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**Interpretive Asymmetry, Retrospective Inquiry and the Explication of Action in an Incident of Friendly Fire**

**Authors:**

Dr. Michael Mair, University of Liverpool, UK

Email: michael.mair@liverpool.ac.uk

Dr. Chris Elsey, De Montfort University, UK

Email: christopher.elsey@dmu.ac.uk

Dr. Patrick G. Watson, McMaster University, Canada

Email: watsonp@mcmaster.ca

Dr. Paul V. Smith, University of Manchester, UK

Email: Paul.V.Smith@manchester.ac.uk

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**Abstract**

In this article we examine a controversial friendly fire incident that took place during the early stages of the Iraq War. Our focus is on how a cockpit video of the incident was used post-facto in a military inquiry to arrive at an understanding of the actions of the pilots involved. We shall concentrate specifically on a series of interpretive difficulties that highlighted the problematic status of the video as evidence and explore what their resolution might tell us about military practice, and the place of friendly fire within it more broadly.

**Keywords:** sociology of knowledge, friendly fire, interpretive asymmetries, retrospective inquiry, ethnomethodology

**Introduction**

Despite its status as a routine, stable or ‘normal’ feature of modern warfare (Perrow 1984, Reason 1990, Hicks 1993, Snook 2002, Molloy 2005, Kirke 2012), ‘friendly fire’ – the killing of fellow soldiers under circumstances in which they have been mistaken *for* the enemy, also referred to as ‘fratricide’ or ‘amicide’ (Schrader 1984) – is not a phenomenon those outside the military generally have the opportunity to examine directly. However, due to the public domain release of a cockpit video recording as well as the reports of two military boards of inquiry, one American and one British, following a coroner’s inquest[[1]](#endnote-1) in the UK in 2007, we have an unprecedented level of access to the particulars of one specific case: an incident in 2003 in which two US pilots mistakenly attacked a convoy of British soldiers.

What makes the case particularly revealing, and what came to interest us, was that, despite having access to video of the incident as it unfolded in real-time, making sense of how the pilots came to mistake the British for Iraqis posed major interpretive difficulties. As the inquiries demonstrated, each in their own ways, the character of the pilots’ actions could not be unproblematically ‘recovered’ from the video alone. The problematic status of the video as evidence was underscored in the first military inquiry in particular (USAF 2003). As became clear in the course of the testimony the pilots gave under questioning before that inquiry, determining exactly what the scene had presented to them at the time was difficult for those attempting to make sense of the incident after-the-fact.

Drawing on ethnomethodological studies of perception in the context of collaborative activities[[2]](#endnote-2), our purpose in this article is to explore this ‘interpretive asymmetry’ and the explicatory work involved in overcoming it (see Coulter 1975, Anderson & Sharrock 2003, Goodwin 1994, 2000). Setting the pilots’ testimony alongside transcripts from the video, we argue that the pilots’ responses constitute an *ad hoc* “ethnography of vision” designed to overcome that asymmetry (Goodwin 1994: 618, 2000). This ‘ethnography’ allowed the investigators to situate their actions in a field of “professional vision” (Goodwin 1994) – one made determinate with reference to a specific *way* of seeing, a locally organised “praxiology of perception” (Coulter & Parsons 1990, Anderson & Sharrock 1993). Through their testimony, the pilots show that their ‘(mis-)seeing’ was embedded in, and arose from, a heterogeneous patchwork of interwoven, collaborative practices – themselves part-and-parcel of wider forms of military practice and “the horizons of relevancies ... in play” within them (Anderson & Sharrock 1993: 149, Wittgenstein 1953, Goodwin 1994, 2000, Schutz 1963). Reading the pilots’ testimony alongside the video thus provides an unparalleled opportunity to examine how friendly fire incidents are made sense of from “within” (Anderson & Sharrock 1993, Goodwin 1994, 2000, Heath & Luff 2000). It is this occasioned explication of ‘seeing’s work’, to adapt a phrase from Macbeth (2011), one involving a form of video analysis indigenous to the setting rather than produced by an ‘interaction analytic’ gaze, that we therefore want to focus on in what follows.

**The incident and its aftermath**

The picture of the incident which emerged from the three official inquiries is clear. On the afternoon of the 28th March 2003, the two US A-10 war planes took off from their base in Al Jaber, Kuwait. Once in the air, they were asked to provide ‘close air support’ (CAS) to UK infantry in an area to the north-west of Basra close to the Shatt-al-Arab waterway in Southern Iraq. Nine days into the invasion, the advances made by coalition forces were such that the Iraqi military could no longer mount an organised response in the south of the country. As a consequence, the pockets of resistance that were being encountered were dispersed across large areas and frequently mobile, remaining stationary only long enough to mount opportunistic attacks before moving off again to evade return fire. Working with US Ground Forward Air Controllers (GFACs) ‘embedded’ with British troops in the region, the pilots were supporting infantry by coordinating and launching attacks on these dispersed enemy forces as and when they were encountered or ‘called in’. It was within this particularly unpredictable combat situation, one in which the position of friendly and hostile troops was constantly changing, that the pilots came into contact with a British reconnaissance patrol. Making their way along the edge of the al-Hammar canal close to one of the major roads from Basra to Baghdad in the Ad Dayr area, the patrol had stopped outside a small village after they were approached by civilians waving a white flag. As they were discussing what to do, they were fired upon by the A-10s in an attack that led to the death of L/Cpl. Matty Hull, serious injury to four of his colleagues and the destruction of two of the vehicles they were travelling in.

