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**Chapter title:**

Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis and the Study of Action-in-Interaction in Military Settings

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**Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis and the Study of Action-in-Interaction in Military Settings**

**Introduction and Chapter Summary**

In this chapter we discuss what ethnomethodology and conversation analysis can contribute to studies of the military, specifically understandings of ‘action-in-interaction’ in military settings. The chapter is methodologically focused and explores how work in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis provides an alternative way of approaching the problems posed in studying the different forms of practice that constitute ‘soldierly work’. Rather than approach these issues in the abstract, and in line with the central thrust of ethnomethodological (e.g. Garfinkel 1967, 2002; Heritage 1984; Lynch 2007) and conversation analytic studies (e.g. Heritage 1995; Pomerantz & Fehr 1997; Sacks 1995; Schegloff 2007), we shall outline this approach through a discussion of the methods employed, and difficulties encountered, in the course of research we conducted into a specific case. This was a fatal ‘blue-on-blue’ or ‘friendly fire’[[1]](#footnote-1) attack on British infantry by American aircraft during the Second Gulf War (see Mair, Watson, Elsey & Smith 2012; Mair, Elsey, Watson & Smith 2013). What initially drew us to the incident was the availability of a cockpit video-tape that was leaked to the public during a controversial coroner’s inquest in 2007, some four years after the attack took place. Crucially this videotape contained the audio communications between the two pilots involved in the attack and the ground forward air controller (GFAC) they were working with, providing unparalleled access to such an incident as it unfolded. Our interest in the footage was twofold. We wanted, firstly, to see what insights we could glean from data of this kind about combat as experienced first-hand, ‘first-time-through’[[2]](#footnote-2); and, secondly, we wanted to look at what the three official inquiries made of the incident (including two military boards of inquiry, alongside the coroner’s inquest) and explore how they had used (and problematised) the video as a resource for analysing the actions of the pilots.

This methodological strategy reflects the ‘duplex’ forms of analysis that ethnomethodology and conversation analysis rest upon (Watson 2009): in this case, an analysis of the pilot’s communicative and sense-making practices coupled with an analysis of locally situated reconstructions of those practices by a number of authoritative auditors. This analysis of members’ reconstructions of practices, rather than ours as researchers, involved us ‘tacking’ between the video and after-the-fact accounts of what the video could be said to show. In order to explain how we proceeded, we will initially discuss the problems we encountered in transcribing the video and what those difficulties themselves revealed about what the pilots were doing. After that, we turn to the ways in which we established links between the video and the reports published by the official inquiries, reports which offered competing and apparently conflicting interpretations of what happened and why. Through two examples, we shall suggest, again, that this reveals something about what is involved in holding military operatives to account morally and legally, but also in opening up ‘soldierly work’ to view, making it account-able, i.e. observable-reportable, and so available for inspection and evaluation in specific settings like military tribunals, courtrooms or even in the workspaces of journalists or academic researchers. Based on this, and having linked our research to wider work in the field as we go, we will conclude, finally, by returning to the question of what ethnomethodological and conversation analytic research adds to our understanding of action-in-interaction in military settings: namely, a focus on its specificities and the forms of organisation internal to it.

The chapter has a simple trajectory. The first section provides an account of how we came to embark on our work, providing an overview of previous military research informed by ethnomethodology (EM) and/or conversation analysis (CA) to demonstrate the types of data available and the scope of work in this field. We do so to outline the guiding methodological principles of these research traditions and the types of claims they seek to make as well to highlight lines of similarity and difference with other work in the field. Having provided some background we then explore common research ‘moves’ and provide demonstrations using three empirical examples. Demonstration 1 looks at different transcription conventions and how presentational issues impact the reading and understanding of the materials documented in transcripts of action-in-interaction during combat (Mair, Watson, Elsey & Smith 2012). Demonstration 2 looks at the coupling of different data sources (the cockpit video and military reports) to explore how questions of ‘evidence’ and first-hand experience are resolved in military settings (Mair, Elsey, Watson & Smith 2013). Finally, demonstration 3 looks at how military practice is opened up and explained in practical terms via materials gathered under questioning.

**Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis and Studies of ‘Soldierly Work’**

In early 2007, like many others, our attention was caught by a controversy developing around a UK coroner’s inquest into the death of a British infantryman, Lance Corporal of Horse Matthew Hull, following an attack on his unit by American A-10 fighter planes just a few days into the second Iraq War. Andrew Walker, the Oxfordshire assistant deputy coroner who was overseeing the inquest, had requested that *all* of the information held by the UK and US forces relating to the case be released to him so he could arrive at a verdict. This request was not met. After a series of tussles that pitted judicial process against governmental interest, the US and UK eventually conceded the existence of additional evidence and turned over a cockpit video showing the attack from the perspective of one of the two pilots involved as well as the reports from two inquiries into the incident – the reports of the US Air Force’s Friendly Fire Investigation Board and of the UK Ministry of Defence’s Board of Inquiry (British Army 2004). The video was subsequently leaked to the Sun newspaper in the UK, before it and the reports were finally and grudgingly released into the public domain later that year.

As the reports showed, the US and UK militaries had concluded that no-one was ultimately to blame for the attack because the attack was an accident. By contrast the assistant deputy coroner Andrew Walker, based on the same evidence, concluded L. Cpl. Hull’s death was an unlawful killing, an illegal act which the pilots were criminally responsible for. The UK press sided with the coroner and, in the period which followed Walker’s verdict, the pilots’ actions as well as the military response to them were widely denounced.

The controversy piqued our analytic curiosity. We were particularly interested in how one and the same piece of evidence – the video – could be marshalled in support of, not just divergent, but seemingly *incompatible* interpretations of what it could be said to be evidence of – the conclusions of the military boards versus the coroner’s verdict and media commentary. An initial inspection of the video confirmed our suspicion that matters were not as clear-cut or unequivocal as those promoting a given reading might suggest – events on the video were complex and far from easy to unpack – and we decided to pursue the issues further.

Just what the video could be said to show when viewed in particular ways for particular practical purposes became our focus and we began to gather materials relating to the case from a variety of quarters. In addition to the video and the ‘official’ transcript of the exchanges between the military personnel involved (which we found to be frequently misleading and inaccurate – deficiencies we sought to remedy in producing our own transcript, see demonstration 1 below as well as Mair, Elsey, Smith and Watson 2014), we obtained copies of both military board reports (after some digging on the UK Ministry of Defence website) and, from a different source, the minutes of the coroner’s verdict. We also followed media coverage as well as emerging academic responses to the incident and its subsequent fallout. As we have no military background or training, we were particularly interested in instructional resources. Alongside useful media work, we thus read military training and field manuals and official literatures relating to the conduct of battlefield operations. But we also sought out and interviewed personnel either involved in the case or with experience of military air operations and/or the law to ask them to talk to us through the video to give us insights into how they made sense of what the pilots were doing. These interviews aided our understanding of military language and terminology in use, as well as insights into the various types of mission and their import, and thus provided background information from which our analysis could proceed[[3]](#footnote-3).

The distinctive character of our ways of working did not, however, lie in the data we drew upon. Despite bringing together the most comprehensive and diverse body of materials relating to this particular case that we know of, working with video, textual and interview data is by no means unusual. Nor were we the only academic researchers working on this particular case. The incident and the controversy which centred upon it have received a great deal of academic (let alone journalistic) coverage (see, e.g., McHoul 2007; Masys 2008; Caddell 2010, Howe, Poteet, Xue, Kao and Giammanco 2010; Kirke 2012) including conversation analytic work (e.g. Nevile 2009, 2013). Moreover, as there were no direct ethnomethodological precursors to our study, in developing our analyses we drew on work by those with a range of different approaches – ethnographic studies (e.g. King 2006; Hockey 2009), organisational studies (e.g. Snook 2002; Kirke 2012), the ‘normal’ accidents literature (e.g. Hicks 1993), studies (including ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies) of inquiries into the conduct of war and military operations (e.g. Benson & Drew 1978; Lynch & Bogen 1996; Boudeau 2007, 2012; Rappert 2012) as well as studies of representations of battle, the soldier’s work and their public reception (e.g. Sacks 1995 [‘Navy Pilot’ example pp. 205-222, 306-311]; Brown 2008; Woodward and Jenkings 2011; Mieszkowski 2012) – in order to get our analytical bearings. While we have taken a great deal from studies in these areas, we nonetheless depart from them in particular ways and it is in those particular ways that whatever distinctiveness we can claim for our work lies.

