

HEBA Y AMIN

# *The General's Stork*



In 2013 I began an investigation on paranoia, following a viral media story about a detained stork that had been accused of espionage. The bird had been captured in Qena, a small city in southern Egypt, when a local fisherman suspected an electronic device attached to its body. The research took many forms (field work, interviews, archival research, digital methodologies) and examines the politics of aerial surveillance—against the backdrop of biblical prophecies, drone warfare, and colonial narratives—from a bird’s-eye view. *The General’s Stork* explores the extent to which Western military techniques of reconnaissance have determined the topographical quartering of the Middle East and how paranoia can become so prevalent that a bird can be accused of spying. Below is a transcript of an artistic lecture that has, since its first iteration, expanded as an ongoing project which includes performance, works on paper, archival research material, film and the book *Heba Y. Amin: The General’s Stork*, edited by Anthony Downey (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020).

## PART 1

We live in a risk society, a moment of global hysteria. A time in which everything is a construct of fear, where responses are formulated according to the phobias that define our social world. In such a world, the narrative becomes everything: it is power. Our paranoia leads us to question even the construct of our visual realities. Our visual paradigms are drastically changing as we’ve begun to dismantle the linear perspective. The mathematics of art as put forth by Italian Renaissance painters and architects, no longer deals with the horizon or the vanishing point but rather the detached observant gaze of the aerial view.

The aerial view has become the new norm as technological tools of surveillance become seamlessly embedded within our contemporary landscapes. From the Orientalist depiction of the desert of nineteenth century aerial photography in the Middle East, to the role that satellite imagery of the 1991 Gulf War has played in transforming war reportage, the problematic practices in landscape surveillance perpetuate the narrative of imperialism through the technology of warfare. The language of occupation and colonization has been written into the visualization of landscape.<sup>1</sup> Early twentieth century geographers were intrigued by this new perspective as a means of territorial evaluation.

The Royal Geographical Society convened in 1920 to discuss British military strategies and opportunities brought forth by aerial technologies for land expansion, particularly in Europe’s new territories on the African continent. It was surveying landscapes not only for visualizing the colonies, but also for administrative control and imperial cataloguing.<sup>2</sup> The Society recognized the power of aerial photography for advancing scientific research, using Egypt and Palestine as testing grounds for perfecting their survey techniques. As early as 1916, surveying and mapping technologies were used to uncover Turkish systems and infrastructures in Gaza in preparation for warfare.<sup>3</sup>

As war became dictated by the needs of technology, conquest from the sky transformed Western warfare into an imbalanced spectacle of high-tech weaponry.<sup>4</sup> Techno-aesthetics became inherently tied to the greater Middle East as landscapes of destruction—complete with trenches, tunnels, minefields and communication structures—became the image of a new regime of terror. Aeroplanes further transformed the aestheticization of geography to another level of domination: aeromobilities not only changed the territorial sovereignty of airspace, but machines altered our contemporary imaginaries and the very nature of seeing. Paul Virilio writes of “the deadly harmony that always establishes itself between the functions of eye and weapon,” when missiles and bombs are fitted with cameras and suddenly “open their eyes.”<sup>5</sup>



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## PART 2

In 2013, Egypt made worldwide headlines for a story about a stork. It was caught and detained after a local resident identified an electronic device attached to its body and suspected it of espionage. It was accused of being a Zionist spy and later imprisoned. Once it was broadcast in the media, it became a spectacle that was in keeping with the frenzy of the events unfolding in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> At this time, Egypt is in the middle of a grave crisis. The elected president Mohammad Morsi and senior figure of the Muslim Brotherhood was overthrown and jailed by the military on 3 July, 2013. In the two months since Morsi was toppled, hundreds of his followers have been killed in clashes with the army and police, including during an event that Human Rights Watch has called “the most serious incident of mass unlawful killings in modern Egyptian history” where it states that at least one thousand people were killed on 14 August, 2013.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, an insurgency has flared in the Sinai Peninsula. On Sunday 1 September, 2013 *Nature Conservation Egypt* receives an email:

