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Drones: the west's new terror campaign

The CIA's Predator drones are bringing to Pakistan the same horror that Hitler's doodlebugs inflicted on London

Clive Stafford Smith

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Living under Drones, a new report from Stanford and New York universities was a difficult piece of fieldwork – I was with the law students in Peshawar as they tried to interview victims of the CIA's drone war. But it has made an important contribution to the drone debate by identifying the innocent victims of the CIA's reign of terror: the entire civilian population of Waziristan (roughly 800,000 people).

Until now, the most heated dispute has revolved around how many drone victims in the Pakistan border region are dangerous extremists, and how many children, women or men with no connection to any terrorist group. I have been to the region, and have a strong opinion on this point – but until the area is opened up to media inspection, or the CIA releases the tapes of each [hellfire missile](#) strike, the controversy will rage on.

However, there can be no sensible disagreement over certain salient facts: first, the US now has more than 10,000 weaponised drones in its arsenal; second, as many as six [Predator drones](#) circle over one location at any given time, often for 24 hours a day, with high-resolution cameras snooping on the movements of everyone below; third, the Predators emit an eerie sound, earning them the name *bangana* (buzzing wasp) in Pashtu; fourth, everyone in the area can see them, 5,000ft up, all day – and hear them all night long; fifth, nobody knows when the missile will come, and turn each member of the family into what the CIA calls a "bugsplat". The Predator

operator, thousands of miles away in Nevada, often pushes the button over a cup of coffee in the darkest hours of the Waziristan night, between midnight and 5am. So a parent putting children to bed cannot be sure they will wake up safely.

Every Waziri town has been terrorised. We may learn this from the eyewitness accounts in *Living Under Drones*, or surmise it from the exponential increase in the distribution of anti-anxiety and anti-depression medication across the region.

Sometimes it is difficult for those comfortably ensconced in the west to understand. But for me, it brings to mind my mother, Jean Stafford Smith. In 1944 she was 17. She had left the safety of her school (she had been evacuated to the countryside) to do a secretarial course in London. Each evening she took the bus home from Grosvenor Place, behind Buckingham Palace, to her digs off Tottenham Court Road. Back then, darkness would truly descend on the city, as the blackout was near total.

Sixty-eight years on, my mother retains vivid memories of the gathering gloom. One night a week, she climbed the tower of a local church to spot for the fires that might spread from an explosion. When the doodlebugs (as V1s – Hitler's drones – were called) came over, she knew that she was safe so long as she could hear the engine. She knew, too, that the drones were indiscriminate killers, and that only when they fell silent did she have to worry where they might fall. Some of the engines apparently cut in and out, like the oscillating buzz of a chainsaw, heartstopping for the potential victims below.

In 1944, two doodlebugs hit the environs of Buckingham Palace, near where my mother learned shorthand. One landed on the palace wall, and blew out the secretarial school's windows. A second [killed more than 100 people who had, until moments before, been singing hymns in the Guards Chapel](#) on Birdcage Walk. It was a weekend, so my mother was back at her digs.

My mother, an eternal optimist, never really thought she was going to die, even when – on 30 June 1944 – a drone struck Tottenham Court Road. Perhaps reminiscent of the tragedy of 7/7, a witness described "a bus, still packed with people sitting in all the seats, but all the glass blown out and all the skin blown off their faces".

Many suffered far more than my mother, both in London and beyond. Indeed, they say that fear for those you love can be more devastating than facing danger yourself: my grandmother Vera, a formidable woman who had learned to trap rabbits in the Great Depression to keep food on the family table, lived 60 miles north of London near Ely, and worried constantly about her youngest daughter. The ripples of anxiety spread wide.

So little changes. Current RAF doctrine tells us, euphemistically, how "the psychological impact of air power, from the presence of a UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle] to the noise generated by an approaching attack helicopter, has often proved to be extremely effective in exerting influence ..." Perhaps they mean "terror", as described by [David Rohde](#), a former New York Times journalist kidnapped and held by the Taliban for months in Waziristan. Rohde, quoted in *Living Under Drones*, describes the fear the drones inspired in ordinary civilians: "The drones were

terrifying. From the ground, it is impossible to determine who or what they are tracking as they circle overhead. The buzz of a distant propeller is a constant reminder of imminent death."

I hope that this report reminds us all what the US – with British support – is doing to the people of Pakistan. Maybe then there will be less surprise at the hatred the drone war is engendering in the Islamic world – and a chance that we will reconsider what we are doing.