of friendly fire deaths accordingly – ever result in court martial prosecutions, and those that do tend to be overturned in appeal (Davidson, 2011). This holds for attacks by US service personnel on other US personnel as much as it does for attacks on, for example, NATO allies.

Against this background, what makes the incident we have chosen to focus on particularly interesting is that it affords rare insight into how specific cases of friendly fire, and the activities which lead to them, are evaluated, judged and accounted for. We have a case here in which we can examine how it is possible for military operatives, when seen from within the culture, to be acknowledged to have acted wrongly while not being held to have been in the wrong for having done so. As this is one of the few occasions where such reasoning, as well as the investigative and evaluative practices which support it and provide its warrant, have been made publicly available, it is worth extended consideration. By examining the case we can, to adapt Wieder and Pratt (1990: 46), explore how someone can remain a recognisably ‘competent’ member of the USAF among other ‘competent’ members despite having done something which all recognise no ‘competent’ member of that culture should do.

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<sup>3</sup> We are not going to set out a definition of ‘friendly fire’ here, however see Mair, Watson, Eley and Smith (2012) as well as Kirke (2012) for extensive discussions. The USAF definition, relevant to what follows as it supplied the grounds for the inquiry we shall examine, is as follows: “Friendly fire: A circumstance in which members of a U.S. or friendly military force are mistakenly or accidentally killed or injured in action by U.S. or friendly military forces actively engaged with an enemy or who are actively directing fire at a hostile force or what is thought to be a hostile force.” (USAF, 2003: 2).

<sup>4</sup> As do, for example, the high numbers of accidental deaths that occur among serving soldiers, with accidents accounting for just over 26% of all service deaths in the UK in 2016 and generally ranging from between a fifth (20%) to a quarter (25%) of deaths over time (see MOD, 2017, and Eulriet, 2014 for a sociological perspective).

We want to concentrate upon the prominent role played by analyses of video in the judgements of the Board investigators in order to further explore the relationship between action and recognition Wieder and Pratt point to (and see also Sacks, 1992: 221, 226). By methodically attending to different aspects of the activities in question with reference to the audio-video and its explication in cross-examination, following the investigators own methodic practices in so doing, we can examine how the Board made links between notions of responsibility and understandings of the practices being a (competent) pilot might be said to have been exhibited by in this specific case.

In order to examine the Board's evaluative practices, we will analyse transcribed excerpts of cockpit footage from the incident itself alongside oral testimony, gathered under questioning, in which Board investigators asked the pilots involved – POPOFF 3/5 and 3/6 – to talk them through what the video could be locally, accountably and relevantly said to show (USAF, 2003: Tab G).<sup>5</sup> Focusing on how the Board pursued the phrase “well clear” in the video, our interest is in how particular video-commentary ‘pairs’ (Garfinkel, 2002) were worked up in the investigation and used to ground judgements about what the pilots had and had not done. Our focus is, therefore, the methods these investigators employed to draw conclusions about what had produced this particular “context for error” (Heritage and Clayman, 2012). This is instructive in two senses. First, by analysing these practices, local forms of vernacular video analysis, we learn something about what is involved when military operatives are held to account (morally, legally, procedurally, etc.) by “cultural colleagues” (Garfinkel, 1967: 11). But, second, we also learn about what is involved in opening ‘military work’ up to view, making it account-able, i.e. observable-reportable (Garfinkel, 1967), and so available for inspection and evaluation in military settings but also beyond.

What we are working with, then, is a situation in which questions about sanctionable conduct as they arise in combat situations were themselves explored as part of an occasioned investigation undertaken for specific practical purposes – an investigation into how this particular incident came to happen and why (Garfinkel, 1967). This was an investigation into the military from within and is illuminating for that very reason: given the circumstances, the Board's inquiries provide a perspicuous setting for a study of the ways in which military operations are made visible, intelligible and accountable as undertakings *of* the military (as opposed to, e.g., rogue individuals acting outside the legitimate scope of sanctionable military action) (Lynch, 1993: 231; Garfinkel, 2002: 181-182).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The only time the pilots were captured on public record and so the only situation where we hear them speak for themselves rather than hearing others speaking on their behalf.

