Micro-politics by hesitation: How combat soldiers work on *and* against an order to kill

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ABSTRACT

In the qualitative research on organisations, micro-politics and studies of work are dealt with in separate registers including distinct cases, concepts, and phenomena. Studies in micro-politics focus on the members' self-organizing tactics within dynamic relations of power. They seek to influence the power relations to their fraction's advantage. Studies of work focus on members' tricks of the trade preferably in demanding situations. Here, communities of practice develop methods and techniques to overcome recurring obstacles at work. The separation of the two micro-analytics turns out to be little productive in moments when practical tasks become themselves doubtful, e.g. when order-takers (here, US-American soldiers) are persistently troubled by an order. For them, what to do next becomes methodically and tactically demanding. In the critical moments before the bombing, the soldiers hurry to change the order micro-politically, while getting ready to execute it. Can the subordinates work at all against the military order? The order-takers follow the order on the frontstage, while making provisions against it on the backstage. This two-track policy, while failing to prevent the order, turns out to be productive nonetheless. It allows the soldiers to account for their work as dutiful and responsible.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, organizational studies have moved increasingly in a "micro"-direction. In the wake of the interpretive and cultural turn (see Weick 1995; Little 1998), social researchers have started paying attention to local struggles and situated work. These moves gather around two approaches: studies of micro-politics and studies of work. Studies of "micro-politics" (Crozier and Friedberg 1979; Pfeffer 1984; Friedberg 1995; Neuberger 1995, 2006; Hansen and Küpper 2009) highlight the power dynamics in (units of) organizations. They conceptualize members as political agents using situated tactics to gain influence. On the other

hand, "studies of work" (Garfinkel 1986; see Bergmann 2006) remind organization scholars of everyday organizational "tasks and troubles" (Zimmerman 1969) and how members, as tinkerers, create pragmatic solutions skilfully and methodically. Under the lens of both analytics, organizations can no longer be presented as smoothly running machines, but instead emerge as contingent, demanding fields of activities. At the same time, however, studies of micro-politics and studies of work focus on different registers of activity. Whereas the "micro-politician" (Springmann 2010, 130) is oriented towards power relations, the "tinkerer" (Levi-Strauss 1966) first and foremost deals with vital things and matters. The tinkerer is easily absorbed by the "task-at-hand" (Garfinkel 1967), whereas the micro-politician typically aims for lasting power effects. These two strands of organizational inquiry attend to different micro-foundations, practical repertoires, analytical frames, and empirical methods. Nonetheless, both direct our attention to the ongoing processes and practices of "organizing" (Law 1993) that exceed organizations' formal and official agendas – particularly so, it seems, in the case of the most rigorously programmed ones.

The following ethnomethodological case study aims at studying an organization-in-action by turning to members' situated problem-solving *and* cautious micro-political work. Here, the organization-in-action in question is an operational military unit: two fighter jets from the US Air Force (USAF) and a German Command Headquarters in the Afghan Province of Kunduz acting as the fighters' Ground Control. The members in question are thus military personnel: the four crew members of the two fighter jets receiving orders from the German Ground Command. Their operation is part and parcel of an extended and disciplined apparatus of destruction, whose activities include the killing of "hostiles", "insurgents", "Taliban leaders", etc., as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan following the invasion of the country in 2001 as part of that "counter insurgency war" (Burke 2004). The case study takes up the (practical possibilities for) opposition among the order-takers, i.e. the air-crews, in the midst of a 'troubling' Close-Air-Support (CAS) mission. Their opposition work, I suggest, starts off with a "trouble marker" by the weapons systems officer in the aircraft leading the flight. As the mission proceeds, the air crews involve start developing what I will call an 'anti-object':[1] a collective effort oriented towards subverting the lead object, here the order they have been charged with carrying out.

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[1] I came across anti-objects during my ethnography of defense lawyers' work. Their professional efforts regularly aimed at the destruction of the prosecution case, the latter presenting a positive version of how the deed might have happened (Scheffer 2010b). While attaining some spatio-temporal persistence and having a socially binding character, the anti-object makes sense only in opposition to a primary object.

In order to foreground the trouble-work and micro-politics that took characterised this CAS mission, I analyse the 45 minutes following the weapons systems officer's hesitant response captured in a USAF produced transcript documenting air-to-air and air-to-ground radio communications during the incident which was released after-the-fact. As the transcript and related material show, the crews' practical dealings evolved turn-by-turn and step-by-step across several "work episodes" (Llewellyn 2008; see Drew and Heritage 1992). The lengthy and complicated communicative stretches involved demanded a 'trans-sequential analysis' (or TSA, see Scheffer 2007, 2008, 2013),[2] one which would identify extended event-process relations in light of 'an object' that members jointly work on over a significant period of time. The "formative object" (Scheffer 2013), here the initial order, allows members and social researchers to orient towards the practical demands it places upon them in light of the situation they are in, i.e. "what to do next" (Garfinkel 1967), something that included the work of "targeting" in this case (Kolanoski 2017).

The praxeological analytics provided by TSA make it possible to examine how, where and when members work against something and thus enable studies of work to deal with the micro- (and indeed macro-) politics of violence and intentional destruction. In order to demonstrate this, I will show that the order-takers' work is – next to the task of following the military order – directed towards an 'anti-object': something that opposes the official object. Consequently, the analysis not only explores the members' problem-work, but their tactics vis-à-vis the order-issuing authority, here the Ground Command they are organizationally answerable to. Whatever might be required for the anti-object to gain influence that should not be confused with dissidence or dissent. Moreover, while seemingly weak and fragile, what is interesting in this case is the anti-object's durability – something which made and makes it recoverable after the fact – particularly in light of the consequences of the order it was worked up in opposition to, a command to attack that resulted in civilian deaths, including those of women and children.

In what follows, I shall address these issues at greater length through the case itself. Moving from local considerations of trouble to its gradual but qualified external expression, I trace the career of the anti-object from start to finish. However, given its importance to the case study, I want to begin by discussing how an analysis of the kind I will pursue breaks with traditional studies of organization in the social sciences.

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[2] Trans Sequential Analysis relates event and process in work environments. The analytics of TSA trace and relate two sequences in light of the work object: (1) within single episodes (turn-by-turn) and (2) across at least three episodes (step-by-step). This way, the members accumulate an object from stage to stage of a more or less organized relevant career. The formative object demands certain investments at each stage, forms a practical collective in its course, and is generally formatted due to particular kinds of 'accounting demands'. See Scheffer 2013.

Micro-politics and problem-solving in organization studies

Formal organization studies still struggle with the Weberian ideal-typical view on organizations as efficiently ordered, top-down apparatuses for getting things done. Ongoing research efforts are devoted to associated hypotheses regarding the functionality of and nature of compliance with these arrangements. However, various strands of micro-foundational research have undermined the picture of organizations this idealization offers by emphasising organizational culture, including informality, interpersonal ties, factions, factionalism, etc. On this alternative view, the organization resembles a social territory, ongoingly re-structured by ritual processes (Turner 1985), inter-objectivities (Latour 1996), local knowledges (Geertz 1973), or language games (Schatzki 2006). As briefly introduced above, two approaches in particular have sought to overturn the idealisation of organization at the centre of Weberian organizational sociology: (1) studies of micro-politics, which focus on organizations as arenas of heterogeneous power games driven by different parties' constantly changing tactics;[3] and (2) studies of work, which focus on members' methods of situated and object-centred problem-solving.

The case study I shall set out in the sections which follow attempts to integrate these two analytics and it does so because, as I will argue, they were integrated by members at the time. I argue that the members at the centre of the events and processes I will examine were engaged in a risky, anticipatory micro-politics, while simultaneously being challenged by a whole series of pressing work-matters-at-hand. This suggests a need to revisit the character of the distinction between the two approaches.

In organizational studies, the micro-foundational turn has altered the image of the member. He or she is no longer just an extension of an organizational programme and its representatives. As tinkerer, the member makes the best out of (missing) resources, (inadequate) equipment, and (limited) opportunities by applying pragmatic rules-of-thumb. As micro-politician, the member is implicated in struggles for resources and power to his/her faction's advantage. As co-participant, the member gets involved in interactional dynamics, with their own norms and rituals. Despite their shared foundations – such as situatedness and contingency – these micro-analytics have cultivated mutually exclusive analytical frames. Whereas micro-political studies attempt to capture members' relational tactics and re-groupings as part of inter-factional bids to gain control over powerful resources, studies of work seek to identify the members' skilful methods for "achieving orderliness" (Rawls 2002, 33) even in critical moments. The ethnomethodological focus on problem-solving might thus seem to neglect organizational

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[3] This micro-analytic "takes the interest-led activities and micro-political strategies of human agents as its starting point" (Hansen and Küpper 2009, 6).

structures,[4] including hierarchies and power relations, while the focus on power games might seem to neglect the organizational matters-at-hand that the members work on in the first place.

