

# A Work of Camouflage

## *Intelligent Warfare:*

*The Memoirs of General Sir Frank Kitson GBE, KCB, MC and Bar, DL*

Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2024, £25 h/b

## John Newsinger

**W**hat is most interesting about this posthumous memoir by General Frank Kitson is what it does *not* say, exactly how little it contributes to our knowledge and understanding of post-1945 British counterinsurgency tactics and strategy. This can only be deliberate. There are, however, some interesting revelations, such as his opposition to war crimes trials in occupied Germany after World War II. He and a number of other British officers actually contributed money to help pay for Field Marshal von Manstein's defence at his trial! They raised over £1600, not a mean sum in those days, with even Winston Churchill donating £25. This was all part of the attempted Cold War rehabilitation of the German Army, denying that the German Generals had any responsibility for Nazi war crimes. Interestingly enough, von Manstein's defence was led by a top British lawyer, the Labour MP Reginald Paget.<sup>1</sup> Despite all this, von Manstein still got eighteen years for his crimes, but was released after four.<sup>2</sup>

As for occupied Germany, Kitson fondly remembers the time he and his fellow officers spent hunting game, although he does acknowledge that the German civilians were starving. There was 'shooting, riding horses or as the winter progressed, skiing and skating'. He and a few other officers would set off in a platoon half-track with a packed lunch and 'spend a few hours hunting down any game we could find'. They shot anything that they came across, except, of course, foxes, 'none of us approved of shooting foxes'. But even though there was 'an enjoyable social life', Kitson was ambitious and 'wanted to step out along the road to fame'. (p. 11)

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<sup>1</sup> He was to end up in the House of Lords in 1975, Baron Paget of Northampton.

<sup>2</sup> Paget felt so strongly about this that he actually published a defence of von Manstein: *Manstein: His Campaigns and His Trial*, in 1951, with a Foreword by Lord Hankey no less. Paget's attempt to whitewash von Manstein in this volume is quite appalling. For a more balanced account see Marcel Stein, *Field Marshal von Manstein: The Janus Head* (Solihull: Helion, 2007). He describes Paget as 'shameless' on p. 357. To be fair, Paget was also a relentless campaigner against capital punishment. In 1953 he published a book co-authored with Sidney Silverman, *Hanged – And Innocent*.

His opportunity came along when he was sent out to Kenya to take part in the suppression of the great revolt against white settler rule, labelled by the British as the Mau Mau rebellion. Kitson's role in the so-called pseudo-gang operations began to establish his reputation as an expert in counter-insurgency. But nowhere in his account does he acknowledge the terrible ferocity of the British repression in the colony. In the course of the Emergency, over a million people were forcibly resettled in 'new villages', where they lived in appalling poverty, many dying from disease and hunger. Thousands of others were interned without trial – by the end of 1954 there were 77,000 people in the internment camps – and thousands more were imprisoned after rigged trials for violating Emergency regulations. By the end of the Emergency over a thousand rebels had been hanged, 45 of them for administering illegal oaths! And, as was widely known but was covered-up at the time, the most brutal torture and summary executions were routine. None of this figures in Kitson's account. The nearest we get is his acknowledging that when Mau Mau were killed deep in the forest, rather than bringing the body back, a hand would be cut off so they could be identified from their fingerprints. On one occasion, he had two amputated hands which he wrapped in sacking and put in his pockets. Whereupon a European police officer put on a sergeant-major voice and ordered him to take his hands out of his pockets, to the amusement of everyone around. Hilarious! As he observes, 'a few months later the distasteful business of cutting hands off dead terrorists was stopped'. (p. 26)

But what of the widespread use of torture and summary execution? As far as Kitson was concerned, there were 'cases of misconduct by individual soldiers and policemen, but they were relatively rare'. However, complaints 'made by people in sympathy with Mau Mau, for the purpose of getting rid of individuals who were proving too successful were far more common'. (p. 46) And anyway, the campaign was not about crushing a national liberation movement fighting against white settler colonial rule. It was in fact 'a civil war within one of the many tribal groups', a civil war between those Africans prepared to work peacefully with the colonial government and those 'who wanted to force the government's hand by violence'. What particularly annoys him are those people who have since gone into print criticising the conduct of the security forces and who 'insist on comparing the ten to fifteen thousand Mau Mau killed with the hundred or so Europeans killed' – ignoring the casualties suffered by those Kikuyu and others fighting for the government. (p. 55) This is a complete travesty. He absolutely minimises the scale and brutality of the repression that was unleashed in Kenya, and somehow manages to disappear the settler white

supremacism that the revolt was really against.<sup>3</sup>

At this point, it is worth considering the account of the campaign against the Mau Mau revolt that appears in Richard Dannatt's history of the British Army post-1945, *Boots On The Ground*. Dannatt was Chief of the General Staff from 2006 until 2009. He singles out the young Frank Kitson for special mention, describing him as '(t)ireless, relentless, somewhat eccentric and clearly relishing the pursuit of the Mau Mau gangs'. But he also goes on to record that after

a lengthy legal battle, in 2013 the British government agreed to pay almost £20 million to more than 5,000 victims who had "suffered torture and ill treatment at the hands of the Colonial Administration" during the Emergency.