*To whom it may concern:*

*We have found out from the media, that a white stork with our satellite tracking device was caught in Egypt near Qena and it is in captivity:*

*Could you get in touch with the authorities and inform them, that this is a stork from Hungary and the device is a wildlife tracking device we attached to it to follow the migration of the bird. Even you can find the details of the bird and the tracking data on our satellite tracking website.*<sup>8</sup>

The stork was a native of Hungary and was following the Nile River on his migration toward the Lake Victoria basin in East Africa when villagers in Qena spotted him at rest with a white satellite tracker fixed to its body. The bird was one of one hundred and fifteen migrating birds being tracked by a consortium of European wildlife organisations. Qena, a small city in southern Egypt, is most famous for its close proximity to the ancient temples of Dendara and today, has become a major traffic route between Upper Egypt and the Red Sea. Seemingly distant from the political events unfolding around the country, the city has its own complicated history that includes an elaborate story about a secret American military airbase.

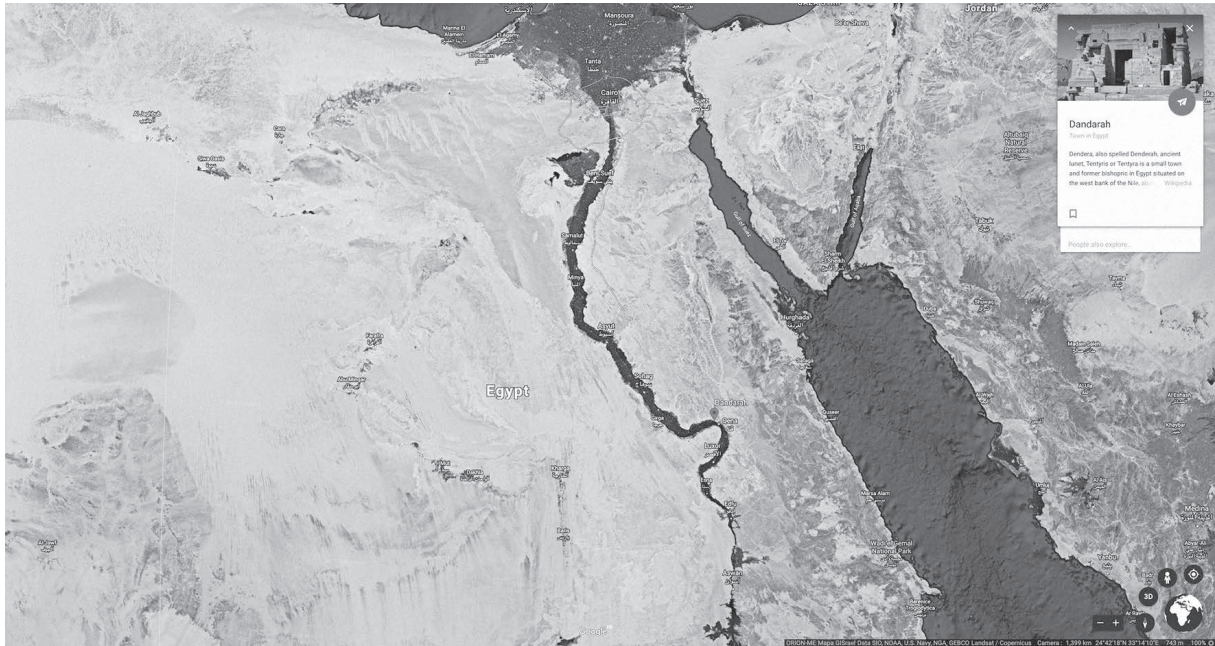
Here is an account from Larry Grinnell, technical communicator for the US military whose role was to perform occasional preventive maintenance inspections and certify the destruction of radio operators' classified documents. This is taken from his personal website:

