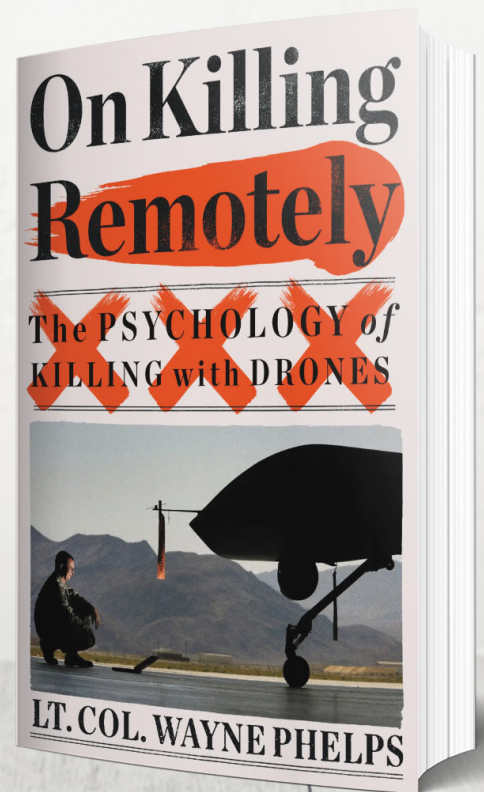


# On Killing Remotely

## The Psychology of Killing with Drones

Wayne Phelps, Little, Brown, New York, 2021, 368 pages

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The strength of *On Killing Remotely: The Psychology of Killing with Drones*, evident from the first few pages onward, is its accessibility. Lt. Col. Wayne Phelps, a retired Marine squadron commander, draws on his experience and research to offer a wealth of background information, analysis, and best practices concerning remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs). Phelps provides an overview that is sufficiently detailed to hold the attention of those who already know the ins and outs of remote warfare without overwhelming a nonexpert reader. Any pilot, sensor operator, or analyst can read *On Killing Remotely* to make better sense of his or her own experience or the experiences of others in the field, but any novice can pick the book up to fill in gaps in their understanding.

The author does not merely rehash data or feign neutrality, nor does he shy away from the difficult subjects. He regularly and seamlessly weaves testimony from personal interviews into analysis and does not promise more than he can deliver. Most importantly, he challenges those at the joint and strategic levels to reassess the cost of remote warfare beyond dollars and cents or the risk of error.

Phelps presents findings from surveys and interviews identifying how and why killing remotely affects pilots, sensor operators, and intelligence analysts across the U.S. military. The result is a melding and expansion of themes from Dave Grossman's *On Killing* (2009), David Sanger's *Confront and Conceal* (2012), and Thomas Waldman's *Vicarious Warfare* (2021): the utilization of RPAs has skyrocketed, yet the emotional and psychological toll on those tasked with carrying out the missions has been weighty.<sup>1</sup> *On Killing Remotely* is divided into four sections, corresponding to Phelps's stated intention to raise awareness by dispelling myths, identifying specific physiological and psychological effects of killing remotely on a team, exploring moral considerations of utilizing remote technology in wartime, and offering recommendations to mitigate damage to RPA crews of the future.

Section I is devoted to understanding remotely piloted aircraft and the crews who operate them. Here Phelps helpfully distinguishes between five groups of unmanned aircraft systems, noting that the physiology and psychology at play will change based on proximity

to targets, nature of the mission, and the ability of operators to effectively debrief.<sup>2</sup> Phelps underscores that the work of an RPA crew is often voyeuristic, dull, and at times harrowing, and not at all like playing a video game.<sup>3</sup> The book highlights ways RPA crews have felt marginalized or misunderstood not only in media portrayals but also in the context of joint operations. Ambivalence toward RPA crews materializes in pejorative language (“drones,” “chair force,” “not a real pilot,” etc.), general ignorance of what RPA crews do, and in the heat of joint missions, frustration and anger.<sup>4</sup> There is a fine line between friendly rivalry and backhanded or overt hostility, as service members in one branch or on one team may perceive that life for others is not as difficult or that sacrifices are not evenly distributed.