The incident was captured on a cockpit video which was leaked to the public in the course of the UK coroner’s inquest into the incident in 2007 (for details see Mair et al. 2012). The video showed that exchanges between the two attacking pilots had centred on the status of anomalous orange panels on the British vehicles, orange panels that had been used by the soldiers to make their vehicles easier to identify, particularly from the air. Working on the (false) understanding that the area they were patrolling was “well clear of friendlies”, and having never seen British vehicles before, after conducting further checks the pilots concluded that the orange panels were a peculiar type of Iraqi weapons system and attacked the vehicles in order to counter the threat they saw them as posing (see Mair et al. 2012, Nevile 2009, 2013, Howe et al. 2010: 4-5, Caddell 2010, Masys 2010, Kirke 2012). In support of his ruling that the attack had amounted to an “unlawful killing”[[3]](#endnote-3), the coroner, and, subsequently, major voices in the British media, treated the video as evidence that the pilots had wilfully misread the situation they found themselves in and displayed a dangerous if not criminal negligence (Mair et al. 2012). The video’s release thus led to heavy and sustained criticism of the pilots.

Our interest in what follows is not, however, whether the pilots, under the circumstances, acted legally or illegally, rightly or wrongly, or in how we could arrive at a definitive judgement either way. Instead, as discussed above, we want to focus on a distinct but related set of issues which were largely taken-for-granted in the controversy which followed; those raised by attempts to determine what led to the incident, to explicate ‘what happened’ and why it happened in the particular way it did. Of particular interest was the manner in which the video was used as a resource for “making out” what actually took place in the course of the A-10 flight (Garfinkel 1967, 2002, Garfinkel & Sacks 1970, Goodwin 1994, 2000, Lynch 2000) and thereby arrive at an understanding of how the pilots came to mistake allies for enemies. In shifting the analytical focus away from constructions of blame we are not seeking to sideline questions of political and moral accountability. One of the things we want to show is that after-the-fact accounts provided the evidential ground against which questions of political and moral accountability acquired their meaning, force and relevance in relation to this incident (see also Goodwin 1994, 2000).

We concentrate on one retrospective inquiry in particular, the US Friendly Fire Investigation Board (hereafter ‘the Board’) convened immediately after the incident in 2003. The first and most comprehensive of the three official inquiries into the incident, the Board was charged with investigating “all the facts and circumstances” (USAF 2003: 3) surrounding the events of the 28th March 2003 and its findings were drawn upon (though for different ends) by the two inquiries which followed it; the UK Ministry of Defence Board of Inquiry in 2004 and the Oxford coroner’s inquest in 2007. Chronological order does not tell the full story here, however, as the Board’s report was not released to the public until some time after the video had been leaked and only then under growing public and inter-governmental pressure for full disclosure. As with the video, the Board’s report became available as a direct consequence of the coroner’s inquest. Unlike the video (see e.g. Nevile 2009, 2013), however, the work of the Board has yet to receive any sustained analytical attention.

**The Friendly Fire Investigation Board**

The central task facing the Board’s investigators was to assemble an account of the attack from a mass of evidence relating to what happened on the day and thus make a seemingly inexplicable sequence of events explicable. The final report is a rich and multi-layered text which details the nature and significance of the evidence that was gathered and examined in the course of the investigation and sets out findings based upon it. As we learn from the report, the investigation was comprehensive and systematic, methodically building up a picture of the ‘trajectory’ (Reason 1990) of the incident by juxtaposing, among other things, video footage, flight-logs, maps of the battlefield, radio communication records, an analysis of the attack site and climatic conditions, testimony from those involved and various expert submissions, including assessments of the pilots’ physiological and psychological states before and after the attack. Based on the evidence available to them, the investigators concluded that “the primary cause of the friendly fire incident on 28 March 2003 was target misidentification. Specifically, the Board found that what the pilots identified as enemy forces was in reality a United Kingdom reconnaissance patrol” (2003: 31), a conclusion which was not challenged in either of the two subsequent inquiries. We will direct attention not to the conclusion so much as the way in which the investigators sought to work out how and why this misidentification occurred, something that led them to focus, in particular, on events as they unfolded from the pilots’ point-of-view. As we shall show, this involved tracing the ‘misperception’ back to the pilots’ practical and embodied ways of collaboratively working to produce a shared ‘view’ of the scene before them (Lynch 1991, Anderson & Sharrock 1993, Goodwin 1994, 2000, Goodwin & Goodwin 1996, Heath & Luff 2000).