*The 1st Comm had an ongoing mission sending people to a classified location somewhere in the middle east, simply known to us as... Site Alpha. As it turns out, this was the forward base that launched the rescue attempt to bring back the American hostages in Iran, taken when the US Embassy was invaded in 1979. The rescue attempt, Operation Eagle Claw, failed completely due to many factors that are probably still being discussed today.*<sup>9</sup>

The helicopters were sent from the military base in Qena and all encountered technical problems: eight helicopters were sent, one encountered hydraulic problems, another got caught in a cloud of fine sand, a third showed cracks in the rotor blade, and lastly one of the helicopters crashed into a transport aircraft. Eight Americans and one Iranian citizen were killed.<sup>10</sup>



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*No one was supposed to know where [the base] was until they were under way, unless they had the appropriate clearances and need to know... Gee, I thought, just having seen King Tut's riches, this was pretty amazing to be going to the country where he came from. We finally touched down, after going around three times due to difficult weather at the site, and when I got to the open doorway, my heart sunk. There it was. Miles and miles of miles and miles. This was a real desert with basically nothing.*

*I quickly found out that Site Alpha was a former Soviet air base, built in the days when the Soviets and the Egyptians were fast friends... officially, it was known as Wadi Qena... We called it Bum F\*\*k Egypt (BFE for short). Along with Thule, Greenland and Minot, North Dakota, BFE was an often mythical place that military training instructors threatened to send you if you didn't get with the program. I think we even had a sign outside Base Operations that said "Welcome to BFE," but when local Egyptian military folks and civilian dignitaries visited, the true meaning of BFE was masked with the acronym "Beautiful, Friendly Egypt." I don't think anyone was fooled, but we did at least try to play the game.<sup>11</sup>*

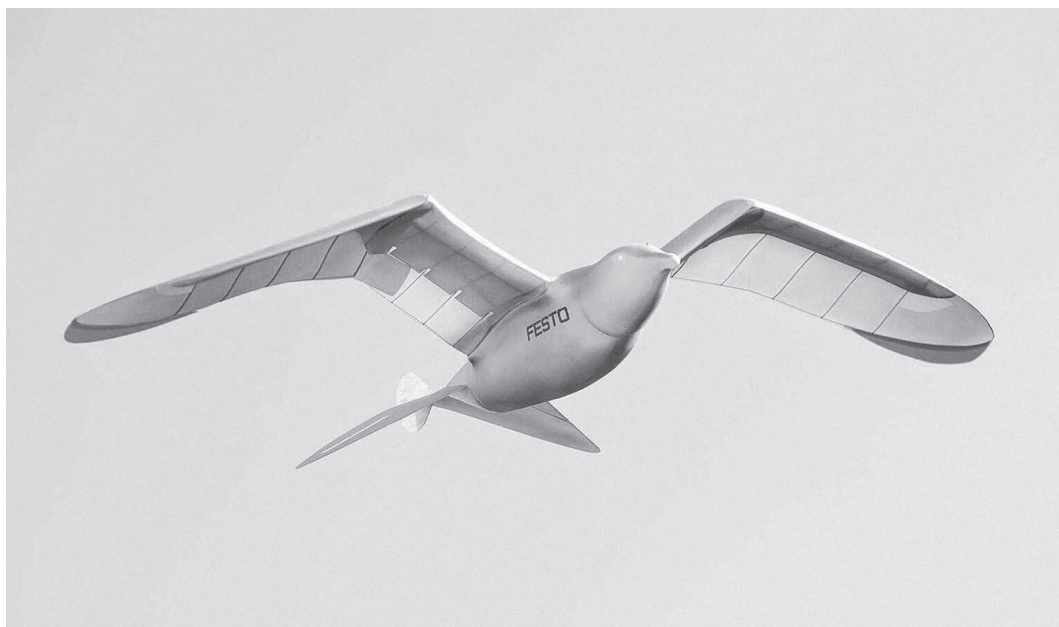
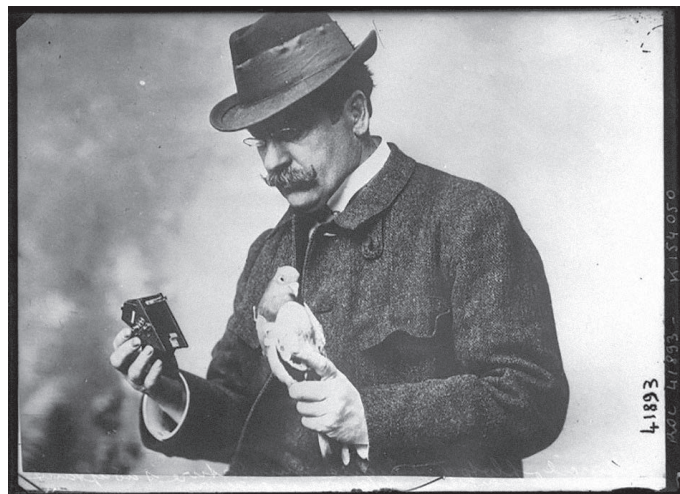
The operation was eventually aborted and failed to save the hostages. The embassy hostages were then scattered around Iran to make another rescue attempt impossible. It was Anwar Sadat, Egypt's president at the time, who leaked the information of the American military base in Egypt. The deal was that the Americans would use the Egyptian facilities to introduce land-based American air power to the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. This was not a surprising move considering the development of aerial technologies in the region.