<sup>6</sup> Friendly fire is not an act like the summary execution of positively identified non-combatants which is always deemed to be wrong by both cultural colleagues and external auditors. Killing one's fellows can indeed be deemed to be wrong just as killing civilians can. In any actual case, however, it is up

We begin our examination of how the Board investigators went about their specific investigative task by briefly discussing the report's central findings. We then move on to examine the sections of the cockpit video that the investigators played to the pilots for comment, using excerpts from our own version of the official incident transcript which has been modified to reflect who was speaking to whom at any given moment in time (Mair, Eley, Smith and Watson, 2014; Eley, Mair, Smith and Watson, 2016), paired with the questioning itself.<sup>7</sup> This analysis, a study of vernacular video analytic work, offers a distinctive ethnomethodological approach to the analysis of military culture.<sup>8</sup>

## THE MILITARY INVESTIGATOR AS VIDEO ANALYST

The Board was charged, as US law requires, with responsibility for examining “all the facts and circumstances” surrounding the incident (USAF, 2003: 1). In their attempt to determine how the pilots came to mistake the British force for an Iraqi one, a particular focus of the questions the Board investigators put to the pilots concerned what had happened from the moment they first sighted the vehicles, including the steps they had subsequently taken to establish whether they were friendly or hostile. The Board's report clearly states that ‘what happened’ was never in dispute.<sup>9</sup> The pilots themselves recognised they had mistaken their allies for enemies as soon as they saw the release of blue smoke – indicating friendly vehicles – from the targets on the ground after their attack. As their acknowledged starting point, the Board's task was to work out how and why this mistake occurred, an investigative task in which inspection of the cockpit video and the communicative activity contained within it played a central role.

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to the investigators as to whether it was in fact wrong. Such judgements are not automatic nor are they unprincipled. Any examination of these extensive investigations will quickly attest they are undertaken in good faith. It is the specific manner in which the pilots in this case were absolved of possible blame that is our interest here.

<sup>7</sup> We also recommend readers watch the publicly available video here, particularly the first 8 minutes: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Friendly\\_Fire\\_Iraq.ogv](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Friendly_Fire_Iraq.ogv). For transcript conventions and a glossary of the military terminology used, see Mair, Eley, Smith and Watson (2014).

<sup>8</sup> From our perspective, military cultures, such as they are, find public expression in precisely these kinds of ways, i.e. in the handling of artefacts like flight video recordings and through procedures for making sense of the events they recover in particular sites of inquiry. They are not ‘in’ psychological attitudes or organisational structures but are, rather, constituted by practices and methods for making war and assessing its conduct.

<sup>9</sup> That the pilots saw the British as an Iraqi patrol was not contested. How they came to do so, however, was contested, with the UK Coroner and military inquiries offering divergent, indeed competing accounts.

Drawing together the evidence gathered in the course of their inquiries, the Board ultimately concluded that the pilots misidentified the British troops due to misunderstandings that arose as a consequence of what the Board termed “undefined or non-standard terminology” (USAF, 2003: 26). One phrase in particular, “well clear”, was the subject of extensive scrutiny. Our interest is in what their scrutiny of the use of this phrase tells us about the background expectancies the identification of misunderstanding and its causes rested on in this context (Schegloff, 1987). It is this background evaluative work we wish to bring out. In order to do so, we will focus on the phrase “well clear” and trace the way in which questions connected to its meaning were pursued in the Board’s inquiries, an analysis enabled by working between the video and the transcribed testimony. We start with its first appearance in the cockpit video.