We focus on one particular section of the report: the testimony given by the pilots under questioning before the Board (released as a redacted appendix to their report) and the role that the cockpit video played within that testimony. There are three principal reasons for this:

First, the report is the product of an investigation; it reports on results, not the investigative work which produced them. The only section within the report where we gain access to that work is in the appendix dealing with witness testimony, which includes transcripts of the exchanges between the pilots and the Board’s investigators. Here, then, the inquiry’s work becomes available for analysis.

Second, aside from the exchanges captured on the cockpit video, this is the only occasion on public record where the pilots talk directly about the incident. Their commentaries, we suggest, afford us considerable insights, not just into the incident, but into how it was and could be made sense of after the fact.

Third and finally, what is perhaps most striking about the transcripts is that, in them, the pilots and the investigators treated the video as in need of further elaboration, as unable to ‘speak for itself’ (see Goodwin 1994: 615-16). In the process of making the video speak, its equivocal status as evidence was brought to the fore as a practical issue. We will thus address our analysis to the question of the *video-under-scrutiny*: what, for all practical purposes, the video could legitimately be said to provide evidence of in resolving the problem of what had taken place in the air. By focusing analytical attention on the exchanges between the investigators and the pilots, then, we stand to learn a great deal about how, under specific circumstances and in specific ways, military practice is made, in Garfinkel’s terms, “visible-and-reportable” (Garfinkel 1967, see also Goodwin 1994, 2000)[[4]](#endnote-4).

**The Video-Commentary Pairings**

In order to make the work of ‘animating’ events on the video visible, our analysis draws on two publicly available sources of data: transcripts of the pilots’ testimony before the Board, and a transcript of the leaked cockpit video.

The transcripts are taken from the version of ‘Tab G’ of the Board’s report (USAF 2003: G1-G80), labelled ‘Witness Testimony and Statements’, that was made available through the UK’s Ministry of Defence website and which reproduces (part of) the responses the pilots gave to questioning from the Board’s investigators. The pilots – call-signs POPOFF 35 and POPOFF 36, lead and wingman respectively – were questioned separately. While this section of the report was redacted, the redactions have a specific locus, with technical references to coalition anti-friendly-fire systems, as well as all discussion of the rules of engagement the pilots were operating under, systematically deleted. This does leave gaps, but they are limited and do not significantly interfere with attempts to follow the pilots’ testimony about the incident – although, as the coroner noted, wider aspects of the operational context are obscured.

At regular intervals throughout their testimony the pilots were asked to comment on sections of video footage deemed by investigators to be of particular significance in terms of how the incident came to unfold. As POPOFF 35’s cockpit video-recorder was not working on the day of the incident, both pilots were asked to talk to the recording taken from the heads-up-display of POPOFF 36’s A-10 and describe what they were seeing and doing as they were seeing and doing it. The record, however, is incomplete: in the report we are not provided with transcripts of the sections of the video that the exchanges between the pilots and the investigators centred upon. Instead, references to the video are glossed with the phrase: “flight recording begins”.

We have chosen, therefore, to ‘fill out’ or ‘complete’ the exchanges by presenting them alongside transcripts of the sections of the video under discussion. This is possible because, throughout their questioning, the investigators specified the location (i.e. time) of the footage they wanted the pilots to comment on. By cross-referencing the exchanges against a corrected version of the time-indexed transcript that accompanied the video, we have been able to reproduce the video-commentary ‘pairings’ (Garfinkel 2002) that were such a prominent feature of this particular part of the inquiry. Although this required us to carry out reconstructive work, it is important to stress that these pairings, which provide much of the focus of our analysis, are not our analytical constructs but worked-up products of the Board’s own investigative practices. As Goodwin notes in related work, and in line with ethnomethodological inquiries more broadly, our study thus “makes extensive use of the very same practices it is studying” (1994: 607).

Unlike the FFIB we do not have access to the full cockpit video, which remains classified. Instead, we have that section of it which was leaked to the public and which covers what was deemed to be the approximate temporal ‘envelope’ within which the events which led up to the incident unfolded. The video consists of approximately twelve minutes of footage which begins just after the pilots have successfully completed an attack run on enemy targets and ends as the pilots make their way back to base having being informed that they had just fired on British troops. Approximately four minutes separate the initial sighting of the vehicles from the first attack run. The pairings we shall present relate specifically to this stretch of footage, starting at the moment in time where, in retrospect, the incident was treated as having *analysably* begun; 13.36.57 International Standard Time.

**The Video as Evidence**

***Interpretive transparency***

For much of the pilots’ testimony before the Board, the video was treated as a transparent resource with the camera cast as an ‘objective’ witness. The ‘evidential transparency’ of the video, i.e. its usably unproblematic status as a record of ‘what happened’, is clearly indicated in the following three excerpts.