### PART 3

A German engineer first attached a camera to a pigeon in 1908 to take aerial photographs. Dr. Julius Neubronner patented the 'pigeon-cam', a camera attached to a homing pigeon activated by a timing mechanism. Neubronner was an apothecary near Frankfurt and started receiving his prescriptions from a sanatorium in Falkenstein using pigeon post. He then thought, if a pigeon can carry drugs, surely it can carry a camera. He fitted a light miniature camera with a harness weighing up to 75g, and the birds were already accustomed to carrying such weight. The imperial patent office accepted his invention which he titled "method and device for photographing sections of terrain from the bird's eye perspective."<sup>12</sup> It wasn't long before his 'pigeon-cam' inspired the German military intelligence to do the same. It was, in fact, reported that the German Army was training pigeons for photography in 1932 leading up to the Second World War. It was only a matter of time until real animals started being replaced by artificial ones.

In August 2012, a suspected surveillance drone crashed in Balochistan Province, Pakistan. According to an eyewitness account, it landed near the Frontier Corps headquarters in Chaman, a bordering township with Afghanistan. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, this particular region has seen the heaviest bombardment by drone strikes, with a total of 425 strikes in the last decade and between 2501 and 4003 casualties, eighty-four of which are identified as members of al-Qaeda.<sup>13</sup> The robotic bird resembled a SmartBird, even though the company denies responsibility or ownership. In a TV report on the incident, the reporter states in Urdu voice-over: "From now onwards, we will have to watch the skies carefully, to check whether a bird is real, or it is a spy."<sup>14</sup> SmartBird is designed by a research laboratory at Festo, a German industrial control

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and automation company based in Esslingen am Neckar. The laboratory specializes in lightweight material and advanced pneumatics. The movements of the bird have been precisely engineered to match the patterns of a seagull. They are exploring what they call “bionic thinking” and their goal is to “learn from nature and transfer that knowledge into technology to improve the production of the future.”<sup>15</sup> But to what end?

#### PART 4

Today the United States has the most comprehensive and aggressive drone program in the world; they lead the world in drone technology. “When American army strategists imagine what drones will be like in twenty-five years, they begin by getting an infographist to create a composite image of a typical Arab town, complete with mosque, other buildings, and palm trees.”<sup>16</sup> They use a so-called ‘pattern-of-life-analysis’ to locate anonymous militants based on evidence collected by surveillance cameras through spatiotemporal mapping, or the analysis of an individual’s movements in correlation to space and time. Obviously, this is not error-free and often firing is decided on arbitrary ‘pattern-of-life’ indicators and innocent people are being killed. In fact, the White House ‘kill list’ criteria are unknown and based on blind trust; they are tracking ‘behaviour’ from the sky.

