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**Violence as Work: Ethnomethodological Insights into Military Combat Operations**

**Abstract**

***Objective:*** The objective of this article is to outline an ethnomethodological approach to the study of professionalized violence or violence *as* work. It focuses primarily on violence in the context of military combat operations and the ‘situational’ analyses and assessments military personnel themselves undertake when engaging in violent action. ***Method*:** We use video from one incident (WikiLeaks’ *Collateral Murder* release) as a demonstration case to set out the methodological bases of ethnomethodological studies of combat violence. As part of that, we show how transcripts can be used to document the interactions in which situational analyses feature as part of coordinating and executing linked attacks. ***Results*:** Based on the video and our transcripts, we explicate how the military personnel involved collaboratively identified, assessed and engaged a group of combatants. We show the incident consisted of two attacks or engagements: a first and a follow up, treated as connected rather than distinct by those involved on situational grounds. ***Conclusion*:** Moving beyond controversy, causal explanations and remedies, the paper describes how structures of practical military action can be investigated situationally from an ethnomethodological perspective using video data. By treating collaborative military methods and practices as a focus for inquiry, this article contributes to our understanding of violence as work more broadly.

*Keywords:*Violence, Combat, Iraq War, WikiLeaks, Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis

Violence has received a great deal of attention across social scientific literatures. A central motivation for much of this work is to uncover violence’s causes – whether genetic- behavioral (e.g. Ferguson & Beaver, 2009), psycho-biographical (e.g. Staub, 1989) or social-structural (e.g. Bauman, 1989). When it comes to examining any particular instance of violence, one of the foundational questions social scientists have sought to answer is thus ‘why did it occur?’ (Schinkel, 2004: 7). Rather than adopt this standard analytical move, i.e. ‘look for the causes’, in this article we will offer ways of drawing out the identifying features of real-time incidents of violence in *situational* terms.

We do this, following Schinkel (2004: 9), because we believe it is important to think further about what it would mean to take “violence itself” as our “topic of investigation”. Collins’ work is instructive on this issue. He advocates the need to pay closer attention to actual real-time acts or incidents of violence by “focus[ing] on the dynamics of interaction in situations” rather than treating them as the surface expression of deeper and/or more distal causal processes putatively at work (Collins, 2009a: 566)*.* Elsewhere Collins (2009b: 11) states that studies which took this policy seriously, studies in what he calls “the micro-sociology of violence”, would emphasize: “how violence happens, or fails to happen, in the immediate situations where humans threaten each other in naturalistic settings... [The] emphasis [would be] on small slices of time, sometimes in the order of fractions of seconds, and on the emotions, body postures, sounds, and movements, both synchronized and at cross purposes, that make up the details of violent action.”

Collins’ method for building accounts of violence thus centers on studying violent acts situationally. We think this is a valuable starting point and agree entirely with Collins that we need more fine-grained analyses of the details of specific interactions in particular situations. However, Collins also moves quickly to place limits on how situations should be defined. For Collins, “violence is an interactional accomplishment in a situation *structured by emotions*” and he points to a series of factors that must come into play if individuals are to overcome the “confrontational tension/fear” that he argues would normally prevent them from engaging in violence at all (Collins, 2009c: 449, emphasis added). We think such a move is premature. Rather than define situations from the outset in particular ways, for instance, as ‘structured by emotions’, we want to argue for a more open approach, one which treats the organization of situations of violence as an empirical question to be settled in and by the close analysis of actual instances, not in advance of it. We therefore outline the methodological bases of an approach to studying how violent situations are structured “from within” (Garfinkel, 1967: viii). That approach can be characterized as ethnomethodological in orientation because of its concern with practical action and practical reasoning in and about situations of violence (Garfinkel, 1967; 2002).

One of the reasons why we think situational studies of violence would benefit from a shift to a more explicitly ethnomethodological footing derives from our experience of undertaking studies of violence in the context of military combat operations. Although Collins framework has been extended to situations of war (see Collins, 2009c; Vollmer, 2013), we have not found those extensions particularly insightful in relation to real-time combat. Generalizing, as Collins and Vollmer do, from instances of interpersonal violence in civilian settings to instances of organized professional violence in military settings misses a great deal of what is distinctive about combat situations. In such contexts, violence is not haphazard but expected, planned for and collaboratively produced. Military personnel do not act as private individuals when engaging in violence. Rather professionalized violence as practiced is produced so as to be impersonal, collective and task-focused in ways that demonstrate an accountable orientation to mission-specific instructions and the local chain of command; the wider rules of engagement that govern the conduct of military units in a given conflict; and the still broader Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) as set out in the Articles of the Geneva Convention. These simultaneously feature as procedural constraints upon *and* licenses for the use of lethal force *in situ*. How such constraints and licenses are made situationally relevant is something we will explore empirically below.

Collins and Vollmer have little to say about the details of professionalized violence as a collaborative production (and, indeed, others may raise questions about how much Collins’ work illuminates more quotidian episodes of violence too, see Whitehead, Bowman and Raymond this issue). When we focus on the specificities of violence as work and how *it* is distinctively made to happen, however, we arrive at understandings of violence that allow us to fruitfully revisit and develop Collins’ work by “respecifying” (Garfinkel, 2002: 67-70) situational analysis as an achievement of those involved in that violence rather than a framework for analysts to make sense of it (Garfinkel, 1967: 76). That is, we can achieve an understanding of instances of violence grounded in how the parties involved themselves assess the situations in which they engage in violence (see Suchman, 2015). When it comes to understanding violence in military settings this is particularly important because, as we will show, decisions to employ violence are undertaken based onand calibrated to those situational assessments. Ethnomethodology is particularly useful in this regard because it is geared towards analyzing and describing the worksite practices and courses of practical reasoning that are constitutive of the social settings it investigates (Garfinkel, 2002).

In order to draw out what we see as the principal insights that emerge from ethnomethodological studies of combat operations, we will focus on video footage from one particular incident, the *Collateral Murder* incident leaked by WikiLeaks (2010), which recorded the activities of two US Apache helicopter crews as they undertook a series of airstrikes in Baghdad in 2007. Augmented by our work on several other airstrikes (see Elsey, Mair, Smith, & Watson, 2016; Kolanoski, 2017; Mair, Watson, Elsey, & Smith, 2012), we will use *Collateral Murder* as a demonstration case to show how violence in a complex, multi-sited and procedurally regulated work environment can be investigated as a collaborative accomplishment. Exploring the value of transcripts in highlighting aspects of the conduct and practices of the military personnel involved, we develop an empirically-grounded account of the ‘structures of practical action’ around which this particular situation was organized. The pay-off of ethnomethodological studies of violence, we suggest, is precisely their capacity to foreground those structures. Given our emphasis on understanding incidents in their details, we start our exposition by providing background on the *Collateral Murder* case, move on to methodological questions arising from it and then explain how we developed an analysis that took those questions into consideration before returning to more general issues in conclusion. In sum, this paper has the following objectives: (1) to produce a moment-to-moment account of the practical and collaborative activity of situational analysis in the *Collateral Murder* video; and (2) to consider methodological lessons and implications for future research into contemporary warfare and incidents of violence based upon that account and the considerations which arise from it.