Rather than produce an analysis of our own over-and-above the *in situ* accounts of the parties directly involved in the incident or involved in evaluating its consequences after-the-fact, we were interested in the methodic practices employed by the pilots, coroners and military investigators and how *they* (co-)produced analyses and exhibited, demonstrated and displayed those analyses *as part of the work* they were engaged in, making those analyses *publicly available* to us as analysts in the process (Rizan, Elsey, Lemon, Grant & Monrouxe 2014). In a study of this kind, as Schegloff puts it (1991: 50-52):

“... characterizations of [what] the participants [are doing have to] be grounded in aspects of what is going on that are demonstrably relevant *to* the participants, and at that moment – at the moment [that is] that whatever we are trying to provide an account of occurs ... [the crucial question being] how to examine the data so as to be able to show that the parties were, with and for one another, demonstrably oriented to those aspects of who they are, and those aspects of their context, which are respectively implicated in the “social structures” which we may wish to relate to [their actions and interactions].”

This is no simple feat and, in the three ‘demonstrations’ that follow, we want to show how such a study might be built up, focusing initially on the work of the pilots before showing how that work was taken up and analysed in the investigative context of the military boards.

**Three Demonstrations**

***Demonstration 1: First Moves with Data***

An obvious first move when working with audio-visual material – whether for research or other purposes – is to transcribe it. One of the great advantages of audio and video data, something long recognised within ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, is that it is possible to replay and scrutinise the interactions such materials capture, honing in on details that would be missed were we to solely rely on, for instance, our own impressions of what people were saying and doing. Transcripts are extremely useful in this, making it possible to identify particularly interesting aspects of the materials at hand and revisit them again and again as they play out in real-time. It has been the ‘abiding preference’ of ethnomethodological and conversation analytic research to work with transcribed audio-video materials precisely because of this – and such studies have generated deep insights into interaction as a social practice. However, as we shall go on to discuss, transcripts are never entirely analytically ‘innocent’ or neutral records: compiling a (written) representation of the material, entextualising it (Watson 2009: 10), is always undertaken in the light of some particular set of practical aims. As such, different ways of presenting interactional exchanges have consequences for how the exchanges themselves can subsequently be made sense of and understood, often in quite subtle but powerful ways.

As mentioned above, the data we were working with, the video of the incident, came pre-transcribed[[4]](#footnote-4) and, by and large, it was this transcript which was used by the coroner and invoked in the media debate in support of (caustic) judgements about the pilots’ actions. When we came to watch and rewatch the video alongside that transcript, however, we realised it was deficient in several ways. Much of the dialogue was, for instance, mistranscribed and, in several places, who was actually speaking was misattributed, with the different parties confused for one another. As a consequence, we began to work on our own transcript, one that would correct these errors and enable us to arrive at a more accurate picture of what was going on. We did not appreciate just how difficult a task this would prove to be – despite the approximately 15 minutes of footage having been substantially transcribed already, it took us almost a year to produce a transcript we were happy with[[5]](#footnote-5).

The difficulties we encountered were not technical distractions from our analytic task but proved to be instructive in and of themselves. As we came to see, confusions in the official transcript as to who was speaking at a given moment reflected confusions between the parties about exactly the same thing. Mistranscribed utterances were likewise tied to exchanges in which the sense of what was being said was also opaque to the pilots and the ground controller they were working with. In other words, the mistakes in the transcript helped us to see that this was a situation in which who was talking to who, and for what purposes, was itself unclear throughout, something directly linked to the incident’s tragic finale.

Our attempts to rectify these surface mistakes in the official transcript led us to something we came to see as a much more problematic feature of the transcript – the *linear* way it depicted the parties’ exchanges and the inferences that were being made as a result of the deployment of its conventions as a particular kind of formatting device. Take for instance, the excerpt below which captures the opening set of exchanges in the video. In it we hear POPOFF flight (comprising POPOFF 35, the lead, and POPOFF 36, the wing) and MANILA HOTEL, the ground forward air controller they were coordinating with in supplying close air support to Coalition infantry in an area to the north west of Basra (for more detail see Mair, Watson, Elsey & Smith 2012: 85-86).

