UPI.com
100 YEARS OF JOURNALISTIC EXCELLENCE

Commentary: 'Wired for War'
Published: Feb. 9, 2009 at 11:08 AM

By ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE
UPI Editor at Large

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9 (UPI) -- From their cockpit at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, the pilot and co-pilot are flying a pilotless Predator on a bombing mission over Afghanistan, 8,000 miles away. Ordnance aboard includes four Hellfire missiles and two 500-pound bombs. A forward air controller using another unmanned drone spots the target, and the Predator bomber takes off under local control from Kandahar in Afghanistan. Minutes later, control of the bomber is handed over to satellite control in the cockpit at Creech. Two hours later, the crew sees on the cockpit screen two suburban vehicles stop in front of the targeted mud-baked house. Half a dozen bearded men hurry into the dwelling, which intelligence has spotted as a Taliban command post. The ultra-sensitive cameras in the aircraft's nose show a door latch and a chicken outside. Seconds later, the bombardier in Nevada squeezes the trigger and a 500-pound bomb flattens the Taliban dwelling with a direct hit. Watching the action on identical screens are CIA operators at Langley, who can call in last-minute course corrections.

Their eight-hour mission over, pilot and co-pilot, both experienced combat pilots, climb into their vehicles and drive home. Thirty minutes later they are playing with their children. War by remote control is here and is brilliantly depicted in Peter W. Singer's latest best-seller, "Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century." There are already some 5,000 unmanned drones of one kind or another in Iraq and Afghanistan and a shortage of veteran pilots. Those unfit to fly conventional fighter bombers, either for age or medical reasons, can extend their flying careers in unmanned bombers. But drones now in combat soon will look like Model T Fords.

Science fiction is already reality on the battlefield, not just in how wars are fought, but also in the geopolitics of war. At the end of Gulf War I, Air Force Chief of Staff Merrill "Tony" McPeak forecast that by 2010 the fighter pilot will have been taken out of the cockpit. The Air Force isn't there yet, though the next phase in robotic flying will be fighter aircraft, now on the drawing board at a fraction of the cost of today's state-of-the-art fighters and bombers.

The cost of Lockheed Martin's fifth-generation stealth fighter aircraft is now just under $140 million per copy for 180 F-22 Raptors, whose development costs are in the $70 billion range. The most expensive U.S. Air Force aircraft is the B-2 bomber. Twenty Northrop Grumman B-2s were deployed at a cost of $2.2 billion per aircraft (one crashed in Guam last year).

The British-designed Taranis drone is expected to fly in 2010, and its designers forecast that even fighter pilots may get excited.

A senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Peter W. Singer, 34, collected scores of examples and anecdotes about the most fundamental change in the conduct of war since the invention of gunpowder. From robotic scientists to the science fiction writers who inspire them to 19-year-old drone pilots and the insurgents who try to cope with this revolution in warfare, Singer's latest is brilliantly crafted and takes us from tiny robots the size of flies that act as special forces to the ethics of robotic warfare. What happens when science fiction becomes battlefield reality? Singer takes us there -- and beyond. His two previous books were "Children at War" and "Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry."

The U.S. military invaded Iraq with a handful of drones in the air and zero unmanned systems on the ground. Today, there are some 12,000 unmanned systems with a lethal armory of missiles, rockets and grenades. Deadly mistakes are, of course, unavoidable, such as the man who was a dead ringer for Osama bin Laden though an innocent civilian. He lost his life to digitized warfare.

Wars, writes Singer, will become easier to start. The traditional moral and psychological barriers to killing will fall, and the warrior "ethos," the code of honor and loyalty that unites soldiers, will erode. Thus wars will come still closer in our living rooms, with videos of robotic battles downloaded for entertainment. But potential enemies like Hezbollah in Lebanon already have picked up or stolen the rudiments of pilotless machines. They used them for recon over Israeli lines in the 2006 war.

Singer's book is a fascinating, well-researched, page-turning account of where technologies are taking us next in the wars of the future. Today a general already can see at the very same moment what a war fighter sees through the bulls-eye of his rifle sights -- and take over the decision to shoot or not. Most news consumers are familiar with Predators. But Singer takes us into the world of TALONs, PackBots and SWORDS, and introduces us to terms like CRAM, LADAR and PHaSR. Skipping ahead, you may prefer to start with the second part of his book, titled "What Change Is Creating for Us," before reading the beginning, titled "The Change We Are Creating."

Moving humans off the battlefield, Singer writes, will make wars easier to start, but more complex to fight.