**Background to the Case and the Controversy Surrounding It**

On 12 July 2007 two US Apache helicopters jointly attacked a crowd of Iraqis in the Baghdad suburb of Al-Amin al-Thaniyah as part of the ongoing hostilities in Iraq. The attack resulted in the deaths of eleven people, including two Reuters journalists, with two children also seriously injured. Repeated requests for information followed from Reuters, but the US military refused to release details of the incident. Two internal US Army investigations cleared the Apache crews of any wrongdoing soon after the operation.

The details of the incident only became public knowledge in 2010 when WikiLeaks released (‘leaked’) the classified video footage, leading to a widespread outcry. The dedicated *Collateral Murder* micro-website, compiled and published by WikiLeaks (2010), characterized what was being revealed in the following terms: “5th April 2010 10:44 EST: WikiLeaks has released a classified US military video depicting the indiscriminate slaying of over a dozen people in the Iraqi suburb of New Baghdad – including two Reuters news staff ... The video ... clearly shows the unprovoked slaying of a wounded Reuters employee and his rescuers. Two young children involved in the rescue were also seriously wounded.”

This brief precis links events in a particular way. According to WikiLeaks, the video is said to “clearly” show that the Apaches engaged in “indiscriminate” or “unprovoked slaying” and one of the reasons it can be described as “indiscriminate” or “unprovoked” is that the attack was not on enemy forces but journalists and rescuers, including children. It was, for WikiLeaks, “indiscriminate” because it did not “discriminate” combatants from non-combatants and was “unprovoked” because unarmed journalists, rescuers and children could not, by virtue of their rightful designation as such, have posed a threat. What this does is partition the protagonists in terms of the categories of ‘innocent’ and ‘evil-doer’ (Lee, 1984), with those fired upon the ‘innocents’ and the Apaches ‘the evil-doers’ – whose evil-doing is established by their act of firing upon and killing innocents, a paradigmatic moral ‘wrong’. The categories used are thus more than a rhetorical flourish, they are fulfilling “moral [and legal] duties” (Jayyusi, 1984: 44), which are essential for securing particular understandings of the event. Via such readings the video was treated as a ‘recording of a [war] crime’: unambiguous evidence that the US military carelessly – and even joyfully – targeted and killed innocent civilians, as opposed to enemy combatants (Kolanoski, 2017; Lee, 1984).

The original source of the video was the ‘gun-camera’ mounted on one of the Apache gunner’s weapons. Such recordings are routinely collected by the US military for internal monitoring purposes (i.e. available for viewing if something goes wrong). However, in the hands of WikiLeaks the video became a central component of a ‘dossier’ that the organization shared online, which included two versions of the video (a full unedited version and the shorter marked-up version which ‘went viral’), an approximate transcript of the video, a series of still images of the key parts of the attack and a timeline of the incident. No attempt was made to disguise WikiLeaks’ stance on the incident as an example of wrong-doing, instead that stance was used as an organizing device in setting up the release, all the way from their chosen title (i.e. Collateral *Murder*), which presented their view on what the attack amounted to, through to the characterizations presented using the rest of the materials to back that view up. As Collins (2009a: 566) puts it, “no evidence speaks for itself” and by making the shocking materials publically available first (rather than responding to an acknowledgment by the military, say), WikiLeaks had the opportunity to *speak* first about what happened and shape the narrative of the incident. Occupying first position, their version gained a certain amount of authority and credibility.

It is worth unpacking this further. For Christensen (2014: 2594, 2597) and others, the edited version of “*Collateral Murder* is visual evidence of the gross abuse of state and military power ... [exposing] … arrogance …, a disdain for human life, a clear and systematic opposition to transparency”. It is not, however, a direct critique of the actual conduct of the (unnamed and unidentified) military personnel involved (Kirton, 2016). Instead, in the hands of WikiLeaks, *Collateral Murder* is made to speak of and to failures of transparency, openness and accountability at a general level. Mirroring academic research into violence of the kind Collins and Schinkel have critiqued, viewers of the edited video are thus guided quickly away from a consideration of the particulars of the situation itself to a consideration of its underlying causes.

Against this background, the content of the unedited as opposed to edited video footage was not subjected to close analytical scrutiny. Giving it that closer scrutiny is not a straightforward task. For one thing, the video, like other videos of violent combat operations, makes for morally troubling viewing, not eased by repeated viewing. For another, again like other videos of combat operations, it poses formidable challenges to the would-be analyst, as we will demonstrate. *Collateral Murder* is much watched but not so readily grasped. Nonetheless, it remains a significant case and revisiting it can furnish methodological lessons. In the following sections of this paper we therefore outline our attempts to work through this difficult material, focusing on what the Apaches ‘did’ rather than what they ‘did wrong’.

**Method**

Drawing on the experience of working on other airstrike incidents (Elsey et al., 2016; Kolanoski, 2017; Mair et al., 2012), in approaching the unedited footage our aim is to show how it can be used to develop an understanding of the Apache crews’ conduct and action in its own terms. Simply stated, we aim to explore the work of violence from the perspective of the two Apaches’ pilots and gunners. It is the “making and doing of war” as embodied and communicative practice to which our analytic attention is turned (McSorley, 2014: 115).

We start by noting there was something routine about the work the Apache crews were engaged in on the day. While the attack was characterized by WikiLeaks as an ‘indiscriminate slaying’ *in light of* who was killed, there was never any suggestion the Apaches had deliberately fired upon people they knew to be innocent civilians. Instead, the attacks were initiated following an assessment of the situation by the Apaches. They had become aware of a crowd who, in line with the specific auspices of their mission and rules of engagement, they determined posed a direct threat to the US military forces they were patrolling with and themselves. They launched their attack against them as a result.

Pertinent methodological questions for an analytic enterprise focused on opening up that work include: In *this* case what was involved in their assessment of the situation? Just as importantly, how can this situational work be recovered from the video?

