

War, what is it good for?

At half past six on a Tuesday morning the alarm clock goes off in a bedroom in Roswell, New Mexico, where twenty-eight-year-old Tiffany McGregor had been sleeping peacefully up till now. She sighs as she gets up to take a shower. While she is doing this her husband, a pilot called Aiden McGregor, comes home from his night shift. He opens the back door to their detached house and enters the kitchen in a buoyant mood. Then it happens: lying in wait for him are two vicious looking attackers.

‘Hands up!’ one calls, threateningly pointing his pistol at him. The other intruder stands by, his firearm loose in his hand. Aiden starts. It’s a cowardly ambush. They are armed and he is not.

‘Don’t shoot!’ he calls, somewhat panic-stricken. He raises his hands in fear.

‘Give me one good reason,’ says one of them.

Aiden thinks.

‘Because I’m your father?’

‘Anyone could say that,’ a six-year old boy shouts, and fires his toy pistol repeatedly. A toddler aged four also begins to shoot. Aiden collapses onto the sofa, his hand covering the bleeding hole in his chest. He rolls onto the floor. His children roar with laughter: dad is bleeding to death on the carpet!

MISMATCH

When Tiffany enters the room, she sighs.

‘We’ve killed dad,’ her eldest son yells. She heaves another sigh.

Ten minutes later the boys are playing a war game on their computer, as Aiden buries himself in the morning paper which is full of reports about global conflicts. The game his sons are playing is a first-person shooter, an action game in which the player views the world from a ‘first-person perspective’. Aiden has no problem with this, but after a few minutes his wife thinks enough is enough.

‘Just leave them to it,’ Aiden says. ‘It’s just a game.’

‘How was work?’ she asks, placing a breakfast of hot pasta with ham in front of him.

‘Busy’, he says, and turns a page of his newspaper. Atrocities in Syria and Nigeria; attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Aiden did indeed have a busy night with his squadron, stationed at an air base half an hour’s drive away from Roswell. They were one man short due to flu, so the remaining pilots were twice as frantic in their container. His shift had started with the usual observations of Afghan Taliban freedom fighters. Aiden and his colleagues monitored possible targets and suspects on twelve computer screens, ventilators buzzing all the while. Joystick in hand and headphones on his head for radio contact with people he did not know personally, Aiden studied the screens. At times, he felt like a voyeur. He had seen a bearded man in a robe who, overcome by diarrhoea, had been squatting for thirty minutes in a remote field whilst feverishly trying to shoo away playing children. He saw how a boy in a black waistcoat was being reprimanded by adult men in turbans. A woman was preparing a meal near her stone house. Everything was being registered.

Once they had fixed on the targets, one of his squadron leaders had issued the command to use the MQ-9 Reaper, an unmanned war plane able to transport around 1700 kilos of bombs and rockets. The aircraft took off and soon the drone had approached ‘Target X’. It had been Aiden who steered the Reaper to the location of the hit.

Together with a colleague he made sure they had locked onto the right person on their computer screen, and fired. Sixteen seconds later a 100,000 dollar AGM-114M Hellfire rocket saw to it that one particular Taliban fighter would never have diarrhoea again. Aiden and his immediate colleague high-fived each other. When, an hour later, Aiden left the airless container and stepped into the fresh morning air, the sun was up. It promised to be a beautiful day. Driving back home in his Chevrolet Impala Aiden looked forward to his pasta breakfast and his newspaper.

Primitive hooligans

At the time of writing, thirty-one official wars are being fought globally. This includes the Casamance conflict in Senegal, the skirmishes in Balochistan and the independence intifada in the Sahara. Many of these conflicts are unfamiliar to us – both in terms of the regions in which they are being fought, the people and the causes.

The list of battles from the past is even longer, almost inexhaustible; hundreds of wars were waged that have vanished from our collective memory. Who apart from historians knows anything about the Lelantine War between 710 and 650 BC? The War of the Eight Princes (291-306)? Or the Dutch-Hanseatic War of circa 1440?

War – one group going to battle against another – is of all times. Historians believe the actual Trojan War took place as early as during the thirteenth or twelfth century BC, but there are many indications that well before that large-scale conflicts were being fought. Excavations in Egypt, Germany and America have uncovered mass graves from prehistoric times that are indicative of human violence. The bashed skulls and bone fractures suggest injuries from axes and sharp arrowheads. The mass graves denote organised violence.

Wherever people lived in proximity, evidence has been found of manslaughter and murder. Archaeological research shows that in 90 to 95 per cent of societies, traces of warring have been found. Peaceful