

# Unorthodox Warfare, “Dirty Wars”, Counter-insurgency: The Legacy of General Frank Kitson

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*Army generals unsurprisingly have tended to be remembered best for feats concocted on the battlefield when managing formations of soldiers pitted against similar opposition in an international or a civil war.*

But the changing nature of military conflict since the end of the Second World War has seen a diminution of all out wars between massed national armies and an increase in what are termed low intensity conflicts where a national army has to contend with an insurgency.

The wars fought by the fading colonial powers Britain and France to put down insurrections in the post-war period such as occurred in Palestine, Indochina, Malaya, Kenya, Algeria and others, are notable examples. These conflicts provided fertile breeding ground for a type of soldier immersed in the sort of strategies and tactics not imparted in many staff colleges of the time which focused on conventional warfare.



General Sir Frank Kitson, GBE, KCB, MC & Bar, DL

And while the idea of unorthodox warfare was not invented during this period, the experience of fighting against miscellaneous national liberation movements while utilizing irregular methods of warfare brought about new theoretical constructs that began to reshape the thinking of many military staff colleges about the manner in which they trained their officers.

Up to this point in time, the 'warrior-scholar' was perhaps best exemplified by the German General Heinz Guderian whose writings about the use of mobile mass tank formations in battle provided an innovation from the largely static trench-warfare fought during the First World War. The experience of colonial wars produced military theoreticians in the art of counter-insurgency such as Roger Trinquier and David Galula, both French officers, the former who served during the First Indochina War and the Algerian War and the later in Algeria.

British military officers have also made significant contributions to the development of counter-insurgency techniques. This is not surprising giving over two centuries of imperial policing and combating revolutionary movements. Robert Thompson's experience of the counter-insurgency effort in Malaya provided a theoretical template geared towards defeating the Maoist technique of rural guerrilla insurgency.

Frank Kitson, whose soldiering career developed during the waning years of empire is another such figure. He served in Malaya, Kenya, Aden and Northern Ireland, and his theories have alongside Thompson's become the official counter-insurgency doctrine of the British Army.

It is often argued that while Thompson's theories are focused on the strategic and operational level, Kitson's are practically orientated to the operational and tactical level. Another important area of distinction between both men relates to the collation of intelligence. Where Thompson felt that this was a matter for the relevant police organisation, Kitson stressed that this should be centred with the army.

One crucial factor that sets Kitson apart from Thompson is his notoriety. He was deeply involved in what are now universally acknowledged to have been 'dirty wars' fought by the British Army in Malaya, Kenya and Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, he initiated a covert intelligence military organisation known as the Military Reaction Force (MRF) which carried out missions that effectively amounted to state-sanctioned assassinations. He also had under his charge the Parachute Regiment's Support Company which played a crucial role in the 1972 massacre of protesting civilians known as 'Bloody Sunday'.

Moreover, his experiences in Kenya formed the backdrop of his books *Gangs and Counter-Gangs* (1960) and *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (1971), both of which prescribe counter-insurgency tactics which still form the DNA of the British Army's response to insurgencies.

Kitson clearly subscribed to the philosophy of the ancient Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, that to understand your enemy, you need to be your enemy. Thus, a key plank of Kitson's formula for waging asymmetric warfare was the concept of the 'counter-gang' or 'pseudo-gang'.

It was a development from the 'government gangs' strategy of an earlier British army officer named Orde Wingate who successfully implemented a counter-terror policy against Ethiopian Shiftas in British Sudan and a counter-insurgency in British-ruled Palestine during the Arab Revolt of 1936 to 1939.

Kitson's idea of a counter-gang consisted of members of the counter-insurgent army and 'turned' members of the guerrilla force. The intelligence-driven rationale of the concept meant that the guerrillas had to be infiltrated by traitors and information collated and stored in a large database of information.

Aside from infiltration, Kitson accepted Wingate's tactic of imitating the modus operandi of the irregulars and taking the fight to them. Infiltration and imitation by the parallel gang provided possibilities for sowing confusion in both the guerrilla-gang and the wider population by launching 'false flag' operations designed to discredit them. As a former MRF soldier explained in a BBC Panorama documentary Britain's Secret Terror Force which was broadcast in 2013, "We were not there to act like an Army unit, we were there to act like a terror group".

The combination of growing intelligence on the gang resulting in arrest or compromise as informers and government agents together with psychological operations which demoralise its membership and denude its capabilities would, Kitson theorized, ultimately subjugate an insurgent force.

Kitson's view of insurgency also stressed the importance of integrating the military effort with a flexible legal background, the resources of the media and political action to provide a favourable outcome to the conflict.