**Figure 1.1: linear transcript**

Lacking any supporting instructions, the linear character of the transcript gives the reader the impression that the various parties are speaking to and can hear each other, meaning that they were all (potentially at least) appraised of what all the others were saying and doing. That is, it appears that all of the parties have and had equal access to – and subsequent awareness of – what was going on. However, as we came to see as we painstakingly worked through these materials, things were by no means as simple as this. This is brought out in the alternative version of the transcript we developed to represent the channels of communication as they were heard and understood by the military personnel in real-time (Mair, Watson, Elsey & Smith 2012; Mair, Elsey, Watson & Smith 2013). Notice that there are two separate conversations occurring simultaneously in this transcript, marked by asterisks and arrows respectively.

**Figure 1.2: modified transcript[[6]](#footnote-6)**



What are the implications of these formatting decisions? When employed alongside the video, this transcript encourages a different reading of what, in the linear transcript, appears to be an anomalous exchange between lines 27-34, an ‘exchange’ explicitly discussed by the UK coroner in his verdict on the friendly fire incident. As he put it (Crown 2007: 20-21):

“At 13.36 POPOFF36 said that he had seen a ‘four ship’. MANILA HOTEL: ‘I understand that was north 800 metres’. To assume that this meant that there were no friendlies in the area was a serious mistake. It would not and could not be reasonably taken as confirming that the area where POPOFF36 was flying was clear.”

Based on the linear transcript which flattens out interactional differentiation, this ‘exchange’, as seen by assistant deputy coroner Walker, seemed to indicate that POPOFF 36 and MANILA HOTEL were talking past one another as the content of their talk did not match up: if the pilot was making a request for information in his turn, he should not have proceeded (to attack for instance) until his request had been clearly answered. MANILA HOTEL's ‘reply’ in no way constitutes such an answer. Read this way the ‘exchange’ does not furnish the pilots a warrant to attack the ‘four ship’ spotted.

This reading is clearly informed by the representation of the video in the transcript itself. Contrast this with the alternative ‘reading’ facilitated by figure 1.2. The most obvious analytic lesson is that it becomes possible to separate out the talk into two distinctive conversations between different parties and with different practical intentions. Further, the fact that POPOFF 36 and MANILA HOTEL are not in direct contact is made visible to the reader. The rest of the excerpt shows that while POPOFF35 was interacting with MANILA HOTEL, POPOFF 36 was either technically or occupationally isolated from their interactions and so not involved in exchanges of any kind with the ground controller – that it appears they were in the linear transcript is an artefact of its formatting conventions.

The lesson we believe accompanies this demonstration is as follows: transcription procedures and decisions influence the presentation of the details of communicative exchanges and so shape how a given interaction is interpreted, understood and analysed (Gibson, Webb & von Lehm 2014). Rather than impose a set of conventions on interactional data (as with the linear transcript), ethnomethodology and conversation analysis try to produce transcripts that bring out the transcribed parties’ orientations to one another. As such the focus is to understand *their* methods for analysing and making sense of what is going on around them *in situ* and what others are doing as part of that *while it is happening*. Our demonstration is, therefore, not about the pursuit of accuracy for accuracy’s sake but about using the problems encountered in adequately transcribing complex battlefield interactions in order to arrive at a better understanding of the practical problems that accompany combat operations as variegated, realworld activities – something lost by linear formatting. In our case, in and through the work of producing a transcript for ourselves (instead of taking those produced by others at face value), we were able to develop a better grasp of real-time communication in this setting and the fragilities which accompanied the division of labour it was embedded in but also helped constitute.

***Demonstration 2 – Military Inquiries and Cockpit Videos***

Our initial work on the transcript showed it was possible to glean a great deal from a direct analysis of the cockpit video (see also Nevile 2009; 2013). However, as the example of the coroner’s verdict above shows, we were not the only ones offering ways of reading and making sense of the video and our interest was as much in how *those* analyses were arrived at as in producing a standalone analysis of the incident footage itself. Given the richness of the material it contained, the work of the United States Air Force’s Friendly Fire Investigation Board (hereafter ‘the Board’) became a particular focus, offering an alternative way of approaching the cockpit data. ‘Tab G’ of the report contained partially redacted ‘Witness Testimony and Statements’ in which the two pilots separately responded to the Board’s investigators’ questioning about the incident. As part of their questioning, selected portions of the cockpit video were shown to the pilots and they were asked to explain what they were seeing and doing at particular moments of the mission.