In order to address these questions, we want to think about how the situation presented itself to the Apache crews and examine what is involved in evaluating a scene and making assessments of it for practical military purposes. Situational assessments in a military context can be a matter of determining a nations’ military plans, capacities and intentions (Boudeau, 2007). These exercises are typically undertaken over time and elaborated across multiple sites via, for instance, intelligence gathering operations. In contrast, and as we will go on to discuss in more detail, what we see in this instance is a situational assessment (and response), collaboratively produced in real-time, in which the plans, capacities and intentions of possible enemy forces are determined based on the Apache crews’ readings of the scene they encountered. These are not disinterested exercises undertaken by detached observers; the Apache crews’ analyses are part of developing events rather than detached reflections on them from afar (Sacks, 1963). The ‘time-sensitive’ character of these assessments injects extra urgency into affairs, as the military personnel involved are also seeking to minimize potential risk to themselves from counter-attacks should they delay from attacking first.

Examining the collaborative element of such situational assessments is complicated in the case of combat operations by issues such as who is involved (in the air and on the ground), who knows what, who hears what, who sees what, and so on. In order to arrive at an account of what the Apache crews were doing, we need to be in a position to answer such questions. Fortunately, unlike other available video footage (LiveLeak, 2017), WikiLeaks’ extensive online ‘dossier’ on the incident provides vital context and background to the contents of the leaked video recording.

Our examination of the incident, specifically the ‘full’, largely unedited video, is also directly informed by previous studies in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, approaches which are especially suited to studies of single instances and the extended sequences comprising incidents (Schegloff, 1987). This is particularly useful in the present case given the complexity and lengthy duration of the original footage (i.e. 39 minutes and 13 seconds). Beyond resources for handling long and complex data, however, we also build on ethnomethodological studies of combat operations in particular. For example, the work of Nevile (e.g. 2013) and our own research on a friendly fire case in Iraq in 2003 (Elsey et al., 2016; Mair et al., 2012), as well as a military airstrike in Kunduz in 2009 (Kolanoski, 2017), illustrate how footage from controversial and heavily documented cases can yield understandings of military practice. The body of work examining cases in-depth, to which this article contributes, enhances our knowledge of routine military activities (e.g. mission types) and the social organization of combat operations in real-time when taken as a whole.

Elsewhere we have sketched where we think an ethnomethodological and conversation analytic method for the study of real-time military conduct might most profitably begin (Elsey et al., 2016). The first step when handling audio-visual material like the *Collateral Murder* video, we suggest, is to produce an accurate transcript, adapting the transcription conventions used in conversation analysis (Jefferson, 2004). In this case WikiLeaks provided a transcript with the video. However, it had to be substantially reworked. Most significantly the speakership of each utterance was unattributed, critical with this type of data where many ‘conversations’ are being conducted and can be heard at once.

The *Collateral Murder* video is notably more complicated than other cases we have examined, which were organized around more sequentially standard one-to-one interactions. The *Collateral Murder* video, by contrast, contains fragmented, multi-party, overlapping, simultaneous communications plus over-layered skilled video work, a significant challenge to follow and make sense of. For instance, the video’s audio track captures pilot-gunner talk in each Apache, Apache-Apache talk, Apache-ground talk and other chatter on an open frequency, making it difficult to disentangle the various strands of communication. Closer listening opens up new layers of complication as much as it resolves them.

Military investigators, addressing these same issues, have occasionally sought to overcome them by amalgamating transcripts across several videos (Office of Special Investigations, 1993), but we do not have equivalent resources to draw upon. The video is our sole source of real-time data. Nonetheless, we want to emphasize that there are ways of proceeding even with materials that pose these kinds of difficulties. The transcript provided below attempts to display separate and overlapping conversations in relation to who was speaking to whom, as well as who could hear whom, as oriented-to and worked with features of the team-working environment (Goodwin, 1993). To achieve this, a ‘linear’ transcript was replaced by a column-based transcript, as developed in our previous work (Elsey et al., 2016).

In this case, however, unlike in other cases we worked on, we could not rely solely on the organization of recorded talk as a guide because it is frequently highly ambiguous. With multiple parties speaking to others about related concerns at the same time, it is not always clear just whose conversations a particular utterance belongs to. The action captured on the video – what the gunner is visibly doing in conjunction with the talk – became equally important for us in gaining a sense of what was taking place. When developing the transcript, then, we employed a combination of best hearings and visual sense-making practices.

Our primary focus in producing the transcript was on distinguishing speakers by voice and tracing them through the recording. Where there were ambiguities regarding that (e.g. due to distortion, changes of pitch and tone, overlapping talk, etc.), we tried to judge how a particular stretch of talk best fit within the surrounding talk as part of the collaborative activities being conducted through it. We acknowledge that the transcript is partial and remains a work-in-progress but suggest it is nonetheless ‘good enough’ to begin to analyze the incident (Sacks, 1984). That is, when read while viewing the video (which we invite readers to do by accessing the online supplemental material comprising the video excerpts we focus on and stills and/or by visiting the WikiLeaks *Collateral Murder* microsite), it provides an initial point from which to start to open up and work through particular aspects of the moment-to-moment interactional organization of this violent incident – the treatment we offer in the next section. However, before moving on to that treatment, we want to note that anyone seeking to engage with combat videos will need to deal with such difficulties (and see Elsey et al., 2016; Kolanoski, 2017; Mair et al., 2012 for further discussion). Transcripts are invaluable as aides in following the action but, because of that, careful thought has to be given to how those transcripts are developed so that they do facilitate the analysis.

**Results**

**Introduction**

For Jayyusi (2011), the *Collateral Murder* video “demonstrates a … method of operation ... [i.e.] real procedures … used in the war on Iraq”. Taking up Jayyusi’s insight, in what follows we explicate the ‘methods of operation’ and ‘real procedures’ that were constitutive of real-time situational assessments in this case. This involves describing the practical operational reasoning revealed through the sequentially unfolding actions and interactions of the military personnel involved (Garfinkel, 2002; Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Schegloff, 2007). This will include a discussion of the conditions that the military operatives were working under (i.e. mission type, chain of command), the verbal/visual practices involved in situational assessment as well as of attack procedures (i.e. permissions, ‘readying’).