While Kitson claimed that working within the law was an important factor in managing a successful counter-insurgency campaign, it is clear that the methods employed in Kenya and in Northern Ireland respectively against Mau Mau and Irish Republican Army insurgents went outside the boundaries respectively of the relevant colonial laws in place as well as British law.

That he believed there was a need to abrogate ethical and legal constraints is clear from a statement Kitson made in 1971, when he was captured on film asserting the following:

In order to put an insurgency campaign down, one must use a mix of measures and it is sometimes necessary to do unpleasant things which lose a certain amount of allegiance for a moment in order to produce your overall results.

This doctrine formed the basis of the strategy employed by the British Army in countering the IRA during 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland, in the early stages by the use of British Army personnel, the aforementioned MRF, as a counter-gang, and later by the use and manipulation of loyalist terror groups via military intelligence organisations such as the Special Reconnaissance Unit (SRU) and the Force Research Unit (FRU). Further, 14 Intelligence Company was a surveillance unit whose work paved the way for lethal counter-terror operations conducted by Special Forces.

The MRF functioned in the first instance as a surveillance and intelligence gathering unit and then acting on information gathered as a direct action counter-terrorist unit. As a 'counter-gang', the MRF aimed to denude the IRA's capabilities and to demoralize its members.

Also, those actions by MRF units such as drive-by shootings which could be attributed to loyalist paramilitary gangs, were designed to draw the IRA into a fight with rival Protestant paramilitary organisations and so divert the IRA from attacking British troops.

Furthermore, targeting and shooting dead IRA guerrillas and inflicting civilian casualties was designed to show that the IRA was vulnerable and that the Roman Catholic community could not rely on the organisation for protection.

The shooting of a sixteen-year old outside of a school disco and of three men chatting at a bus stop were typical of many actions traceable to the MRF. The unit's members did not operate under the Yellow Card rules of engagement which governed the use of force employed by soldiers in Northern Ireland. MRF operatives opened fire on unarmed civilians and shot at IRA suspects even if it was uncertain that they were carrying weapons. As one MRF soldier said, "If they needed shooting they'd be shot".

While they may have felt they were hunting down 'baby-killers' and 'psychopaths', many in the Republican community considered their activities to have amounted to state-sanctioned murder. And the figure they believe bears the responsibility for these acts is Frank Kitson.

In 2015, he was made subject of a legal suit accusing him of been "liable personally for negligence and misfeasance in public office" on the basis that in creating this policy, he was "reckless as to whether state agents would be involved in murder."

Kitson's response was to assert that he was only a commander of troops and not a policymaker. He made no specific references to his experiences in Northern Ireland in his 1977 book *Bunch of Five*, a military autobiography, given the sensitivity associated with a still ongoing conflict. MRF organisational records have been destroyed and while there may be a temptation to portray Frank Kitson as have been merely the spiritus rector of early and later techniques employed in the counter-insurgency, there is ample evidence pointing to Kitson as having been the architect of the overall policy as well as the specific creator of the MRF.

For starters, his service in Northern Ireland dating from September 1970 when he was posted there as a Brigadier commanding the 39th Infantry Brigade until his departure in April 1972 coincides with the time frame of the MRF's creation and its area of activity.

The MRF operated from the summer of 1971 to the early part of 1973. Kitson's brigade, which operated as 39 Airborne, was responsible for the area of Belfast and the eastern part of the province -areas covered by MRF activity. The MRF's camp and armory were located in Palace Barracks, Holywood -east of Belfast- in County Down which functioned as the Brigade's headquarters. In fact, during the June 1973 attempted murder trial of one Sergeant Clive Williams, Williams identified himself as belonging to an MRF unit attached to 39th Infantry Brigade.

Moreover, Lord Carver, the British officer who served as head of army administration during the Kenyan crisis and as a government advisor during the early part of 'The Troubles' was quoted by Mark Urban, the historian and journalist, in his book *Big Boys Rules: The SAS and the Secret Struggle against the IRA*, as stating that Kitson was the initiator of the MRF.

For some time," said Carver, "various surveillance operations by soldiers in

plain clothes had been in train, initiated by Frank Kitson when he commanded the (39) Brigade in Belfast, some of them exploiting ex-members or supporters of the IRA.

Although he was never the most senior officer serving in Northern Ireland, Kitson's importance to covert and overt operations is made clear by General Sir Mike Jackson who in his memoirs described Kitson as being "the sun around which the planets revolved" who "very much set the tone for the operational style in Belfast."