	<b>Air to Ground</b>	<b>Air to Air</b>
→ 1	MANILA HOTEL	Eh POPOFF from
2		MANILA HOTEL, can
3		you confirm you
4		engaged that eh tube
5		and those vehicles?
6		{Automated message}
7		(1)
8	POPOFF 3/5	Affirm Sir. Looks like I
9		have multiple vehicles
10		in revets about
11		{inhales} uk 800
12		meters to the north of
13		your arty rounds. Can
14		you eh switch fire, an
15		uhm, shift fire, try and
16		get some arty rounds
17		on those?
18		(1)
19	MANILA HOTEL	Roger, I understand
20		those were the impacts
21		that uh you observed
22		earlier on my timing?
23		(>1)
24	POPOFF 3/5	Affirmative
25		(>1)
26	MANILA HOTEL	Roger, standby. Let me
27		make sure they’re not

28 on another mission  
 29 (1)  
 → 30 POPOFF 3/6 Hey, I got a four ship.  
 31 Uh looks like we got  
 32 orange panels on 'em  
 33 though. Do they have  
 34 any uh, any eh,  
 35 friendlies up in this  
 36 area?  
 37 =  
 38 MANILA HOTEL I understand that was  
 39 north 800 meters  
 40 (3)  
 41 MANILA HOTEL POPOFF, understand  
 42 that was north 800  
 43 meters?  
 44 (2)  
 → 45 POPOFF 3/5 Confirm, north 800  
 46 meters. {Automated  
 47 message}. Confirm no  
 48 friendlies this far north  
 49 uh. On the ground  
 50 (1)  
 → 51 MANILA HOTEL That is an affirm.  
 52 {Distortion, static}  
 53 You are well clear of  
 54 friendlies  
 55 (.)  
 56 POPOFF 3/5 Copy  
 57 ((lines omitted))  
 58 POPOFF 3/5 Hey dude  
 59 (2)  
 60 POPOFF 3/6 I got a four ship of uh  
 61 vehicles that're evenly  
 62 spaced eh along a eh  
 63 road going north  
 64 ((lines omitted))  
 65 POPOFF 3/6 They look like they  
 66 have orange panels on  
 67 'em though  
 68 (1)  
 → 69 POPOFF 3/5 He told me, he told me

70

there's nobody north of

71

here. No friendlies

*Excerpt 1: Extract from video*

Excerpt one, covering the opening exchanges of that section of the cockpit video in the public domain, involves the three main protagonists involved in this particular incident: the two pilots of POPOFF flight, POPOFF 3/5 and POPOFF 3/6, flight lead and 'wingman' respectively; and MANILA HOTEL, the 'Ground Forward Air Controller' or GFAC that the pilots of POPOFF flight were working with in order to provide 'close air support' to Coalition forces in and around an area to the north west of Basra. As the Board report revealed, Excerpt one begins moments after POPOFF 3/5 completed a successful attack run, coordinated with MANILA HOTEL, against Iraqi missile launchers – had the video started 30 seconds earlier, POPOFF 3/5 would have been captured in the moment of firing. At the start of the excerpt, MANILA HOTEL checks in with POPOFF 3/5 to confirm the attack had been successful. POPOFF 3/5 confirms it had and then directs MANILA HOTEL's attention to a secondary target, a group of Iraqi vehicles occupying a fortified embankment, asking him to order a switch in artillery fire from the previous target (the one POPOFF 3/5 had just destroyed) to this new one, a short 800 meters to the north.

Just after MANILA HOTEL signs off to contact the artillery unit, POPOFF 3/6 tells POPOFF 3/5 he has spotted a convoy of four vehicles (a 'four ship', the British patrol) some 2-3km to the west of the targets they have just engaged. Although it was not standard issue, the vehicles had what looked to be orange panelling, something Coalition forces use to signal their friendly status to aerial support. As these may well have been Coalition troops, POPOFF 3/6 asks POPOFF 3/5, who was responsible for air-to-ground communication, to ask MANILA HOTEL on the air-to-ground radio channel if there are any friendly forces in the area. POPOFF 3/5 duly does so and MANILA HOTEL, at lines 53-54, assures him they are "well clear".

The problem is, however, that MANILA HOTEL had not been informed of the location of these new targets or even that there were new targets because he had not heard the discussion on what was an air-to-air channel only. Which area was clear of friendlies was, therefore, never exactly specified. As the video shows, from this point on the pilots worked on the assumption that it was the area they were *currently* in, not the area they had *just* attacked. It was this locational misunderstanding, one which was interactionally embedded in the course of their exchanges with MANILA HOTEL, that led the pilots to misidentify the British troops in the belief they had to be hostile (as they could not be friendly given the assurances received). How this initial exchange was taken up by the Board can be seen in excerpts two and three below.