The question of how the pilots and the investigators treated the video as ‘evidence’ and understood, interpreted and described the actions found within it is a fascinating one and central to the ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ video analysis worked up in the course of the pilots’ questioning. Contained within this material were explorations of how transparent or equivocal the video could be said to be, i.e. whether what was going on was clear to see or needed to be augmented by additional commentary and explanation. By linking the transcripts of the pilots’ testimony, in response to the clips of the incident they were played, to our detailed transcript (discussed above) we were able to reconstruct and so consider the ‘methodic’ work of the inquiry, particularly in terms of the problematic status of the video as evidence within it (for a comparative study see Goodwin 1994: 753). By doing so, we came to see that the result of that work was to call into question the status of the video as an entirely objective or standalone document or ‘imprint’ of events.

Generally the video as evidence was treated in two contrasting ways by the various inquiry participants. Firstly, on many occasions ‘what the video shows’ was treated as transparent or clear to anyone watching it (including the examiners who were not, of course, on the scene). However, there were moments in the video which caused confusion in that the footage was deemed unable to ‘speak for itself’ (Goodwin, 1994: 615-16) and therefore required the pilots to elaborate and expand by sharing their first-hand experiences of the moment-to-moment action as it had unfolded.

*‘What happened’ as evidentially transparent and unproblematic*

In the first kind of treatment, the emphasis was on ‘what anyone could see’ by ‘looking at the tape’ i.e. what could be ‘read off’ the video footage unproblematically. Figure 1.3 provides an example.

**Figure 1.3: excerpt from excerpt from POPOFF 36’s testimony** (USAF 2003: G24, emphasis added)

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*‘What happened’ as beyond the videotape*

However, at certain points during the pilots’ testimonies it became apparent that their responses to the examiners’ questions regarding the video went ‘beyond’ the videotape and, in the process, highlighted limits to ‘what anyone could see or legitimately deduce’ from it. On these occasions, the pilots produced ‘in the moment’ accounts that described and explained what they were seeing, doing and discussing at different points. As such, the pilots as witnesses came to operate as ‘resources’ or ‘conduits’ supplying details missing or lost from the video (Lynch & Bogen 1996: 155). Hence the pilot’s-eye-view trumped the seemingly ‘objective’ record furnished by the cockpit video. This alternative orientation to the video as data is exhibited by the excerpts reproduced below (notice that, as these exchanges did not involve communication with MANILA HOTEL, a single column is used to display inter-pilot communication).

**Figure 1.4 (Part a): excerpt from video** (emphasis added)

**Figure 1.4 (Part b):** **excerpt from POPOFF 35’s testimony** (USAF 2003: G15-6)

**Figure 1.4 (Part c):** **excerpt from POPOFF 35’s testimony** (USAF 2003: G16)

Space precludes a detailed analysis of these data excerpts (for a full-blown analysis see Mair, Elsey, Watson & Smith 2013). However, at present it is enough to point out that, taken together, these three excerpts demonstrate how the Board came to treat the video as problematic for certain purposes. That is, the video was not (and indeed could not be) treated as a standalone document of the incident. Instead the pilots’ perspective was vital to understanding how the incident came to unfold as it did, with the pilots firing (unwittingly) on the British soldiers. As such we see an embodied familiarity with the plane, ‘knowing my plane’, on display (e.g. 4b, c), as well as a ‘collaborative seeing’ of the target and its presumed intended actions (Watson 1999, Mair, Elsey, Smith & Watson 2013) that gradually emerges from the communication between the pilots. Here, then, the Board, when assessing the evidence, is heavily reliant upon the access to ‘war as work’ that the video coupled with the pilots’ testimonies furnishes when taken together.