Kitson secured the approval of his superiors to set up the MRF and those MRF members who had been recruited from the ranks of the IRA -known as 'Freds'- were sent to live in a married quarters section of Palace Barracks. Clear evidence of his involvement can be ascertained from a paper Kitson penned for the Home Office entitled [Future Developments in Belfast by Commander 39 Airborne Brigade](#). Dated the fourth of December 1971, Kitson, when explaining the need for more organisational efficiency on the part of the British Army, writes, "As you know, we are taking steps to do this in terms of building up and developing the MRF..."

Kitson's philosophy and activities in Northern Ireland is also important to consider in the context of Britain at the time. This is because he believed that there was a strong possibility that the breakdown in law and order in Northern Ireland could be mirrored in the rest Britain and that the tactics employed there would be required on the mainland.

This is not at all fanciful. The country which Kitson was serving in the late 1960s and the 1970s, was one severely challenged by a range of maladies which threatened to get out of hand. The loss of empire and a sense of economic malaise represented by the devaluation of the pound, high levels of unemployment, a militant trade union movement which some influential people believed was being guided by a 'communist Trojan Horse' all contributed to a growing pessimism on the part of certain influential members of the Establishment that Britain was bedevilled by ineffective governance and on the brink of economic collapse.

England was no longer a green and pleasant land and the possibility existed that unpleasant measures of the sort advocated by Kitson might need to be put into effect.

Certainly, among the measures considered was that of a military takeover. In the late 1960s, the newspaper baron Cecil King was the focus of a plot by renegade MI5 officers in an enterprise which would have engineered the overthrow the Labour government of Harold Wilson and the installation of Lord Mountbatten as the head of a military regime.

In 1974, a series of army deployments around Heathrow Airport in January and June were viewed as dress rehearsals for a coup by Wilson who had not been given advance warning or notified about who gave the orders.

While retired military figures such as General Walter Walker, a former NATO commander, and David Stirling, the founder of the SAS, had garnered publicity because of their endeavours in setting up private armies which they intended to use to keep the country functioning in the event of a union-led general strike, behind the scenes, serving officers in the military are believed to have readied themselves for action.

If a coup or similar extraordinary action involving a declared state of emergency had taken place, it would have been facilitated by the likes of Kitson. His book Low Intensity

Operations had advocated the use of the army in a situation of severe civil disorder. The army, he believed, needed to be deployed against 'subversion' as it had been against 'insurgency'.

To Kitson, the tools of subversion involved the "use of political and economic pressure, strikes, protest marches, and propaganda" which could be employed to pressure the government to "do things they do not want to do" and coercing the public into giving support.

A close reading of his words could identify any non-violent direct action protest movements including the trade union movement as potential sources of subversion. In a television interview, Kitson stated that it might be necessary for the military to "take over against terrorist plots and conspiracies" which might develop in Britain.

These views according to a BBC news reporter implicated Kitson in the planning of a military coup – an accusation which he strongly denied. There was a fundamental difference, Kitson argued, between upholding the civilian government and undermining democracy.

Yet, it is the case that the methods employed by Kitson in colonial emergencies and in the domestic circumstance of Northern Ireland offended the rule of law. His theories and their application are laced with ambiguity and contradiction. For instance, the assertion that counter-insurgency methods should be applied within the law is qualified by an insistence that the law be flexible and accommodating of certain measures that needed to be taken to defeat the insurgents. As he wrote in *Bunch of Five*:

No country which relies on the law of the land to regulate the lives of its citizens can afford to see that law flouted by its own government, even in an insurgency situation. In other words, everything done by a government and its agents in combating insurgency must be legal. But this does not mean that the government must work within exactly the same set of laws during an insurgency as existed beforehand, because it is a function of government to make new laws when necessary

It is a form of logic that echoes the old Cromwellian adage about those "great occasions in which some men are called to great services, in the doing of which they are excused from the common rule of morality." In essence, Kitson argued that a peaceful state of affairs could be restored by resorting to the use of morally disagreeable tactics.

But what was intended to serve as a peacekeeping force in Northern Ireland became a partisan one and could not be considered as a neutral broker between the warring communities since the British army essentially took sides with Protestant paramilitaries.

The esteem with which Frank Kitson is held for his service to the British state is evidenced by the assortment of military medals he received. These include the Military Cross and a Bar. His award of the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1968 was upgraded to Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1972 for his operational service in Northern Ireland the previous year. He ended his army career with the rank of general and as a sign of the favour in which he is held by the state was for a time the aide-de-camp general to the sovereign.