- 1 Board investigator They let you know that in that area you'll be well  
 2 clear of friendlies. When somebody tells you that, what  
 3 does that bring up in your mind? What does that mean to  
 4 you?  
 5 POPOFF 3/5 It means that, in my mind, well clear means that I can  
 6 concentrate on the tactics of how I'm going to kill  
 7 that target. And look at the run-ins relative to wind,  
 8 sun-angle, that kind of stuff ... that's what I'm looking  
 9 at primarily ...  
 10 Board investigator Is there any kind of a number? Or distance that you  
 11 attach to that?  
 12 POPOFF 3/5 I mean, if I was going to pick a number, I'd say 4-5  
 13 kiles [km] away, is ... ish  
 14 Board investigator Approximately somewhere in there?  
 15 POPOFF 3/5 Yes.

*Excerpt 2: Extract from POPOFF 3/5's testimony (USAF, 2003: G7-G8)*

- 1 Board investigator So they [the 'four ship'] were on the north-south road  
 2 ... Can you describe what the vehicles looked like?  
 3 POPOFF 3/6 There were four vehicles, rectangular in shape and they  
 4 were spaced out probably a couple, a hundred meters or  
 5 so apart. They were heading north.  
 6 Board investigator [We] hear well clear friendlies. To your mind that's  
 7 meaning what?  
 8 POPOFF 3/6 That means there's no one in this whole area that we're  
 9 supposed to be attacking, in this complex here.  
 10 Shouldn't be, as far as initially there. That there's  
 11 no one in that area.

*Excerpt 3: Extract from POPOFF 3/6's testimony (USAF, 2003: G33)*

Unsurprisingly, given the central role of locational misunderstandings in the incident, the Board investigators were keen to understand what had generated and sustained them.<sup>10</sup> As Excerpts one, two and three demonstrate, their attempts to pin down the meaning of the phrase "well clear" from the pilots' perspective took them onto interpretive terrain as they sought to ascertain not just what the phrase 'meant' but also what consequences its use had in the context of the incident as a whole.

Excerpts two and three show the investigators, through their questioning of the pilots, seeking 'instructions' on how the pilots, at the time, had heard and

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<sup>10</sup> For an account of the pilots' movement across and around this particular part of what was a much wider, dispersed and fragmented 'battle space' see Nevile's innovative reconstruction (2013).

understood the phrase (Garfinkel, 1967). This line of questioning was not simply pursued to help them decode the phrase in literal terms however. Had they been interested in establishing a general working definition, this would conceivably have been enough but they also focused on the action the phrase was woven into. That is, they sought to work out how it appeared in and became relevant to the actions of the participants at the time, and these initial exchanges paved the way for further inquiries designed to establish the practical conditions under which the use of these words had ‘done’ certain things (Wittgenstein, 1953; Austin, 1962; Garfinkel, 1967; Fish, 1978).

In order to gain a better understanding of how the category “well clear” had specifically worked to shape the pilots’ actions in this particular case, they sought to understand the wider activities it was employed within (Coulter, 1979: 44). In pursuing that understanding, they opened up the work the pilots had engaged in before attacking the British troops. This led them, among other things, to examine differences in successive instances of the employment of “well clear”. This is best brought out in a further pairing, beginning with Excerpt four.