**Setting the scene**

The US protagonists (with their transcript identifiers) foregrounded in this incident were two Apache helicopters each consisting of a crew of pilot and gunner, with the call sign for the attacking Apache ‘Crazy Horse One-Eight’ (Pilot: CH18P and Gunner: CH18G) (the video and audio comes from this vehicle) and for the second ‘Crazy Horse One-Nine’ (Pilot: CH19P and Gunner: CH19G), both of whom were actively ‘monitoring’ infantry communications on an ‘open channel’ (hence the layered audio heard on the video). They were patrolling with Bravo Company Two-Sixteen Infantry consisting of Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFV) (approximately 100 meters from the targets) and including ‘Bushmaster Four’ (BM4), ‘Bushmaster Seven’ (BM7) (approximately 300 meters away) and ‘Hotel Two-Six’ (H26). The latter two were both called upon to give the Apaches clearance to attack.

The leaked military incident report describes the following as the conditions under which they were operating: “Bravo Company 2-16 [sic] Infantry had been under sporadic small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire since OPERATION ILAAJ began at dawn on the morning of the 12th of July [2007]. *The company had the mission of clearing their sector* [‘zone 30’] *and looking for weapons caches*. Since Bravo Company had been in near continuous contact [with enemy combatants] since dawn, *the pilots were looking primarily for armed insurgents. Lastly, there was no information leading anyone to believe or even suspect that non-combatants were in the area*.”(Investigating Officer 2nd Brigade Combat Team 2nd Infantry Division (MND-B), 2007: 2. emphasis added)

The Apache crews had thus been sent on a mission to help ‘clear’ a designated area of combatants. As set out in the report and under the parameters of the mission, they expected to see, find, encounter and engage combatants on the scene (not journalists, children or ‘innocents’ more broadly). Along with the infantry forces in the area, they had a specified two-fold task to perform; (1) engage any enemy combatants encountered, and (2) find and remove weapons from possible use.

Working to this dual mission rubric in conjunction with ground forces, the Apaches had been patrolling the area for some time (approximately 50 minutes) prior to the incident we discuss. Where the unedited video begins, we see, in overview, a real-time situational assessment play out in a particular way. The crew of Crazy Horse One-Eight are monitoring a “black vehicle” when Crazy Horse One-Nine points out a separate group of men in an area to their left (“There’s about four or five [men]... [in] this location and there’s more that keep walking by and one of them has a weapon”). Initial estimates of the size of the group grow from “four to five” to “probably about twenty of them”. In terms of the “guns” held by the walking group, it is again reiterated that “one of them has a weapon”, with the gunner adding “that’s a weapon” as the Apaches move into position to attack them.

The threat this situation might pose is weighed and assessed by the Apache crews (e.g. in terms of presence of guns, types of people, etc.) and they then seek permission from ground commanders to engage the crowd in an attack. Access to the scene is unequally distributed across the collaborating parties, i.e. only the Apaches can see the group and assess any threat they might be thought to pose, but the chain of command and division of battlefield labor is worked through in locally accountable ways to license the Apaches to attack. The helicopters had already been scouting the area at the commencement of the recording. These were not the first potential targets identified, and the presence of vehicles dropping off enemy combatants to join the fray became consequential later in the incident.

Table 1

*Collateral Murder transcript – first attack*

*Note*. Unedited ‘full version’ video start time: 1 minute 57 seconds, available as supplemental material online along with illustrative stills. The identifier “UNATT” (i.e. Unattributed) refers to utterances that could not be definitively ascribed to the known participants. Identifiers in brackets refer to transcribers’ (best) possible hearings (e.g. (CH18P)). Transcript conventions can be found at the end of the paper.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Air-Ground/Ground-Air/Ground-Ground** | |  | **Pilot-Gunner/Gunner-Pilot/Apache-Apache** |
| 01  02  0304 | CH18G | Hotel Two-Six this is Crazy Horse One-Eight. Have individuals with weapons (([PIC 1](https://www.dropbox.com/s/ddw6feku50jwtfz/Excerpt%201%2C%20PIC%201.png?dl=0))) |  |  |
| 05 |  | (2.8 seconds inaudible) |  |  |
| 06 |  |  | CH18G | Yup. He’s got a weapon too: |
| 07  08  09  10  11 | CH18G | Hotel Two-Six, Crazy Horse One-Eight. Have five to six individuals with AK47s  (([PIC 2](https://www.dropbox.com/s/yhxbzj6c0mgki3s/Excerpt%201%2C%20PIC%202.png?dl=0))). Request permission to engage |  |  |
| 12 |  | (1.4) |  |  |
| 13 |  | {Beep} |  |  |
| 14  15  16  17 | H26 | <Roger that> Uh, we have no personnel east of our position. (0.7) So, uh, you are free to engage. Over |  |  |
| 18 |  | {Beep Beep} |  |  |
| 19 |  | (1.1) |  |  |
| 20 |  |  | CH18P | Right, we’ll be engaging |
| 21 |  | (0.3) |  |  |
| 22 |  |  | CH19P | Roger, go ahead |
| 23  24  25 |  |  | CH18G | I’m gonna (.) I can’t get em now because they’re behind that building (([PIC 3](https://www.dropbox.com/s/g6td6oi99z87i2g/Excerpt%201%2C%20PIC%203.png?dl=0))) |
| 26 |  | (2.4) |  |  |
| 27  28 | UNATT | Um, hey Bushmaster element [( ) |  |  |
| 29 |  |  | CH18G | [>He’s got an RPG< (([PIC 4](https://www.dropbox.com/s/d72n9zumcwauuqw/Excerpt%201%2C%20PIC%204.png?dl=0))) |
| 30  31 | CH18P | All right, we got a guy with an RPG |  |  |
| 32 |  | (0.5) |  |  |
| 33 |  |  | CH18G | I’m gonna fire= |
| 34  35 |  |  | (CH18P) | =Okay. No hold it. Let’s come aro::und |
| 36  37 |  |  | CH19P | Behind buildings right now from our point of view= |
| 38  39  40 |  |  | CH18P | Okay, we’re gonna come around [(so we can get all, all eight of em) |
| 41  42  43  44 | CH18G | [Hotel Two-Six; have eyes on individual with RPG. Getting ready to fire. We won’t (inaudible) |  |  |
| 45  46  47 | (UNATT) | Yeah, we had a guy shooting, and now he’s behind the building |  |  |
| 48 |  | (0.3) |  |  |
| 49 |  |  | CH18G | God damn it |
| 50  51  52  53  54 | UNATT | Uh, negative, he was, uh, right in front of the Brad ((BFV)). Uh, bout, there, one o’clock (.) Haven’t seen anything since then |  |  |
| 55 |  |  |  | (.) |
| 56  57 |  |  | CH18P | Just fuckin, once you get on em just open em up |
| 58 |  |  | CH18G | I am |
| 59  60  61 | UNATT | I see your element, uh, got about four Humvees, uh, out along, this uh ((continues)) |  |  |
| 62 |  |  | CH18P | You’re clear |
| 63 |  |  | CH18G | All right, firing |
| 64 |  |  | CH19P | Let me know when you get em |
| 65 |  |  | CH19G | Let’s shoot (([PIC 5](https://www.dropbox.com/s/3lhhja8yle2jp3y/Excerpt%201%2C%20PIC%205.png?dl=0))) |
| 66 |  | (0.7) |  |  |
| 67 |  |  | CH18P | Light em all up |
| 68 |  |  |  | (1.6) |
| 69 |  |  | CH18G | Come on, fire! (([PIC 6](https://www.dropbox.com/s/p6wp9mwa17o88xg/Excerpt%201%2C%20PIC%206.png?dl=0))) |