**Excerpt one: excerpt from testimony** (USAF 2003: G12, emphasis added)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Board Investigator | 123456 | What I’m gonna do now, is I’m going to fast forward to about 1336. This is after you find ... In fact I’ll move it up to 1330, which is when you find, and shortly after that engage some targets that you pick up. How we’ll work this is I’ll keep playing the tape and then we’ll stop and *I’ll be discussing some of the things we’re seeing on the tape.* |

**Excerpt two: excerpt from testimony** (USAF 2003: G24, emphasis added)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Board Investigator | 1234 | *Looking at the tape*, it looks like it would be maybe just some scattered clouds off in the distance. *Clear vis* [‘visibility’], probably at least I would say seven miles and I don’t know about the winds but would you say that that is an accurate representation? |
| POPOFF36 | 5 | Yes, definitely. |
| Board Investigator | 6 | Clear vis, and no cloud cover? |
| POPOFF36 | 7 | Right.  |

**Excerpt three: excerpt from testimony**(USAF 2003: G38, emphasis added)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Board Investigator | 12 | Without playing it, *he actually does describe them again*, matching that same description. And then... |

In excerpts one, two and three, ‘what the video shows’ is being treated as a matter of what ‘anyone’ could hear and see (Sacks 1984), to the point that the investigator is able to anticipate POPOFF 35’s own ‘seeing’ of what he is about to show (excerpt one, lines 5-6) and demonstrate that it is possible for an informed onlooker to formulate assessments of the video based upon inferences drawn from the available materials (excerpt two, lines 1-2). The video is therefore being treated as something that is available for all parties present to inspect, consider and pass judgement upon. In exchanges such as these, which presuppose the transparent character of the events on tape, the public availability of the video as evidence served to constrain the pilots’ responses, interactionally guiding their testimony down pre-established interpretive pathways determined prior to hearing their testimony. For example, the investigator’s preface to the instructions in excerpt one, “I’ll move it [the video] up to 1330, which is when you find, and shortly after that engage some targets that you pick up” (lines 2-4), along with his “he actually does describe them again” in excerpt three (line 1), not only show us that the video had been viewed in advance but that (at least in the particular sections in question) its import had been unproblematically grasped in advance as well.

***The unavailability of language-in-use*[[5]](#endnote-5)**

As the questioning came to focus more on the phases of the action surrounding the incident itself, it became progressively more difficult to treat the video as unproblematically transparent, with the investigators encountering and seeking to resolve different kinds of impasse connected with interpreting events on screen. Dealing with these problems required a different kind of interaction from the kind of confirmatory ‘say what you see’ exchange seen in excerpts one, two and three.

One set of difficulties stemmed from the opacity of the pilots’ language-in-use. As Lynch (1991, 1993) for instance has noted, participants in the midst of collaborative activities do not produce their exchanges for the benefits of an overhearing audience. The result is that it can be very difficult to recover the sense of what is being said at any given moment in time. Excerpt four (a) and (b) provide an example.

**Excerpt four (a): excerpt from cockpit video[[6]](#endnote-6)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Pilot-Ground** |  | **Pilot-Pilot** |
| 1234 |  |  | POPOFF 36 to POPOFF 35 | Hey, I got a four ship. Uh looks like we got orange panels on ‘em though. Do they have any uh, any eh, friendlies up in this area? |
| 5678 |  | {Lines omitted: POPOFF 35 confers with MANILA HOTEL over the location of enemy artillery, 23 seconds} |  |  |
| 910 | POPOFF 35 | Confirm there are no friendlies this far north on the ground. |  |  |
| 1112 | MANILA HOTEL | That is an affirm. You are well clear of friendlies. |  |  |

**Excerpt four (b): excerpt from testimony** (USAF 2003: G33)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Board Investigator | 12 | So they were on the north-south road ... Can you describe what the vehicles looked like? |
| POPOFF 36 | 345 | There were four vehicles, rectangular in shape and they were spaced out probably a couple, a hundred meters or so apart. They were heading north. |
| Board Investigator | 6 | We hear well clear friendlies. To your mind that’s meaning what? |
| POPOFF 36 | 789 | That means there’s no one in this whole area that we’re supposed to be attacking, in this complex here. Shouldn’t be, as far as initially there. That there’s no-one in that area. |

In the video-commentary pairing reproduced in excerpts four (a) and (b), in which the pilots discuss the first of the three occasions on which they were explicitly told they were “well clear of friendlies” (four (a), lines 11-12, four (b), line 6), we learn that the meaning of interactions between participants could not simply be ‘read off’ the video by anyone. Instead, the exchanges had to be translated into terms understandable by those who were not on the scene or familiar with the descriptive practices employed within it (Anderson & Sharrock 1993, Goodwin & Goodwin 1996). This explains something of why, in the course of the testimony, ‘say what you see’ exchanges give way to requests to ‘tell us what this means’ as the questioning progresses.