	Air to Ground	Air to Air
1	POPOFF 3/5	POPOFF for MANILA 3,
2		is MANILA 3/4 in this eh
3		area?
4		(3)
5	MANILA HOTEL	Eh say again?
6		(.)
7	POPOFF 3/5	MANILA HOTEL, is
8		MANILA 3/4 in this area?
9		(1)
10	MANILA HOTEL	Eh negative. Understand
11		they are <u>well</u> clear of that
12		now.
13		(2)
14	POPOFF 3/4	OK, copy

*Excerpt 4: Extract from video*

Faced with the incongruity of the orange panelling, the mark of a friendly force, the pilots had to work to reconcile what they were seeing with what they thought they had been told – that there were no friendly forces nearby. They did not proceed directly to attack, taking the information they had been given for granted, but took additional precautions, initiating further checks to confirm the vehicles on the ground were definitely not friendlies. In Excerpt four, we see POPOFF 3/5 try again. Having undertaken several visual checks on the convoy, checks that did

little to clarify the ambiguous, indeterminate status of the vehicles' orange paneling, which stubbornly refused to resolve into something either categorically friendly or categorically hostile, POPOFF 3/5 takes a different tack. Rather than ask MANILA HOTEL directly about the presence of friendly forces, he asks him whether *another* GFAC, MANILA 3/4, and thus the infantry force he was embedded with, might still be in the area. Once again, the answer appears definitive: "they are well clear of that now". Once again, however, what being clear of "that" actually means is not settled and the pilots continue to assume MANILA HOTEL is referring to *their* position, a position he was not in fact aware of.

During the inquiry POPOFF 3/5 was queried on this exchange: "You ask about MANILA 3/4, and the reason for that [was]? (USAF, 2003: G14). POPOFF 3/5's response demonstrated the additional confirmatory work involved: "He [POPOFF 3/6] sees military vehicles with orange panels, and I'm thinking maybe friendlies are here for some, somehow they got in here. So the only friendlies I thought of that could be here was MANILA 3/4. Somehow they strayed in there, so, that's why I called for his position."

However, attempts to definitively resolve the ambiguities of "well clear" did not end there, or with POPOFF 3/5. POPOFF 3/6 also attempted to take the matter up with MANILA HOTEL again, and again indirectly, as we see in Excerpt five.

	Air to Ground	Air to Air
1	POPOFF 3/6	Let me ask you one
2		question
3		(.)
4	POPOFF 3/5	What's that?
5		(.)
6		The question is
7	=	
8	MANILA HOTEL	(An I need a first shot on
9		that eh adjustment from
10		you, north, the previous
11		impact) {beep, beep}
12		(3)
13	POPOFF 3/6	{To MANILA HOTEL}
14		Hey, tell me what type of
15		rocket launchers you got
16		up here?
17		(5)
18	POPOFF 3/6	{To POPOFF 3/5} I think
19		they're rocket launchers
20		(1)

21 MANILA HOTEL {Distortion} MANILA  
 22 HOTEL, you were stepped  
 23 on, say again

*Excerpt 5: Extract from video*

Although they had been given “blanket release” by MANILA HOTEL to attack any non-friendly targets they identified in the area of the “kill box” they had been called in to patrol (USAF 2003: 8; Mair, Watson, Elsey and Smith, 2012), the pilots continued to hold back. Working together, and in light of further reassurances regarding the location of “friendlyes”, they eventually concluded that the makeshift panelling that the British troops had used to augment the standard orange strips on their vehicles had to be some kind of Iraqi weapons system. Based on this, in Excerpt five we find the pilots conferring, with POPOFF 3/6 about to put a question to POPOFF 3/5 when he is interrupted by MANILA HOTEL, who cuts in to request support for the artillery fire he is attempting to train on the fortified embankment that POPOFF 3/5 had brought to his attention in Excerpt one. POPOFF 3/6 takes this opportunity to ask MANILA HOTEL, on the only occasion he addresses him directly, about the weapons systems Iraqi forces might be deploying in this area, in an attempt to find out whether the orange panels might be rocket launchers. This may not look like a check on the presence of friendly forces but it works in that way. Coalition forces do not employ rocket launchers on vehicles so a confirmation that rocket launchers were being used in the area would rule out the presence of ‘friendlyes’. The reverse holds true too: were MANILA HOTEL to have let them know there were no rocket launchers in the area, this would have ruled out the convoy as a threat.