Table 1 begins with Crazy Horse One-Eight’s gunner contacting Hotel Two-Six to make him aware (and by extension the rest of the ground forces he is responsible for coordinating) that they have spotted “individuals with weapons” (lines 1-4). As an overlap, on the Apache-Apache communications (or ‘comms’) link, the gunner confirms the positive identification of *another* individual and hence *multiple* individuals with weapons “too” (line 6). As well as alerting Hotel Two-Six to the presence of a potentially hostile group, this prepares the way for the request for permission to engage them – according to the mission rubric – in lines 7-11, with permission subsequently given in lines 14-17. In the process, the nature of the threat gains specificity and is ‘upgraded’, with a move from “individuals with weapons” (lines 1-4) to “five or six individuals with AK47s” (lines 7-10). These ‘noticings’ are militarily, legally and interactionally consequential in situational terms as they call for and result in requests to attack under their known-in-common rules of engagement (Schegloff, 2007).

The assessment of situational threat here follows fairly well defined parameters, although at this stage exactly what or who the ‘threat’ is to remains unspecified. The direct relevance of the threat is subsequently reassessed by the Apaches. They come to see the group as posing a threat to themselves due to the presence of “an RPG” or rocket-propelled grenade (lines 29-31), a weapon which can bring an Apache down, unlike small arms fire. Situational assessment involves seeing (for it is partly a visual activity), assessing and reporting (possible) threats and hence targets while managing communications, maneuvering the helicopter and readying weapons systems in conjunction with the other Apache ahead of (possible) strikes. Rather than assessing them *as* individuals, the people on the ground are seen and assessed together and taken to pose a threat as a group. As this is a ‘group threat’, the appropriate response is to get into a position where it is possible to target them collectively – and in the latter sections of the transcript we see Crazy Horse One-Eight under cover from Crazy Horse One-Nine move into a position where that can be done, discussed further below. The positive identification of targets and positioning for observation and attacks are thus phases of the action that take for granted and are oriented to the duplicative organization of ‘the group’ as a ‘team’ acting together (Sacks, 1974).

The presence of weapons forms a critical, indeed criterial, part of the situational assessment and attribution of combatant status and a ruling in/out process is central to the identification of, and initial moves against, possible targets. That is, gaining permission to engage involves seeking information to confirm or rule-out the presence of ‘friendlies’ in the vicinity. Hotel Two-Six offers just that confirmation: “We have no [friendly] personnel east of our position ... So you are free to engage”) (lines 14-17). This must be asked for, checked and verified. Here the negative response (no friendlies) is met with the upshot “*So* you are free to engage” (lines 16-17), leading the Apache pilot to fix their course of action: “right, we’ll be engaging” (lines 20). The ground commander can provide the permission to engage, even though the Apaches have superior visual access to the scene, because their relayed description of the situation is consistent with its known-in-common features as hostile. The video reveals the working division of labor in this instance to be that the reported positive identification of enemies (i.e. the reasonable certainty that the target located is a legitimate military target) is the responsibility and task of the Apache crews together, whereas the responsibility for licensing the actual attack resides with the ground commander. In short, this organizational delineation acts as a procedural failsafe to prevent individuals from acting alone and outside of the law (in contrast, e.g., to the incident examined in Kolanoski (2017) where the ground commander had superior access to the situation than supporting aircraft).

Before arriving at the scene the Apache crews were thus working on the basis that they would not encounter civilians but armed combatants and upon encountering a group of men they judge to be armed, they are told there are no friendly personnel in the area. Given the options they are working with, the group is not friendly so must be hostile and therefore can be attacked under their rules of engagement by a process of elimination. At no point do the Apache crews entertain the possibility that the men holding “RPGs” could be anything but combatants and the confirmed absence of friendlies is sufficient to license an attack based on the direct threat ‘the RPG’ (actually a camera) is held to pose. Adapting Sacks (1974), the circumstances of the mission and their encounter with the group are ones in which anything that *can* be seen as a threat *will* be seen and responded to as such. This way of reading and orienting to the scene is closely fitted to the type of mission (i.e. clearing an area) and its stage (i.e. finding initial possible targets as soon as they are there to be found).

Assessing the threat posed by a target and planning and preparing for an attack – seeing and responding – run simultaneously here. So while they continue to monitor the group and its developing activities, we also observe them considering how best they can engage the group as a target. Attacking ‘too soon’, inopportunely, is to be avoided. We therefore see an ‘insertion sequence’ (Schegloff, 1972), where the attack is delayed while the pilot moves the helicopter, by panning counter-clockwise, into a (better) position for a (better) shot, starting at line 34 and ending with “you’re clear” to fire at line 62. A second kind of situated work consideration comes into play here, one connected to the effective professional execution of the course of action in which they are engaged: in readying for attack, where there is time, set up for the best not the first shot where possible. The maneuvering of both Apaches in preparation for the strike is only partially available to us, but it is a critical part of the situated work they engage in – it is what enables them to “light em all up” (lines 67) as Crazy Horse One-Eight’s gunner proceeds to do.

**Collateral Murder – an interlude**

The Apache gunner opens fire on the group on the ground a number of times (approximately six closely grouped rounds of shots). The Apaches together assess the outcome (“bunch of bodies”, “about eight individuals”, “currently engaging approximately eight individuals KIA [killed in action], RPGs and AK-47s”). Hotel Two-Six is instructed to send troops to the location to provide further on-the-ground assessment (including “[to] get pictures” or take photographs) and the Apaches remain in the vicinity to assess whether all the combatants have been successfully engaged, i.e. killed, and offer assessments of their own work (“nice”, “look at all those dead bastards”, “nice, good shoot’n”, “thank you”). At this juncture they do not know exactly how many have been killed or the identities of the deceased. While continuing to monitor the scene, they notice that one of those targeted is alive and attempting to crawl away. We take up the video again from the immediately prior exchange.