   In terms of the case I wish to focus on, I propose that it is a mistake to separate out problem-solving and micro-politics as divergent facets of members' organizational doings. The practical orientations of the members involved are better grasped when integrating these two micro-foundational analytics. The integration seems particularly necessary where power-asymmetries and problematic matters intersect: e.g., during critical moments in combat situations. Here, we may encounter contingent practical efforts to accumulate critical resources that allow the repair or correction of a troublesome organizational object: e.g., a military order. To achieve this, the order-takers may try to "transform private trouble" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, 148) into an organizationally relevant anti-object. Such a case might be one constellation out of many suggesting a need to critically rethink what is involved in treating organizations as members' phenomena and, from there, to reappraise where their work takes them and indeed us.

Opposition among order-takers in military studies

Military organizations relate members as order-givers and order-takers. Both obtain positions in a strict hierarchy that is operationalised in and through "chains of command".[5] The order handled in the present case study derives from the requirements of "Close Air Support" (CAS) missions. CAS missions, especially when undertaken at haste with minimal preparation,[6] involve a series of practical challenges[7] that members' must deal with methodically (see Kolanoski 2017). In general, air-crews work through a whole check-list of pre-emptive measures (Nevile

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[4] Studies of work show an "interest in capturing the elusive connection between larger institutional structures and processes and the 'textual' details of everyday encounters" (Duranti 2003, 332). This connection is usually built by showing, how members, in order to solve a problem, use resources provided by the organization.

[5] New Military Studies criticize this mechanistic understanding of a command running top-down from order-giver to -taker, exposed to failure only by accident, disobedience, or sabotage (King 2006).

[6] US assessments show an increase of civilian casualties in unplanned, short-notice CAS missions (Dadkhah 2008; Human Rights Watch 2008).

[7] Such operations are practically demanding in several regards: the air-crews need to re-direct their spatial positions (Mair et al. 2012); and they are asked to use excessive violence, which may undermine their ability to act in a controlled manner (Marshall 2000 [1949]; Collins 2008).

2007) in order to minimize the risk of counter-attacks,[8] missed targets, or "friendly fire" (Mair et al. 2013) in the course of CAS missions. Despite all these efforts (Larkin 2005), however, CAS missions remain troublesome practically, technically, and morally.

In the following, I study the practical demands placed on order-takers during a CAS mission by focussing on their communications just before a bombing. Here, the order they received to destroy specified vehicles became problematic for them once they came into contact with the target directly. The sociology of military organizations (see Siebold 2001) provides us with a variety of cases that demonstrate how order-takers may deal with troubling orders: by silencing (1), through channelling (2), by warnings (3), or by resistance (4). Each of these carries micro-political implications.

In cases of silencing (1), soldiers suppress their trouble. At the most, when confronted with trouble, they may issue what Goffman called "response cries" (1981). Silencing may cause long-lasting psychological effects, often described as trauma. In cases of channelling (2), the soldiers do not deny trouble, but specifically keep it amongst close comrades[9] or trusted superiors. Case studies suggest that military personnel dealing with more "ambiguous problems" seek informal means of resolving their difficulties whereas "definite problems" are handled by the book (Van de Ven et al. 1976).[10] In cases of warning (3), hesitation among the order-takers' can be linked to official doctrine in the military as a learning organization. The order-takers serve as a distributed warning system close to the enemy, sometimes leading to the adjustment of orders *in situ*. Warning signals may thus initiate repair activities (Vollmer 2016). In cases of resistance (4), trouble translates into open critique and disobedience. Open resistance has severe punitive consequences. In the following case, the order-takers respond to a troubling order in yet another way still: working against the order while avoiding anything that could count as disobedience.

I argue that the air crews' response, a response which worked both for and against the order, cannot be explained by situated practicalities alone nor does it merely reflect local power relations. Nonetheless, those structuring dimensions, i.e. the situated practicalities and local power relations, were significant. In order

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[8] I understand "asymmetric war", differently to Münkler (2002), as systematic one-directional targeting. The case studied here is an instance of such an asymmetry. The aircraft cannot be counter-attacked because those being targeted are (intentionally) at a technological disadvantage.

[9] Classic case studies determined the perfect size of combat units in order to build solidarity and comradeship (Stone 1946; Shils and Janowitz 1948), while "jumping a link in the chain of command" (Homans 1946, 299).

[10] According to Stevenson et al., "further research is needed to discover what problems … [members] consider unequivocal and thus amenable to formal procedures and what problems they consider better left for information processing through existing networks" (1991, 926).

to combine them, I will undertake a "trans-sequential analysis" (TSA; Scheffer 2007, 2008, 2010b, 2013) using the publicly available military accounts of the incidence. This will involve re-constructing the binding forces the members created across work episodes. Approached in this way, how the members dealt with the troubling order becomes visible both as a practical accomplishment and as a contingent micro-politics involving a whole series of communicative manoeuvres. A TSA thus reveals the soldiers' methodical counter-work and how it was practically as well as tactically oriented towards the authoritative order within a chain of command.

The case under study: A publicly investigated military killing

On September 4th 2009, the German command in Camp Kunduz, Northern Afghanistan,[11] received messages that Taliban forces had hijacked two of their petrol-trucks. The commander, Oberst Klein, declared this a TIC ("troops-in-contact") situation and received support from two USAF F-15E-jets. He ordered the bombing of the two petrol-trucks, now stuck in a riverbank, as well as the "70-90 insurgents" around them. While the jets were on the way, the number of people involved seemingly scaled up. The entire incident took place approximately 5 miles from the German camp.

The USAF air crews responded to the military order in interesting ways, ways that repay sustained analytical attention. Their radio communication before the airstrike contains several messages that denote trouble within and across ranks. The air crews openly questioned the order they had been given and voiced doubts about its inconsistencies amongst themselves. Several problems pertinent to events derive from this. For instance, it is difficult to assess who military personnel should turn to when an order-giver is considered the source of trouble. It is, of course, difficult to question an order when obeying orders is their primary duty. As a result, military personnel must proceed cautiously. They may, for instance, seek to modify orders in various ways to resolve conflict. Attempted modification is what happened in this case as I shall show.

About a year after the incident, a Parliamentary Inquiry into the German government's information policy[12] scrutinized the air crews' communications for signs of open dissent, critique and warnings. This was followed by criminal and civil court cases initiated to determine the commander's culpability, which again sought signs of the order-takers' caution. All this was accompanied by heated public debate. Key political figures criticized the mission's counter-productive effects: such

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[11] See Dadkhah (2008) for a broad overview of the use of airpower as part of "Operation Enduring Freedom" (OEF) and the controversy surrounding American airstrikes in Afghanistan.

[12] For the different readings of the Kunduz airstrike, see the report of the Parliamentary Inquiry: "Deutscher Bundestag Drucksache 17/7400, 25.10.2011".

incidents risked losing the "hearts and minds of the Afghan people" (McChrystal, cited by Lewis 2012, 416). Others questioned whether such bombings met the standards of International Law. Generally, the "Kunduz Airstrike" put an end to the German master-narrative that their role in Afghanistan amounted to a "stability-operation". Hereafter, the public considered the operation a war plain and simple.

This is how, four years later, leading German newspapers remembered the "Kunduz airstrike":

> "[In] September 2009, around one hundred people were killed, including many civilians. It was the most devastating attack under a German command since the end of World War II." (Spiegel, December, 12th 2013)

> "[A] momentous NATO air strike on two fuel tankers highjacked by Taliban took place on September 4, 2009 in Afghanistan, in which about 90 to 140 people, including many civilians, were killed, according to different sources." (WELT, December, 11th 2013)

> "In September 2009, more than 100 people were killed in Kunduz, including many civilians. The Bundeswehr Colonel, Georg Klein, who had given the command to bomb the fuel tankers, came under enormous criticism as a result." (Süddeutsche Zeitung, August, 8th 2013)

The attack was shaped in collective memory as "devastating" due to the high numbers of deaths it resulted in, "including many civilians".[13] Interestingly, the articles ascribe responsibility in different ways: from the "German soldiers" to "NATO" to "Colonel Georg Klein". The case also fed into debates on the strategic and technical[14] problems of modern counter-insurgency warfare. All these issues were raised by the release of information on the case to the public.

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[13] "Insider reports" gave a different picture. Lindemann (2010) used the Kunduz airstrike as an example of good military practice in line with the German command's Rules of Engagement and Public International Law.

