

D R O N E P I L O T S

a radio play
by Robert Myers

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DRONE PILOTS dramatizes a week in the lives of TWO drone pilots, MAJOR LAWRENCE McCracken, 62, and AIRMAN OLIVIA ANDRAS, 22, who work for a private military contractor, Marathon Corporation, out of their "cockpit," in one of a group of camouflaged trailers in the desert outside of Gallup, New Mexico. MAJOR McCracken, who speaks with a Southern accent, is a former F-16 ace from Georgia, who flew in Vietnam and during the 1991 Gulf War, where he strafed retreating Iraqi soldiers on the so-called "Highway to Hell." AIRMAN ANDRAS, who is a working-class, Italian-American and college dropout from industrial New Jersey who sounds like it, has never been in a plane. As we soon discover she was offered a job by a Marathon recruiter when he spotted her at a gamers' convention, where she handily beat the boys at a popular video game. Their job is flying a Peregrine drone over the "tribal areas" of Pakistan, where they are currently maintaining surveillance of Ahmad, who owns a car repair shop in the town of Darkhat Halu and is married with a wife, son and daughter.

CHARACTERS

RETIRED MAJOR LARRY McCracken - Drone pilot, male. Former fighter pilot, 62, white Southerner.

"AIRMAN" OLIVIA ANDRAS - Sensor, i.e. co-pilot of the drone. Female, video game whiz, 22, Italian-American from Northern New Jersey.

LIEUTENANT ALICE HOLMES - Air control supervisor for drone surveillance. Female, forty-something African-American female from Toledo, Ohio, career military.

SERGEANT MICHAEL NAJJAR - Linguist. Male, 20-something Iranian-American who grew up in Shiraz, Iran and Washington, DC, where he studied Pashto and Urdu at George Washington University. Also a video game enthusiast.

RETIRED GENERAL ETHAN EDWARDS - 65ish retired US Air Force General. WASP from Maryland.

PILOT #1 - 40ish Western Male. (DOUBLE W/EDWARDS)

PILOT #2 - 40ish Male. (DOUBLE W/IZAT, ETC.)

TARIQ MARWAT - 30-something Pashtun (i.e. Pashto speaker) male, living in the "tribal regions" of Pakistan. Brother of Ahmad. Import-export business, i.e. militant.

IZAT LOHANI - 20-something Pashtun male, living in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Tariq's business associate across the border in Afghanistan.

AHMAD MARWAT - Late 20s, Pashtun male, living in South Waziristan, garage owner.

SABA MARWAT- Mid 20s, Pashtun female, living in South Waziristan, homemaker, spouse of Ahmad.

NAJIBA MARWAT - Mid 60s, Pashtun female, living in South Waziristan, mother of Ahmad. (DOUBLE WITH LAILA SEYANI)

LAILA SEYANI - 40ish, Pashtun female, living in South Waziristan. School principal.

CONTROLLER - 20s, official-sounding USAF. Gives weather reports etc. (DOUBLE WITH PILOTS #1 AND #2)

PILOTS - 20s-50s. (DOUBLE WITH #1 AND #2, AHMAD, TARIQ, IZZAT)

PROLOGUE

(As night falls on the Marathon base outside Gallup, New Mexico we HEAR CRICKETS, A YELPING COYOTE, PICKUP TRUCKS AND FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE VEHICLES ON THE GRAVEL PARKING LOT of the base as the DRONE PILOTS arrive for their evening shift. WE HEAR THE LAST FEW BARS OF A COUNTRY-AND-WESTERN SONG ON A CAR RADIO, PICK-UP TRUCK ENGINES BEING TURNED OFF, A CAR WHOOSHING PAST ON THE HIGHWAY IN THE DISTANCE, CAR DOORS OPENING AND CLOSING, THREE OR FOUR PAIRS OF SHOES WALKING ON THE GRAVEL. Two of the pilots, PILOT #1 and PILOT #2, who fly drones at the base with ANDRAS and McCRACKEN, WALK TOWARD THEIR TRAILERS)

PILOT #1

Looks like you're dragging this evening, Captain.

PILOT #2

Boys were running 'round the house all afternoon like a band of wild Comanches. Only got two hours of shut-eye.

(SOUNDS OF ARRIVING CARS, TRAFFIC PASSING IN THE DISTANCE, SNATCHES OF SONGS ON CAR RADIO)

PILOT #1

Stop by my trailer after roll-call, and I'll give you an energy drink. It's the only way me and Chuck can stay awake.

*(THE SOUND OF TIRES TURNING ON THE GRAVEL.
JARRING POST-PUNK SONG FROM THE MUSIC SYSTEM OF
ANDRAS'S BRONCO 4 X 4 BLARING OUT THE WINDOW)*

PILOT #2

You catch any of the Cardinals game?

PILOT #1

I saw a little bit of the second half.