He is also a figure of respect and even held in reverence by a large segment of his contemporaries and subsequent generations of soldiers. General Mike Jackson, a young



paratrooper serving a tour of duty in Northern Ireland at the time Kitson was posted there, considered him an “incisive thinker and military theorist”, while US General David Petraeus paid him a visit at his Devon home prior to the major counter-insurgency effort in Iraq known as ‘the surge’.

While the ending of the conflict in Northern Ireland, starting with the declaration by the IRA in 1994 of a “complete ceasefire”, is characterised by sympathizers of the Republican movement as a state of compromise, the fact that the IRA’s demands for the complete withdrawal of British troops and the reunification of Ireland was not accomplished is interpreted by British military figures as a victory of the British state. If this view is accepted, it vindicates Kitson’s methods. But at what cost?

Those with a rudimentary knowledge of ‘The Troubles’ will know that the arrival of British troops was initially welcomed by the Roman Catholic community. Yet, the tide changed and Kitson and his methods are held out as a model of how not to win the hearts and minds of a population within which an insurgency is taking place. While the British Army’s efforts cannot solely be taken as the reason for the transformation of a peaceful civil rights movement seeking to end anti-Catholic discrimination into a violent state of affairs, the measures adopted from its prevailing counter-insurgency doctrine cannot have helped.

Kitson, claimed Paddy Devlin of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, “probably did more than any other individual to sour relations between the Catholic community and the security forces”. The view that the paratroop unit under his command, nicknamed ‘Kitson’s private army’, had a reputation for thuggishness and of being ‘out of control’, is one which was allegedly held by other British army units. This unit was involved in the massacres respectively of Ballymurphy in August of 1971 and Derry in January 1972.

The misgivings and distrust on the part of Catholics about Kitson’s policies are affirmed by specific incidents involving the MRF and 1 Para as well as the atmosphere of repression and coercion alluded to when he wrote that “conditions can be made reasonably uncomfortable for the population as a whole in order to provide an incentive for a return to normal life and to act as a deterrent towards a resumption of the campaign.” Kitson’s transfer during 1972 from operational duties to that of training soldiers at the Infantry School at Warminster may be viewed as a concession to the Catholic community by the then home secretary William Whitelaw.

The polarized views on Frank Kitson the warrior are not surprising since they reflect the perennial contending issues of how best to deal with a violent insurgency while attempting to maintain adherence to the law. British methods in countering first Arab and then Jewish terrorism in Palestine were marked by the ruthless methods employed by the army and police.

It is a curious but noteworthy fact that many military theorists and practitioners of counter-insurgency warfare who hailed from democracies such as Britain and France did not shirk from developing brutal strategies aimed at defeating insurgencies. As Kitson wrote, what he described as the “more intelligent officers” find themselves developing a new “deviousness” in terms of outwitting what often turn out to be determined and resourceful foes “by all means”.

Many of the French officers with experience of the conflicts in Indochina and Algeria became adept in the conduct of so-called psychological operations. A number of them, including

Colonel Jean Gardes went on to become members of the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS) after which fleeing to exile, they came to serve as trainers and advisors to the Argentinean military officers who conducted the 'dirty war' against Marxist guerrillas in the 1970s and 80s. One of Colonel Roger Trinquier's prerequisites for fighting an anti-guerrilla campaign was the use of terror and torture as necessary evils.

The counter-insurgency doctrine of the United States as implemented during the Vietnam War, Central America and then Iraq has also revealed a rich underbelly of amoral strategies that have left in their wake a recurring pattern of serious human rights violations including murder and torture.

What sets Kitson apart from these other exponents is that the application of his policies was not limited to foreign jurisdictions which were colonised, occupied or which served as client states, but that it was transferred to a province of the United Kingdom.

One way in which Frank Kitson's legacy may be explored is to refrain from taking the path requiring that he be cast unambiguously as either a hero for valiant services offered to Queen and country at times of great difficulty or as the villainous author of murder and mayhem.

Instead, it can be argued that in the theory and practice of his special brand of warfare, we see an illumination of the perennial dilemmas when countries are confronted with national security emergencies; that which attempts to reconcile the desire to achieve a restoration of peace and security with the sort of severe measures which compromise the values of human rights and the rule of law.

Those who consider the near three decade-long programme of counter-insurgency in Northern Ireland to have been a success and by extension a vindication of Kitson's theories must contend with the evidence of the deliberate murder of non-combatant civilians alongside the extra-judicial executions of suspects and reflect on the cost to the democratic and civilizational values which the state claimed to be fighting to uphold.

It is always a dangerous path to tread the logic which holds that the ends will always justify the means.

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