[14] "Whether civilian casualties result from aerial bombing in Afghanistan seems to depend more than anything else on whether the airstrike was planned or whether an unplanned strike was in rapid response to an evolving military situation on the ground. When aerial bombing is planned, mostly against suspected Taliban targets, US and NATO forces in Afghanistan have had a very good record of minimizing harm to civilians." (Human Rights Watch 2008; see Hultman 2012).

THE MILITARY ACCOUNTS OFFERED TO THE DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC

The Parliamentary Inquiry into the "Kunduz airstrike" disclosed, next to "after-battle assessments", the internal communications that led to the bombing. Those communications are of two kinds: (1) frequent reports referring to the enemy's activities; (2) radio messages received and sent by the lead aircraft. I examine the military reports first before I turn to the radio communications in order to find traces of the soldiers' object-centred and micro-political work.

The military reporting: accounting for the enemy's actions

Among other materials released into the public domain, the German military disclosed a series of "human intelligence" messages. This HUMINT had been released frequently during the incident, in 30-minute or 60-minute periods. Later on, the messages were compiled into two series, each framed by a heading. The first series refers back to an external cause, the attack on allied vehicles: "Place: Kunduz – Object: the Highjacking of two fuel tankers". The 1st message in the series is missing for unknown reasons:

HUMINT-message No. 2 to PRT Kunduz Liaison Officer

Date of information: Sept. 3rd 09 – Date of notification: Sept. 3rd 09

Place: Kunduz – Object: Highjacking of two fuel tankers

Information: At 5.00 p.m. local time, the INS (insurgents, TS), who set an ambush close to ANGOR BOCH (...), did highjack two fuel tankers. The INS are currently close to ANGOR BOCH (...) at each side of the river banks and are ready to transport the vehicles across the river during the night. The INS aim to drive over the PLUTO Street to NAWABAD (...) and continue over JUMAR BAZAR (...) to GOR TEPA (...). If it is not possible to transport the vehicles over the river close (...) to ANGOR BOCH, the vehicles are to be exploited at the current location in order to gain useful materials for the INS.

Publishing office: army signal corps, additional reinforcement support staff RC North, Afghanistan

This message provides information on where and when the initial assault (the "highjacking of two fuel trucks") took place. The assault is ascribed to "INS". The reader learns what the enemy have been doing thus far, what they are "currently" doing and what they are about to do next. The account is accompanied by a clatter

of toponyms ("ANGOR BOCH", "PLUTO Street to NAWABAD", "JUMAR Bazar to GORTEPA") consistent with those on a military map.[15]

The next series of messages is framed *prospectively*. Here, the heading orients the reader towards the projected outcome: "the explosion of two fuel tankers".

Notification No. 3 to PRT Kunduz, Commander PRT

Date of information: Sept. 3rd 09 – Sept. 4th 09 – Date of notification: Sept 4th 09

Location: KUNDUZ – Object: Explosion of two fuel tankers south of KUNDUZ

Information: The times mentioned are estimated times only, because the employed translator was not allowed to access the OPZ area at the respective moment.

The "object" seems entirely determined here. However, the ordered "explosion of two fuel tankers" adheres to the reports' trouble-free tone. It de-problematizes the mission in military (it will be accomplished!) and moral (no civilian casualties!)[16] terms.

Despite this framing of the "two fuel tankers" as an unproblematic military target, the following messages describe the actions of the people around them according to the incoming HUMINT:

3.9.09, 10.00 p.m. local time, call CTC:[17] The INS led by ABDUL RAHMAN try to transport the two fuel tankers that were stolen close to ANGOR BOCH (…) in the district CHAHAR DARREH, Province Kunduz (compare HUMINT-notification INFOREP 031930Lsep09.doc) at 10.00 p.m. local time over the KUNDUZ river in an eastern direction (no more details known).

4.9.09, 11.00 p.m. local time, call CTC: The two vehicles got stuck in the river at about 11.00 p.m. local time. It is no longer possible to move them (no more details known).

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[15] According to http://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/17/CD07400/Dokumente/, the map was disclosed by the 20th German Operational Regiment at Kunduz/ISAF (Aufklärungsbataillon). On the salience of location formulations, see Drew (1978).

[16] What is absent in the military account is the possibility of the "deep moral implicativeness of what is 'shown' in itself: of people, women and children, dead and dying, bleeding in hospitals, being buried, grieving relatives" (Jayyusi 2007, 41). These moral dimensions will be articulated only by reports after the airstrike.

[17] CTC stands for "contact", meaning here the Human Intelligence that calls in to inform the command center on new developments.

4.9.09, 12.00 a.m. local time, call CTC: The INS try to empty the fuel tanks of the trucks and fill the fuel into different containers because the two tank trucks can no longer be moved. During this action, ABDUL RAHMAN, Commander SAIDI, Commander NASER and Commander AMANULLAH can be located close by the two vehicles. More INS, informed by ABDUL RAHMAN, participate in the activities to steal fuel as well. The INS intend to put the vehicles on fire afterwards (no more details known).

4.9.09, 12.30 a.m. local time, call CTC: At 12.30 a.m. local time several INS can be located on the trucks stuck on the sand bank and are emptying them. Civilians are not there. The INS are armed with portable anti-tank rocket launchers and small arms weapons (no more details known).

4.9.09, 1.30 a.m. local time, call CTC: The activities are still continuing around the fuel tank trucks. Currently, a lively moving between the INS around the fuel tankers can be reported. There are no civilians near the vehicles (no more details known).

4.9.09, 2.00 a.m. local time, call CTC: About 70 persons were killed by the explosion of the two fuel tankers at 01.58 a.m. local time. Commander SAIDI and commander AMANULLAH are also among the dead. There are no victims among the civilian population. Mullah ABDUL RAHMAN survived the explosion (no more details known). Commander NASER was not wounded either, because he was on the way to LALA MAYDAN (Coordinate not known) at the time of the explosion (no more details known).

The messages provide conditions and reasons in support of the order to kill. In the 10 p.m. message, for instance, the "INS" try to move the trucks "in an Eastern direction", the direction of the German command. An hour later, their movement is reported as having been interrupted: the two vehicles were stuck in the river bed. At 12 a.m., the insurgents "empty the fuel tanks". Now, the HUMINT identifies three more commanders who have joined the activity of "stealing fuel". The commanders' names may add extra relevance to what happened next. The people "down there" may represent significant military targets.

At 12.30 a.m., message No. 3 mentions the absence of a certain "membership category" (Sacks 1972): "*Civilians* are not there." An hour later, this declaration is repeated and specified: "There are no civilians near the vehicles." Those identified are just "INS" carrying weapons: "… portable anti-tank rocket launchers and small arms". Here, the account offers a minimal "threat assessment" (Boudeau 2007). "No civilians" denotes an obligatory condition for ordering the attack that will lead to the "explosion of the two trucks". It renders the bombing formally permissible.

The reported message at 2.00 a.m. concludes the prospective series. It provides a first "battle assessment" of sorts. Resultant killings are initially accounted for in two ways: as a total quantity ("70 persons") and as a provisional list of named leaders. Moreover, the report mentions persons that have not been killed. Here, the explosion's effects are re-humanized. The death count ("70 persons") seems to retrospectively contradict the prospective and projected mission ("explosion of two fuel tankers"). However, the killings are presented as consistent with the latter, since they had been attached to the "military target" (Kolanoski 2017).

The accounts carry a number of features that contribute to the impression of *trouble-freeness*: the mission is reported as standard procedure; each message shows uniform markers of formality (title, location, date and hour); the accounts do not mention *how* (well) the enemy-movements are known; the messages display information solely in the epistemic status of definite facts; later messages take for granted the presuppositions of former ones. On these grounds, the phrase "No more details known" serves as a formula to exclude remaining ambiguities. The accounts make themselves unavailable for critique.

Conflicting accounts emerged elsewhere however: through interviews with villagers from the area, in the form or statistics from local hospitals and battle assessments from the Military Police and the Afghan Police. The public received indications that major groups around the vehicles were in fact civilians. This is probably why, shortly after the bombing, military experts publicly criticized the 'poor' intelligence sources it had been undertaken on the basis of. The single source (HUMINT) should have been cross-checked. Others speculated, given the presence of named Taliban leaders, that the bombing was in fact a case of targeted killing.[18] Later on, the Parliamentary Inquiry identified procedural mistakes, including the 'incorrect' declaration of a TIC situation when no such contact had occurred.

The ordered bombing thus became increasingly troublesome as time wore on. However, in contradistinction to the military reports, it also proved troublesome at the time, as the remainder of the analysis will endeavour to show.