However, due to radio interference, MANILA HOTEL did not get to hear POPOFF 3/6’s request for further information and the question was not repeated. Nor was MANILA HOTEL, as he had not been informed of the presence of the ‘four ship’, in any position to query what this interrupted talk of rocket as opposed to missile launchers (the targets he was aware of and all talk to now had focused on) might have been about. By now convinced that they were dealing with a group of vehicles armed with rocket launchers attempting to flee the area in order to regroup a safe distance from Coalition forces, POPOFF 3/5 cleared POPOFF 3/6 to attack. Approximately four minutes after the vehicles were first sighted, POPOFF 3/6 thus launched the first of the two attack runs which resulted in the death of L. Cpl. Hull.

Another crucial moment, then, one involving another indirect attempt to confirm who might be where, this was also examined by the Board. POPOFF 3/6 was asked specifically: “you’re asking MANILA HOTEL what kind of rocket launchers they have up there. Is that correct?” In reply POPOFF 3/6 stated: “I think it was ... to POPOFF [3/5] ... I can’t remember who it was that I was asking that question.” (USAF, 2003: G35).

What is notable about this exchange is that the deep seated and ramifying misalignments between pilot and ground which characterised this incident made it difficult for the pilots themselves to make sense of what was going on in the exchanges after the fact. As Young notes: “[if] the acts of individuals who assume they are engaged in coordinated social interaction are not properly aligned with each other, interaction becomes problematic” (1995: 252; see also Schegloff, 1987). Here we see the consequences of such misalignments in battlefield conditions, namely a locally produced “fracture” (Mort and Smith, 2009: 223) in its complex ecologies of action and interaction that resulted in all parties losing track of what was going on – a fracture with fateful consequences.

#### LOCATION REQUESTING AND REPORTING AS A MARKER OF COMPETENCE

As can be seen from the discussion above, the Board repeatedly sought to clarify how the phrase “well clear” was serially (mis)understood during the incident. In so doing, their questioning sought and elicited commentaries on the courses of action within which the succession of requests by the pilots concerning the location of friendly forces had been embedded. This shifts the focus from any standalone meaning the phrase “well clear” might putatively be thought to possess (Fish, 1978, Goffman, 1981), to what was practically involved in the act of posing questions which received “well clear” as their answer as the incident unfolded. The exchanges with the investigators allow us to see, for instance, that while the pilots did *receive* assurances they were ‘well clear’ twice, they actually *sought* reassurance on three occasions: firstly by asking whether there were *any* friendlies nearby, then by asking whether *particular* friendlies were nearby and finally by attempting to ask about the *specific type* of enemy armaments in the area.

When these exchanges are examined in terms of what the requests for the location of friendly forces were doing in practical terms, they thus make visible the work of identifying the unknown force by progressively building up a characterisation of it through a series of confirmatory and disconfirmatory checks (Smith, 1978). In the Board’s questioning, the sequential and categorical features of those actions and interactions are explored together and treated as intertwined. As a consequence, location requesting emerges as more than ‘just talk’: it is instead an example of language-in-use tied to the “setting activities” (Sacks, 1992: 512-522) within which location requesting and reporting acquired practical significance – in this case ‘securing an area for infantry from the air’, the objective of close air support.

Handling the complexities of those activities in their midst, and engaging in checks while doing so, is precisely what the Board’s examination of the video with the pilots shows is expected of competent military personnel – it is this background set of expectancies, we suggest, that are made available in and through the

Board investigator’s questioning; it is what they were engaged in checking *for* as they progressively worked through the video.

Additionally, what the exchanges show is that understanding is *not* being treated solely as a matter of the ‘correct’ terminology in this context – any more than *misunderstanding* is solely a matter of its ‘incorrect’ usage. Understanding, like misunderstanding, is, instead, here treated as accountably woven into, and consequential as part of, the collaborative accomplishment of the specific tasks military personnel were engaged in performing. Based on this, we come to see why the use of arguably more ‘precise’ forms of language, like coordinates, may be no guarantee of mutual understanding either – they too can fail to mesh with collaborative activities and so lose their sense within them (see also Whalen, Zimmerman and Whalen, 1988; Froholdt, 2010, 2015). This comes across very clearly in Excerpt six below.