And as a further 'gesture of reconciliation, Britain funded the 2015 Nairobi statue in memory of the victims, some of whom suffered castration and rape'. Incredibly, Dannatt still describes all this as 'an unwelcome footnote'.<sup>4</sup> Kitson, however, does not acknowledge the horrors inflicted by the British in Kenya at all. Indeed, after he had returned to Britain and got married he had a wonderful six weeks honeymoon . . . in Kenya.

Kitson went on to serve in Malaya where the British were engaged in suppressing a Communist-led insurgency, a campaign that once again unleashed brutal repression, this time against the Chinese minority. He also recounts his involvement in Jebel Akhdar campaign in the Oman at the end of the 1950s. His involvement in this campaign was to earn him the MBE (Membership of the Order of the British Empire). One thing he does not mention is that the puppet regime the British were keeping in power, a brutal medieval autocracy, still had slavery. Indeed, the Sultan himself had a slave retinue, kept subservient by punishment beatings inflicted even for not looking straight ahead. Obviously not worth mentioning. As for the campaign itself, the Jebel Akhdar plateau was subjected to merciless aerial bombardment, raining death and destruction on a completely defenceless civilian population who were effectively bombed, strafed and starved into surrender. In one week alone in

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<sup>3</sup> For studies of the British campaign in Kenya, see in particular David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006), Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: The Bodley Head, 2005), and Huw Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). For a general account of post-1945 British counter-insurgency operations, see my *British Counterinsurgency* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dannatt, *Boots On The Ground: Britain and Her Army Since 1945* (London: Profile Books, 2016), pp. 85, 88-89.

September 1958, Shackleton heavy bombers dropped 148 thousand pound bombs on the plateau. The punishment from the air was relentless. This was a dimension of British counterinsurgency operations that was seldom acknowledged.<sup>5</sup>

Inevitably it is Kitson's account of the campaign in Northern Ireland that is of the greatest interest. As he admits, he knew very little about the province: 'So far as I was concerned it was just a place one went to occasionally to hunt and shoot'. (p. 150) Nevertheless, in the autumn of 1970 he was appointed to command the 39<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Northern Ireland. Here he presided over the British campaign against the Provisional IRA in Belfast, a campaign that in every way possible made the situation worse. How revealing is his account? Let us look at one quite well-known episode: Bloody Sunday. Kitson was still serving in Northern Ireland when the Bloody Sunday massacre took place on 30 January 1972. The Paras shot twenty-six unarmed people, killing thirteen of them on the spot and with another dying later. Many more were brutally beaten in a ferocious display of violent repression. This would have gone completely unnoticed in Kenya in the 1950s, but in 1972 the massacre provoked widespread outrage in Britain and in Ireland and gave a tremendous boost to support for the IRA in Northern Ireland. It is worth remembering that on 2 February a large crowd of protesters actually burned down the British Embassy in Dublin in retaliation.

How does Kitson deal with this somewhat crucial episode? He tells his readers that he had agreed to send Paras under his command to reinforce the British troops in Derry so they could more effectively police a planned protest against internment. And then, he either heard on the radio or read in the papers 'that there had been a serious disturbance in Londonderry'. He asked the Paras' commander, Colonel Derek Wilford, what had happened and records his reply: 'he told me that when launched at a crowd of youths hurling stones at a barricade, his men had been shot at and that in the ensuing action a number of presumed gunmen had been killed. Apparently the press were saying that some of them were not gunmen at all, but innocent bystanders'. (p. 194) And that is Frank Kitson's account of the Bloody Sunday massacre! He still complains about how the 'republican propaganda machine' succeeded in 'making most of the Catholic population of Belfast think that I was a wicked fellow'. (p. 189)

Colonel Wilford was awarded the OBE (Order of the British Empire) the year after the massacre as a way of demonstrating the Heath government's wholehearted support for the Army at this time. And as for Kitson himself, barely a month after the massacre, he was awarded 'the CBE for gallantry', that