PILOT #2

Talk about a mismatch.

PILOT #1

The third time they fumbled, I switched over to "The Simpsons"

PILOT #2

(YAWNS)

It's good you stopped watchin'. Turned into a real massacre.

*(THE BRAKES SQUEAL AS ANDRAS PARKS HER 4 X 4.
THE POST-PUNK MUSIC ENDS ABRUPTLY)*

PILOT #1

You guys still watching that weapons cache in North Waziristan?

PILOT #2

Nah, they got us surveillin' a Pakistani ISI colonel working with the militants. What about you?

PILOT #1

We're trying to find some bigcheese bad guy hiding out in Islamabad.

PILOT #2

How's that?

PILOT #1

Like looking for a needle in a haystack.

*(BRONCO DOOR OPENS AND IS SLAMMED SHUT. WE HEAR A
PAIR OF TENNIS SHOES WALKING RAPIDLY ON THE
GRAVEL TO CATCH UP WITH A PAIR OF SLOW-MOVING
COMBAT BOOTS)*

ANDRAS

Hello, Major McCracken.

MCCRACKEN

Evenin', Airman Andras. You better get those brakes fixed or they're gonna have you court-martialed and shot.

ANDRAS

Who has time to see a mechanic? I've been doing straight shifts since February.

MCCRACKEN

Duty cycle is a bit heavy in this outfit, isn't it? You see the new roster? They got us flying together again this week.

ANDRAS

Still staking out Ahmad's garage?

MCCRACKEN

How'd you guess?

ANDRAS

If his brother doesn't show up soon I'm going to get seasick from flying in circles.

MCCRACKEN

When they figure out how much time we're spendin' above 'em, they're gonna start chargin' us rent.

ANDRAS

I'm serious, it's like we moved in with them. I know them better than my own family.

MCCRACKEN

Maybe you oughta ask Ahmad to adjust your brakes.

(HE LAUGHS AT HIS OWN JOKE, AND THEY CONTINUE WALKING IN THE GRAVEL PARKING LOT. IN THE BACKGROUND, THE SOUND OF CRICKETS. ON THE DESERT HIGHWAY IN THE DISTANCE, A SEMI-TRAILER TRUCK PASSES. WE HEAR FEET SHUFFLING ON CEMENT, AND THE PILOTS' VOICES AS THEY LINE UP FOR ROLL CALL INSIDE THE TRAINING HANGAR WHERE THEY RECEIVE THEIR INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE BEGINNING THEIR DAILY FLIGHTS. RETIRED GENERAL ETHAN EDWARDS, THE PRESIDENT AND CEO OF MARATHON CORPORATION, STANDS AT THE PODIUM)

GENERAL EDWARDS

Good morning, men and women of Marathon.

PILOTS

(Half-heartedly, unenthusiastic)

Good morning, General Edwards.

McCRACKEN

(Under his breath, to ANDRAS)

Retired General Edwards.

ANDRAS

The pot calling the kettle black, Major.

GENERAL EDWARDS

I said, good morning men and women of Marathon!

PILOTS

(Used to this daily prompt, they now reply in unison, with forced enthusiasm)

Good morning, General Edwards!

McCRACKEN

(Under his breath, to ANDRAS)

Guy's probably pullin' in three pensions.

ANDRAS

(Under her breath, to McCRACKEN)

Admit it, you're just jealous.

GENERAL EDWARDS

Remember, pilots, here at Marathon Corporation, we're 'in this flight for the long haul.'

(SOME OF THE PILOTS MUTTER THE COMPANY SLOGAN UNDER THEIR BREATH ALONG WITH HIM)

McCRACKEN

(To ANDRAS)

...and the big bucks.

ANDRAS

Stop being sarcastic, Major.

GENERAL EDWARDS

You'll find your aircraft assignments on your duty rosters.

McCRACKEN

(To ANDRAS)

They gave us the same piece of crap we flew last week.

ANDRAS

(To McCRACKEN)

That's how they punish smart asses.

GENERAL EDWARDS

Special Operations Command in Clearwater has been picking up a lot of unfriendly chatter on the ground in South Waziristan lately, people, so stay alert.

PILOT #2

(Under his breath, followed by a BIG YAWN)

My main problem's gonna be stayin' awake.

PILOT #1

(To PILOT #2)

Sounds like you're gonna need two energy drinks, Captain.

GENERAL EDWARDS

It's now eighteen hundred hours here in New Mexico, which makes it exactly O-seven hundred in the tribal regions of Pakistan. Your RPA's will be aloft in five minutes, so synchronize your watches, zip up your flight suits, and man your cockpits, people. Let's go fly!

PILOTS

(Halfheartedly, not in unison)

Let's go fly.

*(SOUNDS OF THE PILOTS SHUFFLING OFF ON THE
CONCRETE FLOOR OF THE HANGAR)*