***Misunderstandings among participants***

Of course, the problem with such requests is that they presuppose that what anyone was saying and to whom in the course of events was at least transparent to participants. However, as might be expected in relation to a case which ended as this did, in confusion and error, the investigators found that this was not in fact the case. This was a context in which misunderstandings proliferated as time went by. While the parties took the others to be doing, saying, talking about or looking at one thing, at critical junctures those others were actually doing, saying, talking about or looking at something quite different (see Mair et al 2012, Nevile 2009, 2013). For this reason, relevant information such as the exact location of friendly forces or the nature of possible targets was not being passed on. As a consequence, what had transpired at the time was not always clear. The paired excerpts in five (a) and (b) provide an example.

**Excerpt five (a): excerpt from video**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Pilot-Ground** |  | **Pilot-Pilot** |
| 1 |  |  | POPOFF 36 | Let me ask you one question |
| 2 |  |  |  | (.) |
| 3 |  |  | POPOFF 35 | What’s that? |
| 4 |  |  |  | (.) |
| 5 |  |  | POPOFF 36 | The question is |
| 6 |  | {Lines omitted (3)} |  |  |
| 789 | POPOFF 36 | {To MANILA HOTEL} Hey, tell me what type of rocket launchers you got up here? |  |  |
| 10 |  |  |  | (5) |
| 1112 |  |  | POPOFF 36 | {To POPOFF 35} I think they’re rocket launchers |
| 13 |  | (1)  |  |  |
| 141516 | MANILA HOTEL | {Distortion} MANILA HOTEL, you were stepped on, say again |  |  |

**Excerpt five (b): excerpt from testimony** (USAF 2003: G35)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Board Investigator | 12 | You’re asking MANILA HOTEL what kind of rocket launchers they have up there. Is that correct? |
| POPOFF 36 | 34 | ... I think it was ... to POPOFF ... I can’t remember who it was that I was asking that question. |

Not only were there occasions when the pilots found it difficult to describe the interactions they were being asked to comment upon, there were also instances when they themselves had to turn to the video in order to answer the investigators’ questions because they were unable to furnish an account themselves based on their own recollections. The pilots thus indicated that at least some of what the tape had captured was no more transparent to them than it was to those questioning them about it. There are numerous examples in the transcripts; excerpt six is indicative.

**Excerpt six: excerpt from testimony** (USAF 2003: G14, emphasis added)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| POPOFF35  | 12345 | With that, he’s...*I think* my airplane’s turning from...through north I’m looking from here to go back over here on the left hand side.*I don’t recall if I pick him up then or not.**Shortly around thereafter, I think actually the tape will say, I think it says when I actually pick him up but I’m not sure.* |

***The unintelligibility of action in context***

While these issues were important, the greatest interpretive difficulties the investigators encountered stemmed not from the problems that accompanied attempts to make sense of this or that exchange but the problems that accompanied attempts to characterise what *in general* the pilots’ activities were known to have culminated in, namely the attack on the British soldiers. The video on its own proved to be of limited value when it came to determining how the attack had come about. This is because the investigation was conducted under the auspices of what Coulter (1975) terms an “interpretive asymmetry”, proceeding in light of the knowledge that what the pilots thought they saw at the time (a hostile force) was not in fact there to be seen. This asymmetry (first-hand and prospective versus third-hand and retrospective) made it difficult to understand actions which, after the fact, made little sense. It was not just, therefore, the sense of the pilots’ interactions which was lost on onlookers, it was that the activities within which those exchanges acquired their meaning were “structurally” unavailable too (Garfinkel 1967).

***Resolutions***

The perspectival and interpretive asymmetries that produced the impasses encountered during questioning were handled in equivalent ways. As the questioning proceeded, what we see is a shift in exchanges away from *what* the pilots had seen, done or said at any given moment in time, to *how* they came to see, do or say things in that way. Rather than provide reports on ‘what anyone could see’, the pilots provided ‘in the moment’ accounts that described their still-developing lines of action and reasoning within and about the setting.

In providing these ‘in the moment’ accounts, the pilots spoke ‘beyond’ what was captured by the cockpit video, stressing, from a participant’s perspective, what more had been going on in the situation at the time. In this sense, the pilots as witnesses acted as ‘resources’ or ‘conduits’ that made the recovery of the detailed scene and hence the incident as a whole possible (Lynch & Bogen 1996). This was, therefore, a setting-specific display of what Bogen and Lynch term the “extraordinary relations” (1989: 204) of witness to events, in which the pilot’s-eye-view was privileged over the ‘objective’ record supplied by the video. This can be seen in excerpts seven (a), (b) and (c), where the examiner’s questions are treated as the warrant for an extended response.