A number of lessons can be drawn from this second demonstration. Methodologically speaking, we are advocating research that is rooted in the perspective(s) and understanding(s) of the participants themselves as evidenced by, in this case, *their* (not our) interrogation of ‘the data’. By focussing on some of the ways the evidence was made to speak (or found to be unable to speak on its own) we come to see what hinged on the changeable epistemic status of the cockpit video in this context. That is, there is a practical lesson here for those who might think cameras could capture ‘objective’ or ‘complete’ versions of events, providing a record that recovers soldierly practice in all its complexity. In short, as the Board’s investigations make clear, they do not or rather cannot.

***Demonstration 3 –The Board's Recommendations: Making ‘Soldierly Work’ Visible***

Our final demonstration revolves around how the Board sought to analyse, explain and thereby arrive at ways of preventing such incidents in the future. The report clearly states that ‘what happened’ was never under dispute. That is, 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 (POPOFF 35 ‘got the smoke’). 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.

Drawing together the evidence gathered in the course of their inquiries, the Board offered the following account of the cause of the incident:

“The Board found by clear and convincing evidence that the primary cause of the friendly fire incident on 28 March 2003 was *target misidentification*... From the pilot’s perspective, they asked the GFAC on two occasions if there were any friendly forces in the area. On both occasions, the GFAC told the pilots that friendly forces were “well clear”. This *insufficient reference* to any potential or actual specific location of friendly forces *reasonably caused* the pilots to expect friendly forces would be a non-factor in the area they were targeting.” (USAF 2003: 31, emphasis added)

In his closing statement, Brigadier General William F. Hodgkins, Chair of the Board, elaborated on the implicit theme:

“*Communication discipline* [i.e. indiscipline] is an issue that goes back to the advent of radio communications... Yet, *it still remains* an issue in this friendly fire incident, and is *embedded* as a factor in far too many aircraft mishaps and accidents – and resulting deaths. While it is difficult to imagine any more emphasis being placed on this issue, it is an area that should be re-evaluated.” (USAF 2003: 33, emphasis added)

Here then we find an unequivocal conclusion placing the root cause in the (perennial) court of language use and communication. We see how the fatal misunderstanding or trouble is retrospectively discovered, rather than repairable in real time (Jordan & Fuller 1975: 144). The implication is that conversational mechanisms of sense-making and understanding were not sufficient to highlight and repair the mistakes in this case. Of particular interest here is that while the recommendation is general in character (i.e. ‘use coordinates when flying missions’), the Board is only able to arrive at it through an analysis of the pilots’ and GFAC’s actual location requesting and reporting practices. By focusing on their investigative and indeed analytical work, involving again recourse to the cockpit video *and* pilots’ testimony, we are able to see how the interaction between the pilots and the ground air controllers became decoupled and so the specific ways in which the sense of one set of parties’ comments, ‘the air’, could be lost on the other, ‘the ground’: i.e. via divergent understandings of the area the phrase “well clear” was understood to refer to, see excerpt 1.2. In short, where the inquiry highlighted a ‘lack of effective and complete communication’ linked to ‘imprecise language’ as well as ‘undefined or non-standard terminology’ we see here how this was traced back to the battlefield-specific interactional practices in which misunderstandings arose in this case. That none of the parties involved were fully on the ‘same page’ (King 2006), was made perspicuous through these inquiries. As a consequence, therefore, of the Board’s attempts to explicate ‘what happened’ and the role of language within it, we gain insights into location requesting and reporting as constitutive features of ‘soldierly work’, both in the ‘normal’ course of things and where problems occur – practical features of combat we would not otherwise gain access to.

**Conclusion: Prospects and Limitations**

The purpose of this chapter has been to highlight what ethnomethodology and conversation analysis can contribute to studies of the military, particularly to understandings of action-in-interaction in combat settings. Through our three demonstrations, we have emphasised what we see as the particular strength of such studies: their focus on the specificities of action and interaction as well as the forms of organisation internal to them. We have also tried to show how different kinds of materials can be drawn upon for that purpose.

Given our non-military backgrounds, we were reliant on those materials. Unlike other researchers in the ethnomethodological tradition, as well as other social science disciplines, we have never encountered or trained within the worksite that we have analysed. Within ethnomethodology, this immersion process is referred to as the ‘unique adequacy requirement’ and finds examples in law, science, mathematics, software programming, professional musicianship, etc., where the researchers learn to do the job of those they are observing (Burns 1997: 43; Garfinkel & Wieder 1992: 255; Sormani 2014). This ‘inside’ knowledge assists in understanding the activities and practices characteristic of a given social setting (and see here the work of Snook, King, Hockey cited above too).