In the wake of Wikileaks and particularly Chelsea Manning’s disclosure of nearly 750,000 classified documents, including the Baghdad airstrike video, ‘Collateral Murder’ released on 5 April, 2010, our exposure to the causalities of warfare from the military perspective has become embedded in our contemporary consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Manning’s release of that particular video greatly transformed our public discourse and collective imaginaries in regards to military conduct and our role in it. Manning’s leaks were an attempt to address the accountability of the system, in this case the US government, who not only withholds truths from the public and controls the dissemination of images, but also gets away with war crimes. The released leaks did something that military images never do; they humanized victims.

The aftermath of ‘9/11’ brought us the postmodern war and operation ‘Shock and Awe’, where scenes of violence and destruction from the aerial bombardment of Iraq in 2001 were broadcast on TV and narrated through the constructs of aesthetics. Sixteen years later, the 2017 US Shayrat missile strikes in Syria were described as “beautiful pictures” by MSNBC’s Brian Williams.<sup>18</sup> American military rhetoric systematically portrays warfare through aesthetics that not only glorify the destruction of Middle Eastern cities but also reduce the casualties of civilians to faceless, abstract figures.

The exoticization of violence is embedded in the aerial image which simultaneously proposes notions of construction and destruction. Perhaps even more alarming is that now people are being labelled as potential threats through algorithmic processing. In other words, someone can be singled out as a potential terrorist and be arrested for it before they have even considered doing anything. In fact, in April 2017, over four hundred Palestinians were detained, based on an algorithmic determination of their possible danger.<sup>19</sup> This is not an exact science, in the same way that drone targeting is not precision warfare. The victims of war see their spaces and landscapes simultaneously through experience and through the aesthetics of the machine. Their multi-layered perception of landscape becomes like an out of body experience where witnessing one’s own death is an imminent probability.<sup>20</sup>



It was Israel who had discovered the potential of remotely piloted vehicles, after they had inherited a few machines scrapped by the Americans who, momentarily, had abandoned the development of their drone program in the 1970s. In 1969, the Israeli Air Force was using drones to photograph and monitor Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian troops, and by 1973, in the Yom Kippur War, they sent out a wave of drones to mislead enemy defences—they were able to attack when the Egyptians used up all their artillery and were reloading.<sup>21</sup> This was the first time drones were officially used in battle.

#### PART 5

In 1869, W.F. Quinby of Wilmington, Delaware, invented a new and improved flying machine. Quinby states in his application that his improvements “intended to provide an arrangement of temporary sails resembling in some respect the wings of birds.”<sup>22</sup> Like him, many before Quinby attempted to acquire bird-like characteristics. In fact, The Bible itself has prompted many scholars and inventors to conceive of flying machines or bird-like machines inspired by the following passage from the book of Isaiah: “As birds flying, so will the LORD of hosts protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver [it], he will pass over and preserve [it].”<sup>23</sup>

After taking up his command in Cairo in June 1917, Lord Allenby the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) had been given explicit orders by the Prime Minister David Lloyd George to capture Jerusalem by Christmas. This was in the wake of two failed efforts by his predecessor, Sir Archibald Murray, to conquer Gaza, a necessary condition for the conquest of Palestine from the Ottoman Turks. Lord Allenby was a believer in Bible prophecy; he was a religious man and did not want to destroy the holy places in the city of Jerusalem. He was persuaded by Biblical scholars to move forward based on Biblical prophecy.