**Excerpt seven (a): excerpt from video[[7]](#endnote-7)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | POPOFF 36 | Uh, roll up your right wing, and look right underneath yah |
| 2 |  | (.) |
| 3 | POPOFF 35 | I know what you’re talking about |
| 4 |  | (.) |
| 5 | POPOFF 36 | OK, well they have orange rockets on ‘em |
| 6 |  | (1) |
| 7 | POPOFF 35 | Orange rockets? |
| 8 |  | (.) |
| 9 | POPOFF 36 | Yeah, I think so |
| 10 |  | (1) |
| 11 | POPOFF 35 |  Let me look |
| 12 |  | {Lines omitted} |
| 1314 | POPOFF 36 | I think killing these damn rocket launchers, it would be great. {Inaudible, heavy distortion} |
| 15 |  | {Lines omitted} |
| 16 |  | (3) |
| 17 | POPOFF 35 | Yeah, I see that eh. You see (?). I’m going to roll down, (see a break) |
| 18 |  | {Lines omitted} |
| 19 | POPOFF 36 | OK, do you see the orange things on top of ‘em? |
| 20 |  | {Lines omitted} |
| 2122 | POPOFF 35 | I’m coming off west. You roll in, and. It looks like they are exactly what we’re talking about |
| 23 |  | (2) |
| 24 | POPOFF 36 | We got a visual (1) OK. I want to get that first one before he gets into that town then |
| 25 |  | (.) |
| 26 | POPOFF 35 | Get him. Get him |
| 27 |  | (1) |
| 2829 | POPOV 36 | All right, we got rocket launchers, it looks like, eh number 2 is rolling in from the south to the north. And eh 2’s in |

**Excerpt seven (b):** **excerpt from testimony** (USAF 2003: G15-6)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Board Investigator | 1 | OK, this time you’re looking at? |
| POPOFF 35 | 234 | I’m looking, you’ll notice later on the tape there’s periods where I’m not talking a lot on the radio, cause I had both hands with the binos [binoculars] trying to get a good look at what’s going on… |
| Board Investigator | 56 | At 1341 and 31 seconds, he asks you if you see the orange things on top of them ... Did you actually see them? |
| POPOFF 35 | 7 | Yeah, I did. |
| Board Investigator | 89 | OK, continuing on ... 1341 and 48 seconds, looks like exactly what we’re talking about. What is that exactly? |
| POPOFF 35 | 10111213141516171819202122 | Rockets. In my mind, what I’m looking to do here is roll in on the east side so I can see if there’s a development of shadows, because the sun, at this point, is getting low on the horizon on the west side. And actually, what I do is I’m at a low energy state to employ, so I pull off to the right on the east side, roll the airplane up, have the throttles at max and throw in a couple of clicks of trim, and let go of the stick, so I’m knowing my airplane, as airspeed increases, is going to do this .... At that time, I roll the airplane up and I’m going down with the aircraft, pulling up this way, and I’m looking at these things and I see vertical developments with shadowing it looks like on the eastern side which is what I would expect if in fact it was vertical development, so that’s what I’m seeing. |
|  | 23 | {{Tape runs out}} |

**Excerpt seven (c):** **excerpt from testimony** (USAF 2003: G16)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | {{Tape restarted}} |
| Board Investigator | 234 | This time you were just describing that you were looking through your binoculars and describing the type of target that you were seeing. You’re saying what you saw ... |
| POPOFF 35 | 567891011121314 | Military vehicles looking like they have vertical developments on these things that are consistent with what I thought were rocket tubes. The shadowing that I saw ... I couldn’t quite ... I wasn’t low enough, you know I was kind of concerned about having a manpad [manned portable air defence system] shoot at me. We were briefed on threats to the southeast of there, and I didn’t want to be the first guy shot down during the war, so. The bottom line is, I didn’t want to, while I was trying to ID them, as best I could, I didn’t want to put the aircraft in a position where it was going to be an easy target. |

Excerpt seven (a) captures the exchanges that immediately preceded (and indeed precipitated) the attack on the British soldiers and excerpts seven (b) and (c) provide examples of the way in which these critical exchanges were handled by the pilots and the investigators.

Within the testimony (e.g. seven (b), lines 10-22), we see POPOFF 35 claim an embodied familiarity with the situation he found himself in, one expressed in his capacity to control and manoeuvre ‘his’ A-10. He summarises this as “knowing my airplane” (seven (b), line 16) and the description he offers goes well beyond a simple explication of the documentary evidence of the video itself. He goes on to show how successfully controlling and managing the aircraft means that the pilot can be in the right place to ‘see’ targets within the constraints of the situation (e.g. the possibility of being shot down when flying too low, seven (c), lines 7-14). Taking into account the possible influence of “shadow” (seven (c), lines 11, 20) on the perception of “vertical developments” (seven (b), lines 19-22) meant that the pilot could make the judgement that in these conditions this “look” indicated rockets and therefore enemy vehicles (seven (b), lines 10 – allied forces do not employ vehicle mounted rockets). This ‘conclusion’ is clarified in excerpt seven (c) (lines 5-7). Seeing, then, is both an art in itself but also one that is contingent on battlefield conditions and skilled movement of the plane. None of this routine embodied work is specifically visible or commented upon in the video but is, instead, taken for granted as what any competent pilot under the circumstances would know to do (see also Hockey 2009: 481). Here then we have the real-time perspective or a detailed ‘at this point’ account being presented by POPOFF 35.