Radio communication: accounting for their own performance

As a result of the inquiries and debates that followed the airstrike, another major source entered the "popular archive" (Lynch and Bogen 1996; Lynch 1999) that was being elaborated around it: a word-by-word transcript of the soldiers' air-to-

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[18] Six years after the incident, various media reported that German ISAF troops had assisted the US Forces in working through so-called "death lists". This "targeted killing" programme covered Taliban leaders of different ranks. Also included in the list were criminals, such as drug dealers. The list contained up to 750 individuals. See SPIEGEL, 29.12.2014. The NATO-documents were amongst leaked CIA-documents.

air and air-to-ground radio communications during the military operation. In principle, such a transcript provides relatively rich interpretive material, full of clues and layers (Nevile and Walker 2005). It allows for the basic reconstruction of the air crews' "synthetic situation" (Knorr Cetina 2009), one held together not by face-to-face interaction, but by "scopic media" (Knorr Cetina 2013) and a framework of radio channels (Nevile 2007).
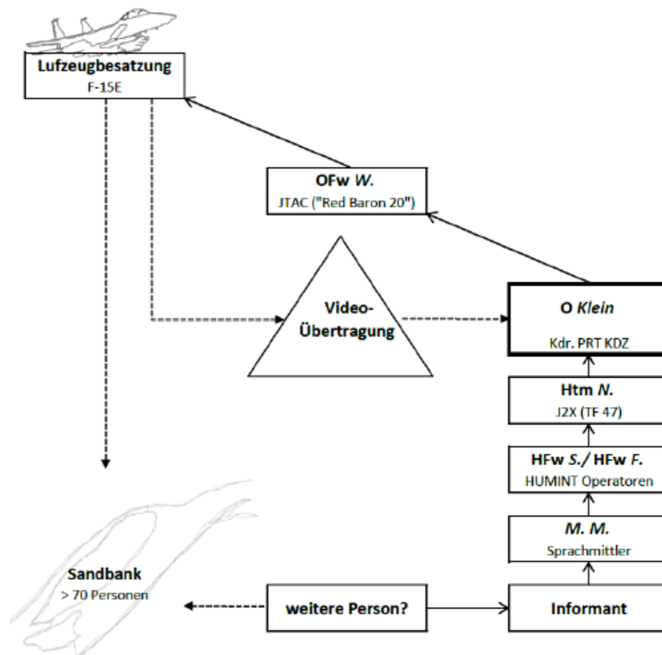

Illustration 1

The diagram of the communication network uploaded by the Parliamentary Inquiry (illustration 1) is misleading here. It maps the mission's personnel as a homogeneous nexus of co-participants: as if everybody was connected to everybody else via radio throughout the CAS mission. The publicly disclosed transcript gives a more realistic impression. It shows the radio communications that the pilot of the leading F-15E-1 (P1) sent and received via separate channels. The transcript includes all communications that passed the on-board station of P1. Out of reach are the communications within the command centre or within the other crew (F-15E-2).

The lead pilot (P1) could switch between three radio channels to connect with: (1) his fellow crew member W1 in the 2nd cockpit of the same aircraft (F-15E-1); (2) the other pilot (P2) of the second aircraft (F-15E-2); and (3) the "joint terminal attack controller" (JTAC) in Camp Kunduz. Communicating by radio excludes overlapping turns (see Sacks et al. 1974; Nevile 2008). Turning to another

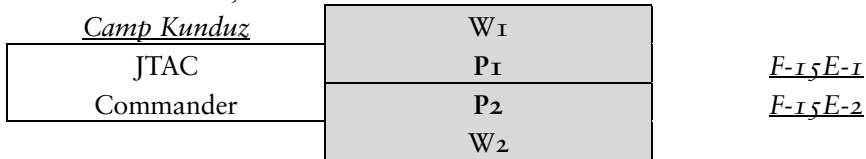participant requires a switch of channel. The radio channels determine who can communicate with whom (bold letters) *and* who can listen (grey boxes):

1ˢᵗ channel: P1 | W1 talk; nobody else can listen.

Camp Kunduz	W1	
JTAC	**P1**	*F-15E-1*
Commander	P2	*F-15E-2*
	W2	
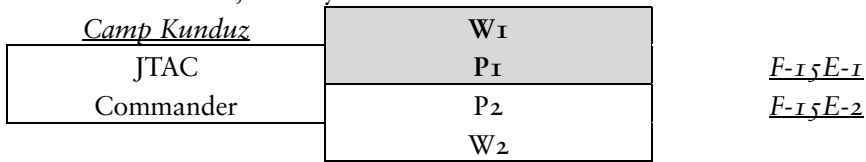
2ⁿᵈ channel: P1 | P2 talk; W1 and W2 can listen.

Camp Kunduz	W1	
JTAC	**P1**	*F-15E-1*
Commander	**P2**	*F-15E-2*
	W2	

3ʳᵈ channel: JTAC | P1 talk, W1 and Commander can listen.

Camp Kunduz	W1	
JTAC	**P1**	*F-15E-1*
Commander	P2	*F-15E-2*
	W2	
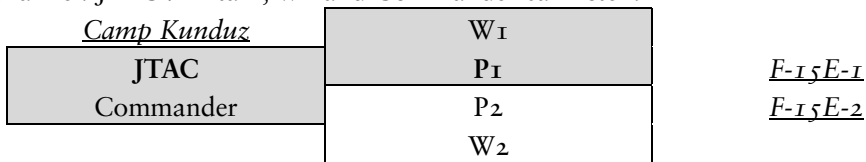
Figure 1

The three channels constitute separate "participation frameworks" (Goffman, 1981) that pre-structure who can do things with whom, who serves as an over-hearing audience, and how what is said and done remains available for later assessment.

The two modes of military accounting – HUMINT reports, radio recordings – differ in how they make military work analysable, dutiful conduct identifiable, and mistakes deniable. Whereas the reports exclude trouble altogether, the radio communications include articulations of trouble. The transcript can show both concerted efforts to implement the order *and* the work against it. The latter constitutes, what I called above, an anti-object oriented towards and opposing the military order as *the* dominant organizational object. Object and anti-object are, from the point of view of the combat soldiers, practically demanding in different respects – something the analysis from here will make clear.

COUNTERACTING THE ORDER:
FROM HESITATION TO ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL

The transcript of the radio communications shows the soldiers' methodical use of the radio channels both to work on *and* mobilize against "the explosion of the

two trucks". The various channels provide room for the order-takers' "backstage resistance" (Ybema and Horvers 2017). They carry out some counter-activities while performing their technical routines.[19] Their work is oriented towards object *and* anti-object.

In the following, I trace the series of communication episodes that shape, next to the official object, this anti-object with an increasingly binding force. The trans-sequential reconstruction begins with the weapon system officer's (W1) hesitation, something which makes room for the order-takers' subsequent counter-activities.

Ordering CAS

Approximately five minutes after the JTAC declared an "imminent threat" (20:33 40) connected to a "troops-in-contact" (TIC) situation, he would inform P1 (see Episode 1) about the number of persons involved on the ground. At the same time, he excludes the presence of "friendly forces"[20] and informs P1 about the weaponry involved, the level of authority, plus additional attack-relevant conditions. This is how P1 receives the order relayed by the JTAC on channel 3:

```
203805 JTAC     ■■■ number 1…■■■ for number 2 [conversation stepped on by
                other radios] We've got err 2 trucks on a sandbank err with
                err roughly 50 up to 70…no friendly forces in the target
                area…we've got also mortars in Camp Kunduz with a gun-tgt-line
                of ■ with a max all of ■■■ clearance authority is with ■■
                ■■ [JTAC], we've got no restrictions, no restrictions on
                ordnance, hazards Kunduz airfield is cold, and err ~ [unclear,
                TS] is hot from ■■■ ■■
203811 P1       ■■ actual QNH 1012 with 29,88 inches and weather is workable,
                how copy?
```

<div align="center">

Episode 1
3rd channel: JTAC | P1

</div>

Most of the JTAC's description echoes the HUMINT messages. However, compared to the HUMINT, the JTAC offers some additional specifications ("50 up to 70…"/20:38 05), while leaving out others (the Taliban commanders). P1 responds

---

[19] The order-takers perform a "micro-politics of trouble" (Emerson and Messinger 1977; Emerson et al. 1983; Emerson 2015). However, the soldiers' situated tactics differ from those of therapists, who turn conflicts with their patients into the deviant status of the latter. See Miller (1983), who found the same pattern in welfare institutions.

[20] There are efforts to reduce "friendly fire" through the use of specific signals that would definitively mark people, vehicles and objects as "friendly". The shortcomings of these 'solutions' are discussed in terms of technology by Larkin (2005) and in terms of "human factors" by Cook et al. (2004).

to the order by providing position coordinates and a brief weather assessment. At this point, P1 has no reason to question any of the details. After another 7 seconds, P1 reports to his own US base: "we're on route we've got about 6 minutes on route ■■ playtime" (at 20:38 18). The aircraft will arrive at the "target area" about ten minutes later (at 20:48 01).