Allenby ordered as many planes as possible to fly over Jerusalem. It is said that at that time the Turks had never seen so many planes in the sky and were terrified by their presence. He ordered pilots to send down leaflets commanding the Turks to surrender. The flyers read: “Surrender the city today, Allenby.” Allenby, in Arabic, can only be written in one way: *al naby* (prophet or son of god). What he did not know was that the Turks also believed in an old prophecy that they would never lose the Holy City until a man of Allah came to deliver it. The Turks surrendered without firing a shot, an incredible fulfilment of Biblical prophecy which put Palestine under British mandate. The Balfour Declaration, a public statement issued by the British government in 1917, called for a Jewish homeland and set the foundation for modern Israel.

In fact, the following version of the story is seldom told and probably because the socio-political transformation of the entire region was prompted by hens. According to the witness account of Major Vivian Gilbert relayed in detail in his book from 1928, called *The Romance of the Last Crusade: With Allenby to Jerusalem*, the city of Jerusalem was, in fact, surrendered to the general’s cook who was out on a mission to fetch some eggs. On 9 December, 1917 the eggs were spoiled, so British private Murch, a cook from London, was sent off alone with his rifle to the next village to get eggs for the commander’s breakfast. As an incompetent soldier, he got lost in the fog and dust and accidentally stumbled on a group of men who greeted him with a set of keys. Hussein Effendi el Hussein, the mayor of Jerusalem, wanted to surrender the city to the cook. “I don’t want your city” he says, “I want some eggs!” Upon his return, private Murch relayed his amazing adventure and his commanding officer promptly declared the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>24</sup>

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Conscious of the city's special meaning for three of the world's great religions, in a deliberate act of humility and respect Allenby entered Jerusalem on foot through the Jaffa Gate on 11 December, 1917. He walked to the Citadel from where he read a proclamation that made it clear he came not as a conqueror, but as a liberator.<sup>25</sup> Of course, at this point, Allenby becomes the man of the moment. All eyes were on him. His unprecedented success had made him out to be a hero, a hero with religious values and kindness. But most peculiar, however, in his limelight with the media focus on our new hero is the emergence of a particular relationship with a bird.

## PART 6

Lord Allenby had a pet marabou stork. Perhaps it was biblical fate that strengthened the bond with this bird. Perhaps the bird represents a sort of triumph that he holds dear to his heart, a symbolic embodiment of biblical prophecy. Perhaps it is not a coincidence. But it is this precise relationship that defines the absurdity of this story, the thread that unites the sequence of events. It relays the surreal way in which history is written and highlights the details that often get left out and are eventually forgotten and erased from history, the fantasies and the truths that we hold on to. The regime of truth and the power of narrative.

So how does the story end? The spy bird in Qena was given the name Menes, after an Ancient Egyptian pharaoh who was credited with uniting Upper and Lower Egypt. Menes, in fact, means "he who endures." However, the short-lived success story of getting Menes released was not enough to keep him safe until he exited Egypt. Upon release, he was almost instantly shot down by hunters and eaten by the very people who had questioned him in the first place. They had consumed their paranoia.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The notion of aerial photography as a construct of war was initially developed for mapping battlefields in North Africa. See for example, *Seeing from Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture*, Mark Dorrian and Frédéric Pousin eds, London: I.B.Tauris, 2013, p. 188

<sup>2</sup> Dov Gavish, *The Survey of Palestine under the British Mandate, 1920–1948*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005, passim. See also Dov Gavish, 'An Account of an Unrealized Aerial Cadastral Survey in Palestine under the British Mandate', *The Geographical Journal* vol. 153, no. 1, 1987, pp. 93–98

<sup>3</sup> The Royal Geographical Society was founded in 1830 and is the UK's leading centre for geographers. In its early years, the organization was predominantly preoccupied with colonial expansion, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. See Peter Adey, *Aerial Life*, Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 90-91

<sup>4</sup> Italian pilot Giulio Cavotti dropped the first bombs from an aeroplane in 1911 near Tripoli during the Italo-Turkish war that transformed Ottoman Libya into an Italian colony. This event marked the first time that the aeroplane and camera came together as a new way of visualizing warfare through the machine's perspective. See Mark Mazower, 'Libya Remembers, We Forget: These Bombs Are Not the First', *The Guardian*; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/25/libya-remembers-bombs-not-first>; accessed 5 July, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, New York: Verso, 2009, p. 83