**Table 2 – Collateral Murder transcript – follow-up attack**

Unedited ‘full’ video start time: 5 minutes 43 seconds, available online with illustrative stills.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Air-Ground/Ground-Air/Ground-Ground** | |  | **Pilot-Gunner/Gunner-Pilot/Apache-Apache** |
| 01  02  03  04  05  06  07 | CH18P | This is Crazy Horse One-Eight, that’s good copy. They’re [the bodies are] on a street in front of an open, uh, (.) courtyard with a bunch of (.) blue uh trucks, bunch of vehicles in the courtyard |  |  |
| 08 |  | (0.7) |  |  |
| 09  10  11 |  |  | CH19P | There’s one guy moving down there but he’s uh, he’s (uh) wounded |
| 12 |  | (inaudible) |  |  |
| 13  14  15 |  |  | CH18G | All right, we’ll let ‘em know so they can hurry up and get over here |
| 16 |  | (2.7) |  |  |
| 17 |  | {Beep Beep} |  |  |
| 18  19  20  21 | CH18P | This is One-Eight, we also have one individual (.) uh, appears to be wounded crawl- trying to crawl away (([PIC 1](https://www.dropbox.com/s/6t5kc8r9yogbrzs/Excerpt%202%2C%20PIC%201.png?dl=0))) |  |  |
| 22 |  | (2) |  |  |
| 23 |  | {Beep} |  |  |
| 24  25 | UNATT | Roger, we’re gonna move down there |  |  |
| 26 |  | (0.3) |  |  |
| 27 |  | {Beep Beep} |  |  |
| 28 | CH18P | Roger, we’ll cease fire |  |  |
| 29 |  | (1.2) |  |  |
| 30  31 | CH19P | Yeah, we won’t shoot anymore |  |  |
| 32 |  | (4.6) |  |  |
| 33 |  |  | CH18G | He’s getting up (([PIC 2](https://www.dropbox.com/s/hec0boiwigd2a3g/Excerpt%202%2C%20PIC%202.png?dl=0))) |
| 34  35 |  |  | CH18P | Maybe he has a weapon down in his hand? |
| 36 |  |  | CH18G | No, no I haven’t seen one yet |
| 37  38 |  |  | CH19G | We see you guys got that guy crawling right now on that curb |
| 39  40  41  42  43 |  |  | CH18G | Yeah, I got him. I put two rounds ((30mm chain gun ammunition)) near him, and you guys were shooting over there too, so (0,9) eh we'll see |
| 44 |  |  | CH19P | Yeah, roger that |
| ((4 ground-to-ground utterances removed, 15 seconds)) | | | | |
| 45 |  |  | CH18P | Come on buddy |
| [((inaudible over stepping))] | | | | |
| 46  47 |  |  | CH18G | All you gotta do is pick up a weapon (([PIC 3](https://www.dropbox.com/s/csgbwrt1la6blhq/Excerpt%202%2C%20PIC%203.png?dl=0))) |
| 48 |  | (4.2) |  |  |
| 49 |  | {Beep} |  |  |
| 50  51  52  53  54  55  56  57 | BM4 | Crazy Horse this is Bushmaster Five, Bushmaster Four break  (0.9)  {Beep}  We are right below you right time now can you walk us onto that location over |  |  |
| 58 |  | (0.6) |  |  |
| 59 |  | {Beep} |  |  |
| 60 |  | (0.4) |  |  |
| 61 |  | {Beep Beep} |  |  |
| 62  63  64  65  66  67 | CH18P | This is Two-Six roger. I’ll pop flares ((drop flares)). We also have one individual moving. We’re looking for weapons. If we see a weapon, we’re gonna engage |  |  |
| 68 |  | (1.5) |  |  |
| 69 |  | (inaudible) |  |  |
| 70 |  | {Beep Beep} |  |  |
| 71  72  73 | CH18P | Yeah Bushmaster, we have a van that’s approaching and picking up the bodies |  |  |
| 74 |  | (3.1) |  |  |
| 75 |  |  | CH18G | Where’s that van at? |
| 76 |  |  | CH18P | Right down there by the bodies |
| 77 |  |  | CH18G | Okay, yeah |
| 78 |  | {Beep Beep} |  |  |
| 79  80  81  82  83 | CH18P | Bushmaster; Crazy Horse, we have individuals going to (.) the scene, looks like possibly uh picking up bodies and weapons (([PIC 4](https://www.dropbox.com/s/8nwqlgjnldi587h/Excerpt%202%2C%20PIC%204.png?dl=0))) |  |  |
| 84 |  | (1.1) |  |  |
| 85  86  87 |  |  | CH18G | Let me engage  [((inaudible over stepping))]  Can I shoot? |
| 88  89  90 | CH18P | Roger. Uh break. Crazy Horse One-er Eight request permission to uh engage |  |  |
| 91  92 |  |  | CH19P | >They’re picking up the wounded< |
| 93 |  | (0.6) |  |  |
| 94  95 |  |  | CH18G | Yeah, we’re trying to get permission to engage |
| 96 |  | (1.1) |  |  |
| 97 |  |  | CH18G | Come on, let us shoot |
| 98 |  | (0.4) |  |  |
| 99  100 | CH18P | Bushmaster; Crazy Horse One-Eight |  |  |
| 101 |  | (2.7) |  |  |
| 102 |  |  | CH18G | They’re taking him |
| 103 |  | (1.0) |  |  |
| 104  105 | CH18P | Bushmaster; Crazy Horse One-Eight |  |  |
| 106 |  | (2.2) |  |  |
| 107 |  | {Beep} |  |  |
| 108  109 | BM7 | This is Bushmaster Seven, go ahead |  |  |
| 110  111  112  113  114 | CH18P | Roger. We have a black SUV-uh Bongo truck ((van)) picking up the bodies. [Request permission to engage  (([PIC 5](https://www.dropbox.com/s/1gg0famms3nf6e6/Excerpt%202%2C%20PIC%205.png?dl=0))) |  |  |
| 115 |  |  | CH18G | [Fuck |
| 116 |  | (1.2) |  |  |
| 117 |  | {Beep} |  |  |
| 118  119  120  121 | BM7 | This is Bushmaster Seven, roger. This is Bushmaster Seven, roger, engage  ((truck begins to move away)) |  |  |
| 122 |  | {Beep Beep} |  |  |
| 123 | CH18P | One-Eight, engage |  |  |
| 124 |  |  | CH18P | Clear |
| 125  126  127  128 |  |  | CH18G | Come on  {firing} (([PIC 6](https://www.dropbox.com/s/t31g9egu5j1m2mg/Excerpt%202%2C%20PIC%206.png?dl=0)))  ((two men run away from the van – [PIC 7](https://www.dropbox.com/s/c84wfww1zfc2yfb/Excerpt%202%2C%20PIC%207.png?dl=0))) |
| 129 |  |  |  | (0.8) |
| 130 |  |  | CH18P | Clear |
| 131 |  |  |  | {firing} |
| 132 |  |  |  | (0.2) |
| 133 |  |  | CH18P | Clear |
| 134 |  |  | CH19P | We’re engaging (as well) |
| 135 |  |  |  | {firing}(([PIC 8](https://www.dropbox.com/s/ibiv4p0cqx47hjl/Excerpt%202%2C%20PIC%208.png?dl=0))) |