A moment of hesitation

Three minutes after the last contact with the JTAC, P1 switches to the 1st channel (Episode 2) to ask his fellow crewman (W1) whether he has listened to the JTAC on the 3rd channel. By doing so, P1 opens up the possibility of a requested second opinion from W1 and/or of checking whether W1 requires an information update.

```
204130 P1        (…), dis you hear what the JTAC said
204135 W1        No
204136 P1        He said get ■■■ ready for 50–70 pax[21] at this specific loca-
                 tion
204140 W1        What the [expletive]
204141 P1        Err so we've just got to get there
204144 W1        Copy
                 203811 P1     XX actual QNH 1012 with 29,88 inches and
                 weather is workable, how copy?
```

<div align="center">

Episode 2
1st channel: P1 | W1

</div>

Instead of just confirming he has indeed received the information, W1 seems to react strongly. One can hear W1's "What the [expletive]" as a negative reaction to the "50-70 pax" or people. One can also hear it, however, in other ways, for example, as an expression of excitement or astonishment. In effect, the strong reaction marks a moment of hesitation, a momentary pause in normal proceedings. For a split second, following the order is suspended.

The hesitation opens up new contingent possibilities. In terms of what next, P1 could bypass the 'explicative'; he could use strong words as well; he could ask W1 to elaborate.[22] P1's use of "Err" (20:41:41) suggests that he has noticed something. The continuation of the turn, however, does not elucidate W1's expression. P1's, by adding "we've just got to get there", resumes the formal procedure. P1 is, as

---

[21] "Pax": persons approximately.

[22] See Goffman (1981, 99) for his inquiry of very short, impulsive signals ('Oops!', 'Eck!', 'Ouch!') that, as Vollmer argues, do "suffice to provide satisfactory identification of distinct types of disruptiveness" (2016, 39).

yet, not someone who W1 can "turn to" (Sacks 1992a).[23] The question arises as to the consequences of this moment of hesitation and that provides the focus for the next section.

From hesitation to internally shared trouble

About seven minutes after these exchanges, the lead F-15E reaches the target area. In Episode 3, it is the pilot (P1) who offers a moment of hesitation, again as a possible trouble-marker (20:48:33). 4 seconds later, W1 expands this into an articulation of opposition:

```
204832 W1        Were these stolen trucks
204833 P1        Yeah [expletive]
204837 W1        Dude we can't ■■ bomb that man
```
<div align="center">

Episode 3
1st channel: W1 | P1

</div>

W1 starts the exchange with a closed question regarding the visible target on the ground. He refers to the video feeds that the crew members view on their separate cockpit screens in real-time. W1 and P1 watch moving infrared dots close to two static objects. The latter are tentatively identified by W1 as "these stolen trucks" (20:48:32). P1 verifies this ("Yeah"/20:48:33).

The verification encourages W1 to add a comment: "Dude we can't …" (20:48:37). He elaborates his initial hesitation in two ways: socially ("we") and thematically ("bomb that"). However, W1's phrasing ("can't bomb that") remains open to interpretation. It could be heard as an objection on (1) personal/moral grounds (e.g. concerning the killing of so many people),[24] on (2) professional/procedural grounds (e.g. concerning certain standards disallowing this), or on (3) technical/operational grounds (e.g. concerning problems in relation to this target as being too big or too distant).

---

[23] This specific phrase is one Sacks (1992a) analyses in terms of its use by calling parties frequently at the beginning of telephone conversations to a suicide prevention help line. In this context, the question of who (troubled) military personnel can turn to – e.g., superiors, colleagues, etc. –is a practical problem for them. Here, the troubled crew member turns to the closest fellow member of the primary group. See Stone (1946) for early examples of solidarity effects within small military units.

[24] See Luckmann's concept of moral communication and his distinction between direct and indirect moralizing, which resonate with mutually presumed social relations (2002). See the communicative modality of "indirect moralizing" in a Crown Court case of murder, Scheffer (2010a). Bergmann (2011) gives an overview of current research on "morality in discourse" from an ethnomethodological perspective.

P1's response bears consideration and to give it due treatment my trans-sequential reconstruction needs to move on to the next stage of the mobilization of the anti-object: from the lead air crew's *internally shared trouble* to the order-takers' *professional concern*. The members accomplish this upgrade by practically orienting towards micro-political and problem-solving issues.

From shared trouble to professional concern

Instead of responding directly to W1, P1 switches to the 2nd channel. He involves P2 in the micro-political dealings.[25] W1 can receive this switch as confirmation: his *personal trouble* is now being *internally organizationally shared*.

```
204840 P1      1 from 2, err 2 from 1
204842 P2      Go
204844 P1      Yeah ■■■ right now, confirm you guys are cued up
204847 P2      Affirm, tally
204849 P1      Yeah dude I, I don't know how we'd be able to drop anything on
               that as far as current ROE and stuff like that
204855 P2      2 same
```

Episode 4
2nd channel: P1 | P2

After some obligatory technical coordination, P1 proceeds on this new ground by rephrasing the internally shared opposition for P2 (20:48 49/Episode 4). He does so by modifying the previous wording (20:48 37/Episode 3) to moderate the concerns voiced (20:48 49/Episode 4): "I don't know how we'd be able to" instead of "we can't"; "drop anything on" instead of "bomb". Additionally, he ascribes a formal basis to the concern: "as far as current ROE and stuff like that".[26] P2

---

[25] This move shows resemblance to what Goss et al. called an "escape by participation in a compensatory ritual" (2011, 217). In order to protect their emotional energies from the "order-giver", this occurs where members consult other "order-takers" on the same level within the organizational hierarchy they are located within.

[26] A lawyer names and interprets relevant Rules of Engagement for the Kunduz-case: "These ROEs are numbered and the so-called, 'attack ROE'. 421-429 rule the conditions under which 'close air support' can be requested. (…). It is stated that the only ROE applicable in this case was ROE 429a/b that refers to attacks on and challenge to ISAF's ability to move freely: '429A: Attack on individuals, forces or groups resisting ISAF in its mission to facilitate the lawful extension of Afghan government authority to secure and stabilize Afghanistan, by realistic and identifiable threat of force, or use of force is authorized. 429B: Attack on individuals, forces or groups challenging ISAF's complete and unimpeded freedom of movement, by realistic and identifiable threat of force, or use of force is authorized.'" See Ruttig on "The Incident at Coordinate 42S VF 8934 5219: German court rejects

receives this procedural footing positively: "2 same". This may suffice to establish what one could call a professional concern shared now by all the order-takers involved.

Here, "current ROE and stuff like that" (20:48 49, Episode 4) may denote a general, sensitizing order, in this case against "excessive use of force". Such an order had been given by NATO's ISAF-chief, General Stanley McChrystal, just two months prior.[27] The General presented this not as a "legal and moral issue", but as "an overarching operational issue": "Civilian casualties […] would turn the Afghan people against us".[28] Acknowledging the wider operational context and the doctrinal guidance for navigating it allows the members to remain within a professional military framework. The reference to the ROE invokes legitimate concern, while avoiding risky ways of posing the problem, such as personal and emotional or moral and political reasons for a refusal. By referring to the ROE, P1 anticipates possible reservations, e.g., that challenging the order could be easily treated as disobedience by them.

Omitting trouble for now: following the order

In advancing the practical status of their concern, however, the pilots do not interrupt the procedural course or voice open disapproval of the CAS mission. Even amongst P1 and W1, as the "primary group" (Shils and Janowitz 1948)[29], micro-politics are put on hold. The lead F-15E crew instead resumes the official business at hand:

---

[27] claim from Kunduz air strike victims", retrieved July 12, 2014 http://www.ecoi.net/lo-cal_link/266193/393258_de.html.

[27] This is, amongst other things, what these ROEs addressed: "While this is also a legal and a moral issue, it is an overarching operational issue – clear-eyed recognition that loss of popular support will be decisive to either side in this struggle. (…) I expect leaders at all levels to scrutinize and limit the use of force like close air support (CAS) against residential compounds and other locations likely to produce civilian casualties in accordance with this guidance. Commanders must weigh the gain of using CAS against the cost of civilian casualties, which in the long run make mission success more difficult and turn the Afghan people against us." (ISAF command, July, 2nd 2009).

[28] According to a veterans' blog, "the interpretation of the tactical directives by ground force commanders were so strict that effective CAS was no longer available in many situations." See www.af-ghanwarnews.info (accessed on 14.11.2014). See also "Limits on Afghan airstrikes frustrates pilots" in *Air Force Times*, May 9, 2010.