This looking process, in turn, is intimately tied to the fact that ‘sighting’ is collaboratively and communicatively derived. POPOFF 35 had earlier remarked that when the “four ship” (excerpt 4 (a)) was initially brought to his attention he spent some time “trying to assimilate his [POPOFF 36’s] information and look down” (USAF 2003: G15). This implies a ‘collaborative seeing’ that emerges and unfolds in stages over time and on the video we hear a series of ‘back-and-forths’ between POPOFF 35 and 36 about the status of the vehicles they have located. Working together, and taking the conditions, known threats and assurances about the absence of allied forces into consideration, they jointly concluded the vehicles were Iraqi, ones armed with orange rockets, and initiated the attack.

Excerpts seven (b) and (c) thus show that the testimony of the pilots sought to preserve the ways in which their *in situ* attempts to identify the British vehicles, to say what they saw, were themselves tied to a “local contexture of practical details and relevancies” grounded in such ‘primitive’ practices as looking, seeing and following another’s lead (Lynch 1993: 125). That testimony was highly sensitive to temporal consideration, detailing how occurrences at one time provided the grounds of ‘further inference and action’ at a later time as part of a developing scheme of interpretation (see also Goodwin 1994: 610). No single element within this temporally developing scheme stood alone. Instead, they were mutually implicative, with each part coming to have the character it did by virtue of its relations to the other aspects of the scene and the conduct of the participants within it.

This comes across particularly strongly in POPOFF 35’s references to: his use of light to further confirm the presence of rockets (‘I’m looking to roll in on the east so I can see if there’s shadows’, seven (b), lines 10-11); the state of the aircraft and how the aircraft’s speed and ‘energy state’ affected his capacity to manouver while attempting to identify vehicles on the ground using binoculars from above (‘I’m at a low energy state’/‘I’m knowing my airplane’, seven (b), lines 13-14); his embodied physical state in relation to the motion of the aircraft (‘at that time I’m going down with the aircraft’, seven (b), line 18); and finally to *how* it is that all this culminates in a positioning of the aircraft relative to the ground vehicles which allows for shadows to be seen in such a way that it is possible to confirm whether a ‘formation’ on the vehicle indicates rockets as opposed to something else (the ‘vertical development’ of shadows, seven (b), lines 21-22). The ‘rockets’ thus emerge as a figure against a complex, densely textured, perceptual ground in the context of a locally situated anmd shared way of seeing that can itself be recovered from the video display by following the description POPOFF 35 provides (Lynch 1991, 1993, Sharrock & Anderson 1993, Goodwin 1994, 2000, Heath & Luff 2000).

This kind of ‘contextural’ description played an important role in the testimony. When the investigator, for example, asks ‘did you actually see them [the panels]’ (excerpt seven (b), line 6) the question invites an explanation of how they came to be seen *incorrectly*. In response, the examiner is referred back to the pilots’ *collaborative* ‘viewing’ work within the scene. Through the provision of these descriptions the pilots were thus able to demonstrate that ‘hostiles’ and ‘friendlies’ are phenomena “encountered from within local social settings”, and which are specifically ‘known’ as things “to be dealt with in that setting ... [things] to be found through the use of specific technologies and the local competencies and skills their use rests upon” (Sharrock 2000: 253).

Through their testimony, the pilots demonstrate that it was only once they were able to provide, and thus correct for the equivocal character of what they were looking at – from perspectives collaboratively centred on the view from the ‘lived’ technical space of the cockpit – that the decision to engage the British vehicles could be made. Moreover, as we have seen, attempts to reconstruct this situated way of seeing had themselves to highlight the equivocal character of just what the situation had actually presented to them at the time. The selfsame procedures that the pilots used within the setting to assess what they were seeing together were thus used to locate and make sense of that seeing after the fact, making this a point where the pilots’ sense-making practices doubly ‘folded back’ on themselves (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970). Without these locally produced ‘guided tellings’, as Bogen and Lynch refer to them (1989: 209), events on the tape would have remained specifically senseless (Garfinkel 1967). Rather than offering an account of its outcome cast in terms of a discrete ‘cause’, this local, interactionally organised sense-making work, and the situated ‘praxiology of perception’ (Coulter & Parsons 1990) it elaborates, constitutes an excavation of the practical grounds of the pilots’ ‘(mis-)seeing’. In, through and over the course of the exchanges between the pilots and the investigators, we therefore come to see what it means to talk of ‘misidentification’ in this context.