The attack mounted in this section of the video (Table 2) is tied to the first attack; it is a follow up engagement which develops out of the first and is constituted as sequentially linked to it. From the perspective of the Apache crew, it is not a new engagement but a secondary one. It is initiated with the Apaches determining the success of the original attack before continuing the task of clearing the area of further enemy combatants as instructed in line with the developing situation as they see it. As such, the scene below them is not subject to any fundamental re-assessment. Instead, the Apache crews wait long enough to ‘let the dust settle’ in order to assess ‘what next’ (lines 1-7), particularly with regard to any surviving ‘enemies’, from the original target group. Just as they are passing on information regarding the location of the dead, an injured man is spotted (lines 9-11) and this is then relayed to the ground forces (“we also have one individual ... appears to be wounded ... trying to crawl away”) (lines 18-21). Article 12 of the Geneva Convention (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1949) appears to definitively specify how military operatives should have categorized this person: “Members of the armed forces and other persons …, who are wounded or sick, shall be respected and protected in all circumstances ... Any attempts upon their lives, or violence to their persons, shall be strictly prohibited; in particular, they shall not be murdered or exterminated.”

However, in practice the distinction between the categories of ‘combatant’ and ‘the wounded’ (i.e. ex-combatants) is not as neat as Article 12 suggests. As Benton and Atshan (2016: 152) note, the separation of combatant, wounded ex-combatant and injured victim is an ‘imagined divide’. Rephrased ethnomethodologically, these are distinctions drawn for practical purposes and how they are drawn reflects the situation of their deployment. We see the criteria used for the assignation of these categories being explicitly marked here; the wounded man when first spotted is configured as someone who should be quickly picked up by the ground troops (line 9-15). Thus, the initial plan is not to kill him but to secure him. They cease fire and monitor the situation. As part of this, the Apache crews closely watch and interpret what the wounded man is doing to determine what he might be about to do (lines 33-47). The wounded man could rejoin hostilities by arming himself so remains a potential threat. How he is monitored thus involves consideration of the developing scene in light of the Apaches’ prior assessments of threat, assessments themselves informed by shared understandings of the broader situation as the site of ongoing armed conflict.

Here again the projectable plans, capacities and intentions of the assumed combatant shape the Apache crews’ actions. The man on the ground is seen as projectably becoming an active combatant *again*, but, for the time being, he belongs to the wounded. “All you gotta do is pick up a weapon” (lines 46-47) designates the legal conditions under which his status would change and they could attack. However, that the man is only *potentially* looking for a weapon (the intent) does not provide sufficient grounds for treating him as a target *as yet*.

As the Apache crews wait to see what the wounded individual will do, a van arrives to pick him up (lines 71-73). The presence of the van critically alters how the Apaches orient to the developing scene. Prior to this the expectation had been that the ground forces would attend to secure the area, those left alive and any weapons still present (lines 24-31, 50-57). For the Apache crew this meant performing an observational role in case something were to happen in the period before the infantry’s arrival. They are not at this moment under direct threat themselves (i.e. there is no mention of RPGs now). Importantly, the arrival of the van is not oriented to as an entirely new encounter so they don’t ‘reset’ (i.e. its appearance is understood as ‘cued’ by the initial attack): they have not encountered the van, the van has encountered them in the middle of their on-going work and, as a result, a different set of relevancies is in play to that which characterized the earlier course of events. The presence of a threat, broadly defined, is almost immediately presumed (Garfinkel, 1967; Smith, 1978).

The van is subsequently attacked killing three men and injuring the two children who happened to be inside. The question is, how was the van seen as a threat to be incapacitated or eliminated? As the video shows, there was some ambiguity about the status of the van. As Crazy Horse One Eight puts it to Hotel Two-Six: “we have a van that’s approaching and *picking up the bodies*” (lines 71-73, emphasis added), where “the bodies” are the bodies of the men spotted earlier and targeted. This explicitly links the van’s appearance to the earlier engagement and thus prepares the ground for potential action against it too. Nonetheless, described in this way, the van could be seen as an (unregistered or unofficial) emergency vehicle bringing rescuers instead of a threat. Its status has not been settled.

However, the description is subsequently extended: “we have individuals going to the scene, looks like possibly picking up bodies *and weapons*” (lines 79-83, emphasis added). As the Apaches were there to clear the area of combatants and secure weapons caches, the appearance of the van could be cast in a rather different, non-innocent light. In the first Table, a group of armed combatants was judged to be a threat. In Table two, the situation on the ground has been transformed. There is now a group of dead armed combatants constituting a seeable weapons cache which either ‘side’ could seek to recover. Nonetheless, whereas the Apaches positively identified weapons in the first engagement and initially waited for the wounded man to pick up a weapon, in the second engagement the connection between the van and weapons never accountably stabilizes as an observable phenomenon. The Apache crews observe the people in the van “picking up the wounded” (lines 91-92) and they request permission to engage the “Bongo truck picking up the bodies” (lines 110-114), linking specifically again to “the bodies” from the initial attack. While not engaged in an offensive attack or posing an immediate threat, it is the van’s possible *future* involvement in the collection of weapons that is read as threatening and turns them into an urgent target, e.g. “come on let us shoot” (line 97), against the background of the on-going mission. That is, rather than a rescue mission, this was treated not just as linked to the activities of the group engaged earlier but as a continuation of the hostile military operations the Apaches and ground troops were there to disrupt. The Apache crew members thus read the intentions, capacities and plans of the occupants of the van in line with their understanding of the wider situation. These are subsumed with the armed group as linked phenomena under the same ‘scheme of interpretation’ (Garfinkel, 1967; Schütz, 1962). Threat, in this reading, does not necessarily need to be directly against the helicopters or indeed imminent (e.g., weapons can be collected for later use). This future-orientation is thus built directly into the outworking of their military objectives through the attack based on their analysis of the situation.