[29] Differently to Shils and Janowitz (1948), I define "primary groups" relationally. The crew-members perform it in relation to a secondary group (all order-takers) and tertiary group (the entire operation).

```
204905 P1        Right are you. Visual outside where this ████
204908 W1        Err yup, ████████ ████████
204919 P1        Yeah the big old thing in the river there. Can you give me
                 another mark real quick?
204916 W1        Copy, stand by…yup
```

<div align="center">

Episode 5
1st channel: P1 | W1

</div>

Once their aircraft reaches the target area, the crew-members hurry to complete their regular attack preparations. They proceed, as if there were no concerns what-soever.

The members carry out the standard protocols using the technical and scopic equipment of the aircraft. The question examined next is whether these routine preparations betray what at this stage is a rather feeble anti-object or support for the battle order.

Interim reflection: following the order and working against it

The TSA presented thus far shows that and how the members both followed the order and worked against it in a localised form of alternation. This criss-crossing opens new empirical possibilities for and new contingencies to attend to in the ensuing activities. (1) Following the order without further ado may result in an acceleration of activity, pushing the trouble aside. The anti-object, as mobilized so far, may, under these conditions, vanish from radio communications altogether. (2) The air-crews may perform the order as their primary task. Working against it remains secondary. This persistent hierarchy restricts the anti-object's impact by keeping it separated from the battle order. (3) The members may accumulate good reasons to dispute the order stemming from the ROE and the situation on the ground. Finally, their queries may render the anti-object operationally relevant. The dominant order could be altered.

The next steps show whether and how the subordinates go on working against the order, how they further the anti-object and analyse its equivocal organizational relevance.

From shared trouble to professional testing

At this point, W1 confronts P1 with a query that seems secondary to the business-at-hand: he guides the crew's attention towards the course and consequences of the hijacking (Episode 6):

```
204926 W1        Do you know if they hijacked the trucks, killed the drivers
                 then stole them?
204931 P1        I don't know … we can ask
```
Episode 6
1st channel: W1 | P1

W1's question ("Do you know if"/20:49 26) implies that something must have happened to "the drivers". His request derives its narrative plausibility from common sense knowledge of social structures (Garfinkel 1967) – trucks do not drive themselves, so if they were hijacked, the drivers must be somewhere, potentially here. It carries important implications. The drivers' possible presence would undermine the order's binary deduction: all INS = no friendly forces (20:38 05/Episode 1). P1 answers W1's question directly ("I don't know"/20:49:31) and turns the shared "not-knowing" into a proposal of what to do about it ("we can ask"/ 20:49:31). P1 delivers the query to the JTAC by switching from 1st to 3rd channel (Episode 7):

```
204935 P1        ■■■[JTAC] from ■■■[F-15E-1] confirm these are the stolen
                 trucks and while they were stolen did they kill the drivers or
                 what was the situation?
204948 JTAC      Err that's affirmative; they are the stolen trucks, although I
                 have no information about the drivers at this time. But we got
                 the intel information ■■■■■■■■ that all individuals down
                 there are insurgents
```
Episode 7
3rd channel: P1 | JTAC

P1 asks for approval: "Confirm …" (20:49:35/Episode 7). The shift of footing that accompanies the switch in channels turns the query into a professional check. It presumes and demands that the command will know this. P1 combines his request for confirmation regarding the trucks with a request for more background regarding the drivers. The JTAC, in response, restricts his confirmation (20:49:48) to the first part ("these are the stolen trucks"/20:49:35), despite *his* lack of background regarding the second part ("*I* have no …"). Despite this lack of knowledge ("But"), the *command* offers assurances ("*we* got intel information that") (20:49:48/Episode 7) by reiterating the initial claim (20:38:05/Episode 1): "all … down there are insurgents".[30] The command passes the test without providing further intelligence.

---

[30] Whereas not-knowing is individualized ("I"), knowing is ascribed to the anonymous collective ("we"). He speaks for the command and protects it against extra demands for assurances.

From shared professional concern to a counterproposal

The minimalist response does not seem to satisfy the crew of the lead aircraft. One minute after the JTAC's assurance, W1 takes the initiative. He makes it clear that the initially voiced doubts ("… if we can drop on this"/20:50 35) still hold for him[31]:

```
205035 W1      I mean I don't know if we can drop on this, you know what I
               mean?
205041 P1      Yeah
205050 W1      How would we work
205053 P1      Through ■■■ [Control]
205055 W1      We'd need yeah we'd need to go through the ■■■■
205104 P1      I don't know if it's a TIC or where the friendlies at ■■■■
205106 W1      Err, FOB Kunduz on my mark point
205110 P1      Okay
205117 W1      That was ■■■
205118 P1      But there is no like imminent threat or any of that
               [expletive]
205123 W1      No
```

Episode 8
1st channel: W1 | P1

W1 paraphrases (20:50:35) the former articulation of trouble by P1 (20:48:49). By doing so, he refers to the anti-object in its current state as a persistent joint uncertainty. P1 needs six seconds to affirm ("Yeah"/20:50:41), which may be explained by his involvement in parallel 'technical' tasks. Another nine seconds later, W1 asks an open question: "How would we work". The question leaves open which (anti-)object it refers to. However, by going "through the XXX" (20:50:55), two aspects seem to trouble P1: "if it's a TIC" and "where the friendlies at" (20:51:04). They arrive at a basic conclusion: "But there is no like imminent threat" (20:51:18).

Here, the micro-political work on the anti-object and professional work on following the order merge. The two undertakings intermingle as obligatory checks and still open questions alternate. In the midst of ongoing preparations, P1 switches to the 2nd channel in order to consult P2 about the persisting doubts. He introduces them as personal judgement ("I'm not seeing"/20:51:26) in contrast ("but err"/ibid.) to the official version.

---

[31] Note that W1 overheard the 3rd channel-communication (Trans. 7), which allows him to directly invite P1 to dwell on persisting doubts (Trans. 8/20:50 35).

```
2nd channel: P1 | P2
  205126 P1      Alright just thinking about this right now, we've got 50-100
                 people down there all claiming to be insurgents but err I'm
                 not seeing any imminent threat. I don't know what you guys
                 think should we try to work a dynamic or any type of other
                 targeting?
  205142 P2      I don't know we err just talking about the JTAC said imminent
                 threat from what you told me. I would dig a little more but
                 basically he might have some more information but basically
                 you have a large mass of probable insurgents and who knows
                 what they are going to do next? I also show the nearest
                 building about 200 metres to the east.
  205207 P1      Copy that
  205213 P2      Yeah I'm really looking to find out status of the people
                 inside and then what's inside the trucks. And then if we can
                 do a show of force³², scatter the people and then blow up the
                 trucks
1st channel: P1 | W1
  205224 W1      Well we couldn't drop on the trucks that would have to work as
                 well; it's not an imminent threat.
  205230 P1      YEAH
2nd channel: P1 | P2
  205233 P1      If we saw the place…where we were just at… imminent threat we
                 probably would've dropped on them
  205238 P2      Affirm
```

Episode 9
2nd channel: P1 | P2 [+ interplay 1st channel: W1 | P1]

P1 transfers the doubts ("no like imminent threat"/20:51:18/Episode 10) by switching from the 1st to the 2nd channel. He does so by providing a soft doubt-provoking portrayal of the official account ("50-100 people down there *all claiming*"/20:51:26/Episode 11). This is followed by a strong doubt-expressing objection ("*but* err I'm *not* seeing any imminent threat"/ibid.). He concludes his turn by inviting an exchange of views ("what you guys think"/ibid.) and suggestions (i.e. "should we try to work …"/20:51:26/Episode 11).

P2 initiates his response by signalling consensus: they share doubts ("I don't know"/20:51:42/Episode 9) and commitment ("we err just talking about"/ 20:51:42/Episode 9). P2 reports internal deliberations on the fact that "the JTAC

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[32] Larsdotter (2009) argues that such "minimal force" has turned out to be more effective in anti-insurgency operations. It lowers civilian casualties and leaves the insurgents with less support.

said imminent threat" (20:51:42/Episode 9).[33] P2 concludes: "I would dig …" and "he might have …" (20:51:42). The subsequent "but" (ibid.) indicates disagreement. P2 gives two reasons as to why the claim of an "imminent threat" might be justified still: (1) the command might know more; (2) the movements of the "large number of probable insurgents" are unpredictable (20:51:42/Episode 9). P2's statement, "who knows what they are going to do next", (20:51:42/Episode 9) implicates a military symmetry[34]. His speculations apply a "viewer's maxim" (Sacks, 1992b) for combat soldiers: if you can see something as a threat, then see it as a threat (see Kolanoski et al. 2015).