**Conclusion**

By focusing on the video-commentary pairings produced as part of the Board’s investigation, our intention has been to explore the pilots attempts to explicate the practical and collaborative grounds of seeing ‘friendly’ British soldiers *as* ‘hostile’ (Wittgenstein 1953). The crucial point, something we believe to be one the most important things to come out of the inquiries, was the pilots’ persistent attempts to demonstrate that they had not departed from a shared military script but had acted in accordance with it (King 2006). What emerges from an examination of the interpretive impasses and the “ethnography of vision” elaborated in response to them, is that the ‘(mis-)seeing’ at the centre of this particular incident was embedded in the very practices employed to ‘see’ in such contexts more broadly. In other words, the selfsame competencies required of participants on the battlefield were displayed in the courses of action and reasoning that led the pilots to misidentify the British soldiers in this case. This suggests that we ought to be very careful not to treat friendly fire ‘asymmetrically’ in a Bloorian sense (1976): as somehow disconnected from or outside ordinary practice. As the pilots show us, one provides the conditions for the other (Wittgenstein 1953).

While this friendly fire incident had undeniably tragic consequences, the manner in which it was documented during the Board’s inquiry provided us with rare access to ‘war as work’ and the situational contingencies, uncertainties and indeed fragilities inherent within it as an organised endeavour. What we take to be the main lesson of the pilots’ testimony, and one which relates to friendly fire cases more broadly, is that we are unlikely to be able to make sense of such incidents unless we can link them to the wider fields of military action and interaction they are an ‘ordinary’ feature of.

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1. Coroners in the UK differ from their counterparts in other countries. While they cannot initiate prosecutions, only recommend them, they do have an investigative role. As well as pronouncing on cause of death, they can hold hearings or ‘inquests’ designed to determine any misadventure or criminal wrongdoing involved. Until this particular inquest, for legal purposes the deaths of all British personnel killed on active duty abroad were investigated by the Oxfordshire coroner’s office. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For those interested in pursuing this literature further, our study engages with research in a variety of fields, including work in the symbolic interactionist tradition, principally Hughes (1958); recent ethnographic studies of military practice (e.g. King 2006, Hockey 2009); the accident and disaster studies literature (e.g. Perrow 1984, Reason 1990, Vaughan 1996), including the body of work within it which deals with friendly fire specifically (e.g. Schrader 1982, Snook 2002, Cadell 2010, Masys 2010, Kirke 2012); as well as, finally, science and technology studies and the sociology of (scientific) knowledge (e.g. Bloor 1976). However, our orientation is ethnomethodological, and the work of Garfinkel (e.g. 1967, 1984, 2002) and Sacks (1992, Garfinkel and Sacks 1970) provides an important backdrop to our study. More specifically, we take our lead from a large and varied body of ethnomethodological studies of perception in ordinary and specialised settings. Courtrooms and legal inquiries (e.g. Garfinkel 1967, Pollner 1976, Benson & Drew 1978, Bogen & Lynch 1989, Goodwin 1994, 2000, Lynch & Bogen 1996, Boudeau 2007), scientific practices (Garfinkel, Lynch & Livingston 1981, Lynch 1985, Lynch 1991, Lynch 1993) and ‘work(places)’ more broadly (e.g. Sacks 1972, Garfinkel 1986, Anderson & Sharrock 1993, Goodwin & Goodwin 1996, Heath & Luff 2000, Warfield-Rawls 2009, Hindmarsh & Llewelyn 2010, Rouncefield & Tolmie 2012) have provided ‘perspicuous settings’ (Garfinkel 2002) for pursuing such studies empirically but there have also been more conceptual or ‘socio-logical’ studies, notably Coulter’s (e.g. 1975, 1989, Coulter & Parsons 1990, see also Button 2008). We draw on both strands of work in this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As widely reported, Oxford coroner Andrew Walker summarised the warrant for his finding as follows: “It was unlawful because there was no lawful reason for it and in that respect it was criminal.” Note, however, that this verdict was recorded without knowledge of the “rules of engagement” governing their mission, i.e. the guidelines that defined what the pilots could or could not legitimately target. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. While Goodwin’s (e.g. 1994, 2000) work on the use of video in the controversial trial which followed the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police is an important precursor to our study, and we have taken a great deal from it, there are important differences between the cases (and, indeed, other cases of “contested vision”, e.g. Coulter 1975, Benson & Drew 1978, Lynch & Bogen 1996). In the Rodney King trial, the question of ‘what had happened’ became the subject of a “politically charged theater” in which “incommensurate” interpretations were advanced about what the video showed (1994: 606). The problem in the case we are examining, however, was not so much the existence of competing interpretations of ‘what had happened’ leveraged via alternate readings of the video evidence – the ‘facts’ as such here were accepted all round – but of arriving at an any kind of understanding of the sequence of events at all, something, as we will show, the pilots’ testimony proved to be indispensible to. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For an extended discussion of the pilots’ language-in-use see Mair et al. 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In these modified transcripts (see Mair et al. 2012), different columns are used to differentiate communication between the pilots and communication between the pilots and the Ground Forward Air Controller they were coordinating with, call-sign MANILA HOTEL. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. As these exchanges did not involve communication with MANILA HOTEL, a single column is used. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)