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<sup>5</sup> Newsinger (see note 3) pp. 136-144.

is made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and was told that 'never before had a CBE been awarded in this way to a British officer'. His pride at being honoured in this way positively leaps off the page. Kitson tells his readers that when he finally left Northern Ireland he

was particularly sorry to say goodbye to 1 Para. Throughout my time in Belfast they had been continuously employed in all the roughest places and had pulled my chestnuts out of the fire on more than one occasion. Nothing was ever impossible for them: nothing too dangerous or too much trouble. (p. 198)

As far as he was concerned 'there was no excuse for anyone denigrating the immense contribution made by this regiment'. (p. 205) His support for the Paras was and always remained 100%.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the behaviour of all the British troops deployed in Northern Ireland was 'a magnificent example of sustained restraint'. (p. 198)

At this point, let us briefly consider how Richard Dannatt assesses the Bloody Sunday massacre in his history of the British Army post-1945. He is quite blunt: the massacre which he describes as the 'infamous Bloody Sunday' destroyed 'any remaining trust' between the Army and the Catholic community; 'the controversy surrounding events that afternoon would set back the cause of peace for many years'. The IRA was winning 'the crucial battle for hearts and minds'.<sup>7</sup> By way of contrast, Kitson never uses the words Bloody Sunday and the massacre does not even appear in his index. What he does tell his readers, however, is that, as far as he was concerned, it was the failure to sustain the crackdown against the IRA initiated by the introduction of internment that led to 'the long haul . . . it led to twenty-five bloody years spent proving to the IRA that their aim could not be met by violence'. He obviously sees himself as the man who, had he been given enough power and control, could have avoided all this and defeated the IRA. He claims Prime Minister Heath was aware of this and later actually said 'I wanted to put you in charge in Northern Ireland, but the generals would not let me'.

Looking back, Kitson actually makes the point that when the final

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<sup>6</sup> I remember a seminar group discussion on Bloody Sunday at Bath Spa University. It was an undergraduate seminar and in the group were two ex-soldiers, mature students. One of them made the point that the training and ethos of the Paras was such that if they were deployed then there was going to be violence because that was what they did and that the Army high command were well aware of this and that was why they deployed them. As far as he was concerned their deployment in Derry meant the Army wanted trouble and the Paras were quite deliberately sent to cause it. The other ex-squaddie agreed and made the point that if the Paras were put on traffic duty in Bath then there would be people shot dead by the end of the week!

<sup>7</sup> Dannatt (see note 4) p. 141

settlement in Northern Ireland was actually achieved, it was 'based on the sort of reforms that the civil rights movement and the SDLP were seeking in 1969. And these could perfectly well have been achieved within a year or two had the right action been taken from the start'. (p. 200) By the right action he means the ruthless and relentless pursuit of the IRA. Where he is quite perverse, of course, is in seeing the IRA as the main obstacle to this settlement back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, rather than the Ulster Unionists and the Paisleyites. The resurgence of the IRA was very much a product of the Heath government's backing of the Unionists' resistance to reform, exacerbated by the unleashing of the British Army against the Catholic community, which in turn led to growing support for the Republican cause. Kitson himself made a very important contribution to this process.

There are many other controversies surrounding Kitson's time in Northern Ireland, not least the brutal interrogation methods that were introduced and the murderous activities of the Military Reaction Force. The best and most recent account of all this is David Burke's.<sup>8</sup> This is essential reading for anyone who wants to get to grips with the realities of the conflict in Northern Ireland. And there is also, of course, Kitson's infamous 1971 *Low Intensity Operations*, with a Foreword by General Michael Carver, Chief of the General Staff, no less. He deals in the memoir with the controversy aroused by this volume's tentative exploration of a domestic counter-subversion role for the Army. He insists that the Labour Opposition Defence spokesman, Roy Hattersley, 'a decent and friendly person', despite some reservations, nevertheless accepted his reassurances about the book's intent. Not very reassuring, really! And he does his best to trivialise the controversy by pointing out that the Army had from time to time been used to break strikes on the docks, to collect rubbish from the streets during binmen's strikes and 'put out fires when the firemen were on strike'. So what he was proposing with regard to preparing for Army involvement in countering domestic unrest was hardly 'revolutionary'. (p 204) This hardly does his own book justice. But then his intention throughout *Intelligent Warfare* seems to be to one of camouflage rather than advancing our knowledge and understanding.

John Newsinger is a retired academic.

His latest book is *Chosen by God:*

*Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism*,  
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>

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<sup>8</sup> David Burke, *Kitson's Irish War: Mastermind of the Dirty War in Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2021).