A wrongly announced "imminent threat" would enhance the status of the anti-object. But the pilots cannot agree on this. Instead, P2 comes up with a pragmatic suggestion: "And then if we can do a show of force, scatter the people and then blow up the trucks" (20:52:13/Episode 9). P1 responds 20 seconds later. In the meantime, he has received 'critical' comments by W1. W1 insists that "we couldn't drop on the trucks", because of a missing "imminent threat" (20:52:33/Episode 9). P1 agrees on the 1st channel, while on the 2nd channel, he goes on to reframe this as a prerequisite for launching an attack. This diplomatic twist allows him, to formulate a position that is agreeable to the 2nd crew. P2 affirms (20:52:38/Episode 9). Only after this agreement has been reached, does P1 seek to approach the JTAC (Episode 10):

```
205248 P1       Yeah just to give you some option, if we can't go kinetic[35] on
                the people and the trucks what we could do is maybe so some
                shows of force, scatter the people and then potentially blow
                up the vehicles for you. Just trying to offer you guys some
                options.
205303 JTAC     Yeah, copied, but please standby, just talking to the
                commander to make sure you are clear, we got a clearance or
                not, standby
```

Episode 10
3rd channel: P1 | JTAC

---

[33] Note that P2 and W2 do not overhear the 3rd channel communication by P1 and the JTAC.

[34] Sacks lecture on "the NAVY pilot" (1992b) suggests that there are military ethics used by military members emphasizing the mutual risk of being killed by the respective other in combat. In his analysis of a newspaper interview, he found the pilot's construction of symmetry in relation to the Vietcong worked as a legitimization of him being engaged in combat-related killings. See Huntington (1957, III.) for an early characterization of a military professional ethics as a "conservative realism".

[35] In common usage, kinetic "is an adjective used to describe motion, but the Washington meaning derives from its secondary definition, 'active, as opposed to latent.' Dropping bombs and shooting bullets – i.e., killing people – is kinetic. But the 21st-century military is exploring less violent and

In his exchanges with the JTAC, then, P1 proposes what P2 brought up about a minute ago ("show of force, scatter …"/20:52:13/Episode 9). He adds modesty-keys to clarify the footing of his elaboration. He even does so twice: "just to give you some option" and to "offer you guys some options" (20:52:48/Episode 10). This extra caution reflects the tricky task P1 is faced with: repairing an order he is obliged to follow. This recommendation could thus be said to instantiates the highest status reachable for the anti-object at this point.

Last efforts to alter the operational course

Up to this point, the crews' work against the order remained external to the operational course. The emerging anti-object gained neither shape nor weight, producing little more than talk amongst the order-takers. The following exchange reveals some hasty micro-political efforts to gain more operational influence via the anti-object (Episode 11-13). The efforts reflect the closing window of opportunity they have to alter the course of events:

```
3rd channel: P1 | JTAC
  205810 P1      Yeah we're going to need to put more than xxx on the side of
                 that river to destroy those vehicles, but err, just confirm
                 those guys, those guys are hostiles?
  205303 JTAC    that's affirmative we've got the intel information that
                 everybody down there is hostile
1st channel: P1 | W1
  205626 W1      oh man
  205627 P1      oh god
```

<center>*Episode 11*</center>
<center>*3rd channel: P1 | JTAC [+ interplay 1st channel: W1 | P1]*</center>

```
210639 P1        Yeah what we'd like to do is get down low, scatter the pax,
                 and blow up the vehicles, that's a, that's an option
210650 P1        … but we've got only ■■■ approved so err …
…                [communication problems]
```

---

more high-tech means of warfare, such as, electronically distorting the enemy's communications equipment or wiping out its bank accounts. These are 'non-kinetic'." (Timothy Noah, 20th November 2002, on www.slate.com)

```
210800           copied so I'm working on the airspace, but err we want to know
                 what time we need until we can engage
                 copy we're just working with some ROE issues, what I was
                 saying if we get low do a show of force we can push ■■■ on
                 each vehicle and take and disable those vehicles
210821           Standby asking the commander
```

Episode 12
3rd channel: P1 | JTAC


```
210918 P1        Do you want us to do a show of force and scatter the pax at
                 this time and hit the vehicles
210924 JTAC      negative I want you to strike directly
210928 P1        Copy
```

Episode 13
3rd channel: P1 | JTAC

P1 contests the order increasingly overtly: (1) by asking for additional confirmation of the peoples' correct categorization as "hostiles" (20:58:10/Episode 11); (2) by suggesting an alternative operational sequence ("vehicles") consistent with "some ROE issues" (21:08:00/Episode 12); and (3) by trying to make the command alter the battle order (21:09:18/Episode 13). The JTAC, after "asking the commander" (21:09:21/Episode 12), declares: "negative I want you to strike directly" (21:09:24/Episode 13). In the meanwhile, on the 1st channel, the overhearing W1 expresses his frustration ("Oh man"/ 20:56:26/Episode 11) about the now seemingly unavoidable character of what they have been directed to do. P1 does so as well.

The order-takers' coordinated attempts to modify the order are blocked by the JTAC's formulaic responses. A friction between the officially trouble-free order and the horizontally shared professional concerns raised in relation to it endures until shortly before the air strike. The chain of command seems to restrict the anti-object's career despite all the micro-political efforts invested in it.

The final say

Another communicative 'trans-sequence' across the 1st and 3rd channel shows the very last attempt to avoid the air strike. The minimal passage takes place while the cockpit crews await clearance by the command (Episode 15-18):

```
211559 W1      Dude I've got a say there uh, do you wanna just do one last,
               alright, confirm
211505 P1      yeah do it
```
Episode 15
1st channel: P1 | W1

```
211606 P1      confirm that err one last time, these pax are an imminent
               threat?
211613 JTAC    Yeah those pax are an imminent threat, so those insurgents are
               trying to get all the gasoline off the tanks and after that
               they will regroup and we've got intel information about
               current ops so probably attacking camp Kunduz
211626 P1      Copies
```
Episode 16
3rd channel: P1 | JTAC

```
211630 P1      we'll be err
211631 W1      Alright dude
211631 P1      let's set up for the attack
```
Episode 17
1st channel: P1 | W1

Here, W1 pushes P1 to "just do one last … confirm" (21:15:59/Episode 15). P1, due to the still binding character of the anti-object *and* contributing to it again, launches yet another request for confirmation ("imminent threat"/21:16:06/Episode 16). However, as soon as the crewmen receive the confirmation, they give up: "let's set up for the attack"/21:16:31/Episode 17). The order succeeds and is, after all this, followed unchanged.

P1's very last intervention is weakened by the urgency of the operation. His request for confirmation ("confirm that …"/21:16:06/Episode 18) invites the JTAC to just complete the "turn-pair" (Sacks 1992a, p. 4) by confirming it. However, instead of just responding with a complementary "confirmed", he expands on what "those insurgents are trying" (21:16:13/Episode 18). He provides a prognosis ("will regroup … probably attacking camp Kunduz"/ 21:16:13). Only at this point does W1 allow his partner to proceed ("Alright dude"/21:16:31).

Soon afterwards, the two F-15E aircraft drop their bombs. All the opposition work seems absorbed by this. The order-takers' efforts did not bring the operation to a halt. However, their requests and suggestions had changed something in terms of accountability: they made the command assume full responsibility.

After the air strike, the military released a brief report. The text is consistent with the HUMINT-messages. Here again, the air strike comes across as a trouble-free operation:

> OCC-P KDZ reported about 2 (two) fuel-tank trucks (owner UNK) being captured by INS. INS intent was to cross Kunduz river at a ford to bring the fuel to …

> At 0322000* PRT KDZ JTAC observed KUNDUZ river and reported that it discovered the trucks as well as up to 70 (seventy) INS at 425 … on the ford on the river. The trucks were stuck in the mud.

> COM PRT KDZ allowed the offensive engagement.

> At 0401490* F-15 dropped 2 (two) GBU 38.

> At 0402280* BDA conducted by F-15/ROVER was that 56 (fifty six) INS were killed (confirmed) and 14 (fourteen) INS fled in a NE direction. The trucks were destroyed. No more information ATT.

The account covers all obligatory precautions for an organized killing: (1) first reports on dissident acts, (2) closer observations, (3) clearance by the command, (4) the dropping of bombs, and (5) a battle damage assessment. Set out for the record in this way, the operation appears orderly from start to finish, just as if the order had run smoothly from the top-down through a Weberian chain of command.

CONCLUSION

Micro foundational studies of organization examine situated work (including its methods of problem solving) or ongoing struggles (including the diverse tactical manoeuvres members engage in) in great detail. From this starting point, students of organization will go out to learn about members' orientations towards pressing matters-at-hand *or* their skilful power games. However, studies of work and micro-politics tend to undervalue members' orientations towards objects-in-the-making. We often do not know what it is that members work at across episodes or over what they actually initiate struggles with others. By studying objects of work *and* struggles as well as how members position themselves with respect to either, we gain access to the critical moments of organizational life, its capacities and contingencies.