- 1 Board investigator So you were actually given co-ordinates that were close  
 2 to 3724 and you actually picked up the target based on  
 3 the talk on more of a 380235, would that be accurate?  
 4 POPOFF 3/6 It’d be about 378 yeah, 235. [Reference page H-3, Pilot  
 5 Interview Co-ordinates Map Red Plot #3]  
 6 Board investigator OK.  
 7 POPOFF 3/6 So, it was a good ways away from what the actual  
 8 co-ordinates were. And as he described it all the GFAC,  
 9 they were saying yeah that’s the target, and so, I  
 10 mean, they kept on moving south and east of the  
 11 original co-ordinates, I mean by quite a ways as you  
 12 can see here, from where the rockets were put in and  
 13 trying to get talk-ons and they say yeah shoot there  
 14 and it turns out that’s not the right one and then  
 15 finally they got us all the way down to in this area.  
 16 Board investigator Over into the 378235 area? OK, and did that cause some  
 17 confusion to have them reference the ...  
 18 POPOFF 3/6 Oh, it did.

*Excerpt 6: Extract from testimony (USAF, 2003: G27)*

Not only can the use of seemingly precise coordinates actually exacerbate confusion, as Excerpt six demonstrates, they can also fail to definitively dispel it. As the video shows, in the aftermath of the attack the pilots were contacted by several parties telling them there was “friendly armour” in their area and that they were involved in a “blue-on-blue” situation and should desist (see Mair, Elsey, Smith and Watson (2014) for further discussion). Coordinates were given several times as part of this. However, it was not until the pilots saw blue smoke that what they had just done was finally brought home to them.

As Sharrock has noted: “a notion is not too ‘vague’, it is too vague for some purpose or use” (Sharrock, cited in Tsilipakos, 2012: 175, see also Wittgenstein, 1953: §88). In other words, whether something is vague or imprecise (or the reverse) is not something that can be decided outside specific practices, interactions and settings. Whether a phrase like “well clear” or a set of coordinates is fit for the task at hand is practically determined in the course of using it. In this incident, the competent (though erroneous) use of locational formulations like “well clear” was found by the Board to be embedded in the temporally organised courses of practical action, produced in and through direct and indirect collaboration with others, that are culturally understood and taken-for-granted features of live combat operations. Their use was part and parcel of ‘clearing the area of hostiles’ in this case – the course of action the pilots wrongly believed themselves to be engaged in and which they wrongly thought they had been understood by others to be engaged in too.<sup>11</sup>

Working within the interpretive schemas supplied by these background expectancies and orienting to the competencies the pilots would have been expected to display in proceeding as they did (e.g., showing appropriate reticence, not rushing to engage, checking and checking again, and so on), the Board was thus able to find, on the basis of the evidence of the video, that despite the incident’s outcome, the pilots had acted properly given what they had been told and had reasonably understood by what they had been told. In contrast to the UK Coroner’s methods of working with the video, here the ‘competence’ exhibited by the pilots in their locational checks becomes the focus while the rights and wrongs of the outcome, the fatal attack, are de-emphasised. That an attack produces the ‘wrong’ deaths, in other words, is not the primary issue: it is whether that attack came about and was undertaken in the ‘right’ way given what is expected of military personnel in such contexts. ‘Wrong deaths’, that is, are revealed in this cultural setting to be deaths that come about due to ‘wrong procedure’ not due to the killing of the ‘wrong people’.<sup>12</sup> On these grounds, L.Cpl. Matthew Hull’s death could be found to be normal or routine, i.e. an outcome of what competent pilots normally and routinely do.

## CONCLUSION: WAR ON VIDEO AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

In order to make sense of the pilots’ consequential orientations to location as captured on video, the Board’s analyses had to grapple with the “local cultural

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<sup>11</sup> As Garfinkel once put it (1952: 367 cited in Koschmann, 2011: 435): “The big question is not whether actors understand each other or not. The fact is they do understand each other, that they *will* understand each other but the catch is that they will understand each other regardless of how they *would* be understood.”