In the absence of first-hand knowledge of our own, our study had to rely on both the primary and secondary materials, while remaining alive to the occasioned character of the commentaries the latter offered. The military boards’ reports, like the coroner’s verdict and media coverage, were not neutral descriptions but accounts offered to particular audiences for particular ends. This enabled us to explore a wider range of analytical problems than we would have been able to explore otherwise. As discussed in demonstration 1, we were, for instance, able to link the events documented by the video to the coroner’s findings of an ‘unlawful killing’ and show how scrutiny of the evidence cited provided access to an alternative reading of the events. As discussed in demonstrations 2 and 3, we were also able to follow the ways in which the incident was taken up by the Board. On the one hand, the transcripts of the pilot interviews provided us with insights into the structure and organisation of both military inquiries in general and the methodic ways in which they produce accounts of combat incidents. On the other, the employment of the video during the pilots’ testimony provided us with ‘ethnographic’ commentaries on what was happening (both within the video itself and the pilots’ first-hand experience of the incident) that further elaborated our understanding of the data under scrutiny. As a result, the methodological approach we have articulated is, therefore, a distinctive one, centred on the analysis of soldiering *and* its assessment as practical action or ‘work’ (Garfinkel 1986).

As opportunities to engage first-hand with actual courses of soldierly work will remain rare (and where they arise, will often be circumscribed by the conditions of access the researcher will have to comply with), if we are to arrive at an understanding and offer ‘convincing explanations of ... what soldiers distinctively do’ (King 2006:510), we will have to make as much use of the materials we do have access to as possible. Those materials include not only the increasing number of videos of combat operations now entering the public domain (via official channels and leaks), but also the increasingly large number of after-the-fact accounts relating to particular incidents that are also being made accessible. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis are not the only approaches that can handle materials of this kind, however, in this chapter we hope to have demonstrated that they offer a distinctive approach with distinctive pay-offs.

**Appendix: Transcription Conventions**

{Beep, beep}: curled brackets contain background cockpit sounds and noises

((To MANILA HOTEL)): double parentheses contain transcriber’s descriptions, and include such things as sighs, inhalations, and so on

((inaudible)): indicates a stretch of inaudible talk

(Eh I see): words placed within single parentheses offer a possible but uncertain hearing of the talk

(1): numbers in brackets indicate time between turns at talk in seconds

(.): indicate a micro-pause, under half a second

(>1): less than one second, but more than half

Stress: emphasis in talk

=: ‘latching’, one turn follows another immediately with no audible pause

[: single square bracket between lines indicates overlaps in talk

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1. We do not intend to define ‘friendly fire’ here: something itself the subject of controversy. For a standard account of what ‘friendly fire’, a.k.a. ‘fratricide’ or ‘amicide’, is see Shrader 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The recommendation that we study practical activity ‘first time through’ stems from ethnomethodology’s insistence on capturing the lived, moment by moment, still unfolding character of actual courses of action and interaction rather than on reconstructing already concluded activity via its outcomes after the fact (Garfinkel, Lynch & Livingston 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See footnote 5 below for further discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Both the video and the transcript released to the public can be found on the incident’s Wikipedia page. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It was in the process of disentangling the technical aspects of the data that ‘talk throughs’ by experts and other instructional resources proved particularly useful – we had to seek such instruction out because much of what the pilots and ground controller were discussing was initially lost on us and had to be ‘translated’. For instance, the interviews along with media coverage and online resources enabled us to decipher talk of ‘tubes’, i.e. missile launchers, ‘goggles’, i.e. binoculars, ‘revets’, i.e. fortified embankments, and so on. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The inspiration to use columns in the transcript came from Goodwin’s (1993) work and the general transcription conventions or symbols are based on Jefferson’s (2004) transcription system that is widely used in CA. See Mair, Elsey, Smith & Watson 2014 for a complete version of the modified transcript and the appendix below for the transcription conventions employed in the data excerpts in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)