In the single case studied here, the object-centred view is able to fuse an interest in situated work *and* micro-politics. Through it, it was possible to track down the air crews' coordinated work for *and* against a military order. The air crews dealt

with the battle order as an object of duty and as a troublesome matter. Interestingly, the air crews' opposition-work did not emerge from some act of brave resistance. Instead, one member initiated a rather minor disruption in the midst of undertaking the routines associated with Close-Air-Support (CAS) missions, crying out to his nearest comrade in a vocalised but not articulated expression of his concern. In retrospect, it was this initial hesitation that opened up the space for the order-takers' opposition-work and their multiple subsequent attempts to head off the killing of 'so/too many'.

The crew members worked on an anti-object, creating, if only for a few moments, some promising contingencies: seeking to leverage an opportunity for things to potentially play out differently despite the strict instructions of the script they had been issued with. However, not following the order remained strongly dispreferred throughout. The trans-sequential reconstruction offered here thus shows how the airs crews' work against the order came to matter, but only within limits. Firstly, the order-takers were only able to create a provisional, horizontally and informally binding anti-object. Secondly, they were not able to adjourn the primary task, the order's technical implementation. Thirdly, their work against the order took place almost entirely 'backstage', managed by locally artful switches between radio channels.

This is why the soldiers' opposition work never came to open resistance; the worked to ensure it wouldn't within the parameters of the 'synthetic situation' they found themselves in. Instead, the order-takers rather cautiously tested the situated possibilities in an attempt to alter the official order. They tried to pinpoint its' weak spots: misplaced assumptions, aporia, incalculable effects, workable alternatives. They did so persistently, as if they could really stop the 'whole thing'. They did so increasingly resolutely in the very last moments before the bombing. Their opposition work shows both their unwillingness to cross the line between obedience and disobedience but also their unwillingness to be accessories to an unnecessary and misdirected act of killing.

The parallelism between working on the order and against it was possible due to the allotted technically-mediated participation frameworks. Working from within those frameworks, the assorted radio channels became a resource that could be pressed into service for two reverse passages of relevancy production (Fig 2):

FOLLOWING THE ORDER	*CAS mission/organisational*	∧
		3rd channel: proposing alternatives
3rd channel: giving an order	*Order-takers/professional*	
	Crew/personal	
2nd channel: implementation		2nd channel: sceptical assessment
1st channel: execution		1st channel: sharing concerns
∨		MOBILISING AN ANTI-OBJECT

Figure 2

The left column of Fig. 2 concerns the primary practice: how the members work through an order running through the military chain of command. The right column runs in the reverse direction. The anti-object emerges from the bottom-up: the opposition work develops the scope and status of the anti-object across a number of stages, altogether consistent with an informal relevance career:

(1) The mobilization starts off with an articulated hesitation that one recipient could treat as *trouble-marker*, but does not need to. This hesitation allows for "plausible deniability" (Lynch/Bogen 1996), i.e. it is explicitly structured so it cannot be taken (yet) as an overt refusal of an order.

(2) Once established as trouble-marker, the 'troubled' member explores the trouble by giving reasons to somebody trustworthy. Here, *personal trouble* seeks interpersonal acknowledgement. The anti-object takes shape.

(3) The interpersonally acknowledged trouble is re-presented to the crew of the other F-15E. Their affirmative reactions establish the trouble as a *problem shared by all order-takers*. The anti-object grows in weight.

(4) The shared trouble is objectified by referring to the ROE. It is accounted for as a *professional concern*. The anti-object is grounded and stabilized.

(5) Once established as the soldiers' professional concern, the anti-object no longer just implies emotional or moral distress. Instead, it is linked via *military standards* to the current situation.

(6) Military standards justify joint investments in the anti-object, i.e., a collective search for loopholes (search for "friendlies") or alternatives ("show of force"). The investments seek *operational relevance*. The anti-object gains ambitions.

(7) Vis-à-vis the commanding authority, the professional concern is diplomatically substituted for a series of *modest proposals*. These proposals, like the first response cry, avoid overt signs of disobedience while demonstrating a degree of

resoluteness for the over-hearing crew members whose concerns they condense.

The anti-object's career thus follows a particular pattern: (a) it is developed in stages from direct to more indirect social relations. This stage-wise mobilization widens its social scope *and* status. The care taken in its development lowers the risk of it being received as disobedient. (b) The career of the anti-object is not linear. It includes twists and novel restarts. The anti-object comes to a halt due to the command simply insisting on the original order. The latter seems immune to challenge. (c) The formation of the anti-object is further improvised. There is no formal procedure for the order-takers to rely on. They employ, however, a recurring sequence of channel-switches plus a series of formulations in ad hoc but locally adequate ways to advance it as far as they can. (d) The work on the anti-object alternates with and is limited by the primary work of following the order they have been given. The opposition work faces a fast closing window of opportunity. (e) On top of all this, the opposition group ensures that by no means will their activities come across as challenging the commanding authority. They repeatedly show they are obeying the order. The latter requires they engage in accountably and inspectably orderly military work throughout.

Working on/out the anti-object carries important implications in terms of military accounting. Its contra-mobilization, although ultimately not successful, performs a lasting account of who did what and why during the operation. By creating professional concerns, the crew members establish (1) the command's exclusive responsibility for the bombing, (2) their own status as responsible and dutiful subordinates, and (3) their continuous efforts to apply professional standards. Working against the order and following it ultimately dovetail in terms of "deniability" (Lynch and Bogen 1996) from the point of the order-execution. Based on their situated and micro-political work, the crew members can show that they did not undertake the bombing of so many "pax" lightly or without due consideration. The primary object, the order, takes centre-stage as the crucial element in the attack. The resulting account thus carries macro-political implications precisely because it raises questions about the role of coalition forces in protecting the civilian population in Afghanistan.[36] That it became impossible, as mentioned above, to maintain the German ISAF troops were involved in anything other than war as a consequence of this attack is testament to the success of that situated micro-political work.

This is how the anti-object merges with the primary object. The order-takers' work both on the order and against it succeeded in producing an account that

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[36] What Warren notes about the "politics of trouble" in a professional psychiatric setting, that "[it] takes place within a more general macropolitical context, of which continual documentation is the most proximate feature" (1983, 327), also applies here.

retains its force today. The German Parliament's Inquiry, for instance, examined these radio communications in order to decide whether the exchanges between the US pilots contradicted or clashed with the version presented by the German command. The same was true in legal proceedings in German civil as well as criminal courts (Kolanoski 2017). These diverse inquiries, however, focused exclusively on 3rd channel communications during the operation. The Parliamentary Inquiry concluded an absence of any open critique vis-à-vis the command and, therefore, ruled in the command's favour. The trans-sequential reconstruction offered above destabilizes that conclusion by demonstrating that the order-takers worked against the order they had been given to kill "60-80 pax" to the limits of their competence, abilities and duties.

POSTSCRIPT: THE LIMITED DATA SET

The two data sources that I have referred to in this single case study represent different modes of military accounting. The "HUMINT messages" offer retrospective accounts in the form of brief summaries. They conceal the process of knowledge production and decision making. In light of the extent of the destruction, the records' minimalism is deeply disturbing to a civilian readership. From a military point of view, however, there might be "good organizational reasons for bad (…) records" (Garfinkel 1967, 186). The HUMINT messages mainly insist on the minimal conditions of possibility for the order to be justifiable. They shield the order against critique. Considering the soldiers' doubts, the command provided them with a similar but even more reduced account of why all those people on the ground had to die.

The recorded and transcribed radio communication is different in this regard. Readers and analysts get a sense of the members' situated work and efforts. The transcript documents the crew members' verbal exchanges in real-time. The resulting account is more vulnerable to testing and critique. It allows for a whole range of well grounded inferences: political, judicial, moral, or professional.

The discrepancy amongst the two modes of accounting carries implications for the legal and political reconstruction of combat-related killings. It casts light on selected lower-ranked order-takers while it conceals the role of the higher-ranked order-givers. For instance, we do not know anything about the communication between the JTAC and commander or between "PRT Kunduz Liaison Officer" and the HUMINT asset (see Message No. 2). These exclusions ensure deniability, i.e. they make it possible for the commander to retrospectively fabricate an account of what he knew and did in this case that could protect him from post-event allegations. The highly reductionist accounts conceal the members' organizational co-production of the primary military object, the battle order. Insights into this co-production would be essential for a democratic review of how the bombing of so many insurgents *and* civilians came about.

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