<sup>12</sup> By corollary, killing the ‘right people’ in the ‘wrong way’ would also be open to censure.

materials” (Basso, 1988: 100) that were constitutive features of the pilots’ actions. Insofar as their inquiries involved an explication of locational work as a localised and localising cultural practice (Garfinkel, 1967: 5; Eglin, 1980), they offer a particular way of accounting for this particular incident, one in which (mis)locating is treated as intimately tied to (mis)identifying as twinned sides of the same praxiological coin. If the (mis)locating is understandable, on this reading, then so is the (mis)identifying. Nonetheless, despite its empirical elements, their account remains a normative one; soldiers carrying out their duties ‘properly’ and in line with the letter and spirit of the rules ought not to kill their fellows. Axiomatically, friendly fire incidents *should not* occur. But this is a brand of normativity that stops short of being legislative – i.e. although they should not, it is recognised such incidents do and will happen recurrently.

In raising these issues our aim is to point to the specific ways in which the methods the Board employed to arrive at such conclusions topicalised war on video – that is opened it up, and made it accountable (Lynch, 1993: xx). In particular, the Board’s workings highlight the sets of expectations against which soldierly work is to be assessed and so is made assessable within a military setting. That is, military personnel, here pilots and ground controllers, in the midst of combat and the contingencies which characterise it, are to be procedurally competent, making clear to those around them what they are doing as they are doing it. However, they are not just to ‘follow procedure’; they are to do so artfully and in ways that take into account the very uncertainties that make action and communication expectably problematic in the field. If they have followed procedures as well as could have been expected under the circumstances, they cannot be blamed for the consequences – they were working, as directed, to implement orders to the best of their abilities in line with the contingencies of the situation.

We thus learn three things from the video-commentary pairings. First, we gain a much better sense of the kind of event friendly fire constitutes within the organisational culture of the military – a regrettable but potentially accountable and understandable one. Secondly, and as a result, we learn something about that organisational culture – about how the military reasons about its operations and the actions of its personnel as well as about the understandings that are drawn on to evaluate them and make them make sense, leveraged here by the Board investigators’ through *their* analytic work with video. The upshot here: within it there is scope for terrible mistakes to be committed by recognisably ‘competent’ personnel going about their job in the culturally expected way. But, thirdly, we also come to see more clearly what generated and sustained the controversy over this case – a dispute over how the video should be interrogated so as to yield appropriate conclusions about the rights and wrongs of POPOFF flight’s actions.

As mentioned briefly above, the Board’s judgements were grounded in different ways of working through the video to those employed by the UK Coroner. We have, in other words, two distinct methods with distinct practical purposes. The

Coroner's method moved inwards to focus on the rights and wrongs of the individual act of firing, and he sought to set that act against external standards (like the Laws of Armed Conflict) for the purposes of judging its legal and moral propriety. The Board's method moved outwards, setting the pilots' acts in the wider fields of activity of which they were a part for the purposes of judging their operational propriety (see Snook 2002: 41). One isolates, the other embeds: one employs external, the other internal standards. It was the clash between these competing approaches that provided the grounds of the dispute over what the video could be said to be evidence of – an unlawful killing or a tragic but ultimately blameless mistake.<sup>13</sup>

We do not wish to suggest an equivalence between these contrasting methods, we want to stress the point that they are embedded in and constitutive of different kinds of practice. With that attention to difference firmly in mind, we have attempted to show that it is possible to come to an understanding of the way the military reasons about itself in specific situations from the inside via an analysis of the kinds of cultural inquiries it undertakes into its own practices and how that contrasts with other approaches. How combat footage is analysed, to quote Vertesi (2015: 161), “reflect[s] and project[s]” local social, cultural and organisational orders. As practiced ways of seeing, they are interwoven with those orders. A particular orientation to what we might call, following Sudnow (1965), “normal deaths” was certainly on display in the military way of seeing in this case. Insofar as understanding that orientation is instructive, offering insights not just into specific ways of seeing particular kinds of actions but also of seeing those who undertake such actions, we feel it is worth drawing out its bases and opening it out to discussion. We hope to have made some progress in pursuing that objective here.

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<sup>13</sup> See Watson (2018a&b) for a discussion of how video evidence is equally problematic in incidents of police violence.

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