<sup>6</sup> Conal Urquhart, 'Arrested "Spy" Stork Killed and Eaten after Release in Egypt', *The Guardian*, 8 September 2013; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/07/arrested-spy-stork-killed-eaten-egypt>

<sup>7</sup> 'Egypt: Security Forces Used Excessive Lethal Force', *Human Rights Watch*, 19 August 2013; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/19/egypt-security-forces-used-excessive-lethal-force>



<sup>8</sup> This email was shared with the artist with permission from Nature Conservation Egypt and the director of Birdlife Hungary. See the stork Menes' tracking data; <https://www.satellitetracking.eu/inds/view/111>

<sup>9</sup> Larry Grinnell, 'Air Force Days, Part 6: Life as a Combat Communicator in the First Combat Communications Squadron', *Meet Larry Grinnell*; [www.larrygrinnell.com/?p=1669#more-1669](http://www.larrygrinnell.com/?p=1669#more-1669)

<sup>10</sup> Mark Bowden, 'The Desert One Debacle', *The Atlantic*, May 2006; <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/05/the-desert-one-debacle/304803/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> 'Neubronner Applies for Pigeon Camera Patent | History Channel on Foxtel', *History Channel*, 8 June 2017; [www.historychannel.com.au/this-day-in-history/neubronner-applies-for-pigeon-camera-patent/](http://www.historychannel.com.au/this-day-in-history/neubronner-applies-for-pigeon-camera-patent/)

<sup>13</sup> See full statistics on drone warfare from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's website; <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war>

<sup>14</sup> From YouTube video, 'American Drone Bird in Waziristan', posted by Abdul Haseeb 14 December 2011; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_-wy-OeTKU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_-wy-OeTKU)

<sup>15</sup> See Festo's website; <https://www.festo.com/group/en/cms/10238.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Gregoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, Penguin Random House, 2015, p. 56

<sup>17</sup> 'Collateral Murder'; <https://collateralmurder.wikileaks.org/> accessed 5 July 2017

<sup>18</sup> Derek Hawkins, 'Brian Williams is "guided by the beauty of our weapons" in Syria strikes', *The Washington Post*, 7 April 2017; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/04/07/beautiful-brian-williams-says-of-syria-missile-strike-proceeds-to-quote-leonard-cohen/> accessed 15 December 2017

<sup>19</sup> Yossi Gurvitz, 'When Kafka met Orwell: Arrest by algorithm', *Mondoweiss*, 3 July 2017; <https://mondoweiss.net/2017/07/orwell-arrest-algorithm/?amp>; accessed 5 July 2017

<sup>20</sup> For an extensive conversation, see Heba Y. Amin and Anthony Downey, 'Contesting post-digital futures: drone warfare and the geo-politics of aerial surveillance in the middle east', *Digi War* 1, 2020; <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-020-00021-y>

<sup>21</sup> Chamayou, p. 27

<sup>22</sup> 'Knowledge Repository @ IUP', Site, [knowledge.library.iup.edu/as\\_patents/13/](http://knowledge.library.iup.edu/as_patents/13/)

<sup>23</sup> 'Isaiah 31:5', "As Birds Flying, so Shall the Lord of Hosts Shield above Jerusalem; and He Shall Rescue and Shall Protect and Shall Deliver", Study Bible; <https://studybible.info/compare/Isaiah%2031:5>

<sup>24</sup> Vivian Gilbert, 'The Romance of the Last Crusade: with Allenby to Jerusalem', *Internet Archive*; <https://archive.org/details/romanceoflastcru00vivi/page/166/mode/2up>

<sup>25</sup> *A Brief Record of the Advance of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force July 1917 to October 1918*, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1919, p. 3