**Discussion**

Moving away from Collins’ focus on emotion as central to the analysis of situations of violence, we have used the *Collateral Murder* case in order to demonstrate the role that the situational analyses undertaken by military personnel themselves play in the collaborative accomplishment of professionalized violence or violence as work. The exposition above, presented through a transcript designed to highlight the division of labor between Apaches and ground troops, unpacks the features of their situational work as it sequentially unfolded. The structural features of the attack we have described offer locally produced and locally relevant thematics that can be used as comparators in investigations of other incidents of military violence. Most notably this would include paying attention to the types of missions being performed (e.g. clearing areas of combatants) and their situational relevance; ‘episodes’ or phases within attacks (e.g. initial attacks and follow-ups); military categorization methods (e.g. spotting enemies, including seeing ‘groups’ of combatants); and the process of readying for attack (e.g. how permission is sought and clearance given, as well as how pilots move into positions to strike based on how they analyze situations as they develop).

First, our case study demonstrates how military violence can be treated as episodically organized. However, we suggest that episodic structure is internal to incidents of violence and elaborated as they unfold. Rather than two free-standing attacks, i.e. the attack on the group and the attack on the van, by attending to the incident in its details, what we come to see here is an initial attack and a follow-up, where the status of the second as a follow-up in this particular situation is critical when accounting for its occurrence. That is, it was because the arrival of the van was treated as an extension of the threat posed by the armed group (which was itself an instantiation of enemy activity in the area) that it came to be fired upon. The Apache crews themselves treated the appearance of the van as tied to the wider context of action they were operating within, rather than as separate from it. A later airstrike on snipers who fired on the ground troops who arrived on the scene after the events outlined above was similarly dealt with as a development within a broader unfolding engagement.

This understanding of the situation, meshed with categorization work that enabled the Apache crews to see individuals on the ground as hostile and interpret weapons held by some individuals as determinate of the status of others, allowed the Apaches to attach motives and intentions to the crowd without, crucially, having to wait to discover exactly ‘what they were up to’. The nature of the mission grounded and reinforced this reading of the situation and its possible trajectories. In the case we have examined, however, the actions of the pilots acquired their local intelligibility against the background not just of the mission but also of the phase of military operations in Iraq more broadly as operationally oriented-to matters. This was one counter-insurgency mission amid a host of related counter-insurgency missions and was recognizably treated as such by participants. The military inquiries into the incident made much of this ‘relevant context’ and that contextualization critically affected their *ex* *post facto* evaluations of what had happened. Placing the engagement within the mission set-up for that day involves recognizing the preference for seeing and engaging threats built into it from the start. Based on this, the worksite of interest we are seeking to make sense of may be said to be the encountered scenes as an operational space military personnel understand themselves to be embedded within and so are oriented to while engaged in combat missions.

Finally, our demonstration case shows the value in attending to how military personnel ready for attack and the process of permission seeking/granting which accompanies it. In this case permission to engage was sought by Crazy Horse One-Eight, as the primary attacking force, and given by the ground commanders with authority in this operation, Hotel Two-Six and Bushmaster Four. Without visual access to the scene, their grasp of the situation was furnished by the descriptions provided by the Apaches. The distributed, team-based and task-oriented work done by descriptions in combat situations characterized by differential perceptual access is an issue that would repay further attention in this and other cases. As we have shown, how situations and particularly people are described provides one basis on which licensed attacks occur and thus topicalises issues of procedural as well as legal accountability. Descriptions, under these conditions, are consequential indeed.

**Limitations**

Practice-oriented analyses of combat operations must grapple with formidable methodological challenges. Military work is not easy to follow. Even those with direct experience of combat find it difficult to make sense of what happened in specific cases given the complexity of the circumstantial particulars and the speed at which things happen and are done. The chief limitation associated with the ethnomethodological approach we have outlined here is, therefore, the time-consuming and resource-intensive character of the analysis of cases in depth. There are, unfortunately, no short cuts to understanding and without access to the sort of vital contextual information available in controversial cases alongside audio-video data, as in *Collateral Murder,* it is very easy to make mistakes. Nor can such analyses, given their focus on the detailed specifics of particular incidents, be unproblematically extended directly to new cases. However, generalization in that sense is not the aim. Instead, the aim is to open up aspects of violence as work which would otherwise escape analysis by focusing on issues of structure, recurrence and situational specificity as they arise in and are made locally relevant to the work of military personnel. The complex and difficult issues analysis which proceeds in this way must grapple with reflects the complexities, seriousness and importance of the subject matter.

**Research implications**

We hope to have established a base from which future studies of this and other incidents could proceed. Such situationally-oriented analyses add to understandings of military violence as a joint activity and collaborative accomplishment in situations of war and conflict. Explicating the connections between understandings of situations and violence as and in military practice, we believe necessitates close examinations of the moment-to-moment *details* of military engagements; violence as work as seen from the perspectives of those involved. This expands the terms of the debate and allows us to think more clearly about what military personnel are engaged in doing.

**Policy implications**

War is not solely a military matter as the public interest in the *Collateral Murder* case and calls for greater accountability and transparency which followed its release amply show. We hope that the ethnomethodological approach we have outlined, along with the analysis we have presented, offers resources for developing an understanding of the actions of the military personnel in this case and aspects of the practical reasoning and methods those actions were shaped by. We live in a world that is characterized by serious conflicts and wars, yet we – whether as social scientists or members of wider publics – rarely get the opportunity to examine violence as work for ourselves. When we do get that opportunity as social scientists, one contribution we can make is to show there is more to learn about violence in the context of combat operations than the question of whether we approve or disapprove of it – in working to meet the twin objectives set out in our introduction, we trust the case study we have presented here has demonstrated that clearly.

**Transcript conventions**

(0.5) or (2) indicate the elapsed time in silence in seconds;

(.) indicates a micro pause/silence of roughly 0.1 seconds

- Talk is cut-off prematurely

= Talk is produced with no noticeable gap

>words< Right/left carats indicates the bracketed material is noticeably faster than surrounding utterances

<words> Left/right carats indicates the bracketed material is noticeably slower than surrounding utterances

((cough)) Double parentheses offer extra descriptions, mostly actions

{Beep} indicates noises/sounds heard on the communication system

(inaudible) something said but speaker and content of talk unknown

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