Phelps then documents human responses to killing at a remote distance. Though it may seem counterintuitive to novices, he conveys particular concern for those operating at maximum distance.<sup>5</sup> He notes two especially taxing mission sets: providing close air support for troops-in-contact and hunting for high-value individuals.<sup>6</sup> Psychological dynamics depend on proximity to the target and nature of missions, but RPA crews of all types report physiological effects (adrenaline rush, cold or shaky hands, vomiting, sweating, and altered memory) comparable to those associated with face-to-face shooting.<sup>7</sup> These operators make collective decisions rather than acting alone, and transition on a daily basis back and forth from remote combat to home life in what amounts to a “never-ending deployment.”<sup>8</sup>

Section III, titled “All Topics Considered,” delves into ethical considerations of remote warfare, raising more questions than it answers. Phelps’s assertion that operators have been the ones most aggrieved should be adjusted to factor in the price paid by those targeted in error, and their families, as more than “collateral damage.”<sup>9</sup> Even so, Phelps argues emphatically that RPA crews are not given license to kill with impunity via remote-controlled assassinations; these pilots, sensor operators, and analysts are at war.<sup>10</sup> Interviews with RPA crews tell the nuanced stories; operators are divided on the question of whether remote technology has changed the nature of war itself, or simply altered its characteristics, though RPAs cannot achieve decisive victory all by themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Another burning issue touched on in this section is the opportunity for moral injury. The crew of an RPA

is at all times under intense scrutiny by “customers” and higher headquarters. This scrutiny, heightened by the group dynamic of a crew, makes killing simultaneously more justifiable in the moment yet more complicated in the aftermath. Culpability seems fluid and transferrable. It is not easy to determine who is making the decisions or who might be to blame if things go wrong.

In the final section, Phelps makes straightforward recommendations for improving systems for RPA crews across the Marine Corps, Air Force, and Army—noting the ways each branch might learn from one another. The Army, for instance, stands out as the branch recruiting junior enlisted soldiers and providing very little prior discussion of executing lethal missions in training before the real-world events.<sup>12</sup> Yet the Army also stands out as the branch that makes a practice of forward deploying their operators to mitigate against a feeling of never-ending deployment.<sup>13</sup>

Phelps’s work is prescient and clear in the wake of the war in Afghanistan, and haunting in the shadow of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and increased competition with China. Speaking for a moment as a chaplain, Army chaplains and religious affairs specialists or NCOs assigned to aviation, special operations, or military intelligence units now have an invaluable primer available to them in this book. *On Killing Remotely* provides prompting questions, language, and a structure for both informal conversation and formal pre-deployment training or post-deployment debriefing. Unit ministry team members in other units dealing with killing at a distance or its aftermath (artillery, snipers, mortuary affairs) can no doubt glean insights as well, though these insights will require tailoring to another context. In their mission to nurture the living and care for the wounded, command teams and unit ministry teams can leverage Phelps’s book to lead the way to meet this challenge.

Phelps challenges readers—regardless of

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branch of service—not to neglect RPA crew members as a growing subset of the veteran population nor to oversimplify their unique experiences, and this challenge will surely endure well into the advent of artificial intelligence, robotics, cyberwarfare, and the domain of space. Pushing buttons half a world away may not be like shooting a rifle, launching a rocket, or firing field artillery. If Phelps is correct, however, technologically assisted warfare on the horizon will still be psychologically costly and may involve smaller and smaller groups tasked with bearing the ever-steeper emotional, relational, moral, legal, psychological, and spiritual burdens of killing at a distance. Are we ready for that? ■

*This review essay reflects the author's own views and not necessarily the official position of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps or the Department of Defense.*

### Notes

1. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009); David Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown, 2012); Thomas Waldman, *Vicarious Warfare: American Strategy and the Illusion of War on the Cheap* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2021).
2. Wayne Phelps, *On Killing Remotely* (New York: Little, Brown, 2021): 60–67.
3. Wayne Phelps, "The Psychic Toll of Killing with Drones," *Wall Street Journal* (website), 5 June 2021, accessed 7 February 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-psychic-toll-of-killing-with-drones-11622865660>.
4. Phelps describes the tension involved in providing close air support in a joint environment: "As would be expected, when you arrive on the scene in this situation, the friendly forces being shot at by the enemy express a wide array of emotions over the radio such as fear, anger, frustration, and impatience that can be felt and understood on the other end of the radio regardless of which crew position you occupy. Often troops' lives depend on the integration and assistance of the RPA called to help them fight through the dangerous situation they are in. And you can hear the stress in their voice." Phelps, *On Killing Remotely*, 73.
5. *Ibid.*, 36–48.
6. *Ibid.*, 72–75.
7. *Ibid.*, 63, 133–34.
8. *Ibid.*, 102.
9. *Ibid.*, 180.
10. *Ibid.*, 152.
11. Since the publication of Phelps' recommendations in 2021, this is changing through the collaboration of commanders, behavioral health teams, and chaplains.
12. *Ibid.*, 153–55, 161.
13. *Ibid.*, 52, 307.

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