
Interview: Colonel Michael Hickey



Dealing with the threat of Soviet irregular warfare

Col. Michael Hickey is author of *The Spetsnaz Threat: Can Britain be Defended*, published as an Occasional Paper by the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies. He was interviewed in Winchester (U.K.) by Michael Liebig, EIR executive director for Western Europe, on April 11.

The discussion dealt with the question of irregular warfare with particular reference to the role of the Soviet Union's *spetsnaz* (elite special forces) operations and their targeting of Great Britain. Irregular warfare is a topic on which Colonel Hickey is highly qualified, having served in Malaya, South Arabia, and East Africa as a light aircraft and helicopter pilot in counter-guerrilla operations. Between 1981, following his early retirement from the British Army, and 1986, Colonel Hickey was the secretary of "Defence Begins at Home," an independent lobby group convened on the initiative of Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Hill-Norton. The threat to Great Britain of the Soviet Union's *spetsnaz* operations was a question for which Defence Begins at Home conducted an extensive public information program and lobbying effort in order to inform the British public.

Colonel Hickey also wrote *Out of the Sky: A History of Airborne Warfare*, London and New York, 1979, and has contributed to numerous publications including *Battle*, *The Army Quarterly and Defence Journal*, *British Army Review*, and the *RUSI Journal*. He is currently writing a semi-fictional work on the security of Britain.

EIR: Could you give a short summary of your military career and background?

Hickey: I joined the army as a conscript in 1947 with no object in life at all. I liked it so much that I stayed in. I applied for a cadetship at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. I passed the necessary tests, went there, and was commissioned in 1949. I served in Korea until 1952. I was retrained in 1952-53 as a light aircraft pilot. I served in Malaya in operations during the emergency there in 1953 to 1955. I then served again in Korea as a light aircraft commander, and in 1956 I came back to England. I was retrained as a helicopter pilot, and went to an experimental unit. I served in Suez in 1956. For two years, I was an experimental helicopter pilot.

In 1960 I was married; in 1961 I went to the Staff College at Camberley; I then served 1962 to 1963 in East Africa flying helicopters in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zanzibar. I then served in the Staff Headquarters Middle East in Aden for two years. Then I came to Germany for two years, the 4th Guards Brigade at Iserloh in Westphalen, commanding a helicopter unit. I then attended the Joint Services Staff college. I served as military assistant to the Chief of Staff in Headquarters Far East at Singapore. Then, to my surprise, when promoted after one year, I commanded the Army Air Corps in West Malaysia for one year until the evacuation of British forces. I then commanded a helicopter regiment at Detmold near Bielefeld, which was the first British unit to be equipped with SS-11 anti-tank missiles.

At that time we were working out the anti-tank tactics for use against Soviet armor. Then I did two years as an instructor at the Royal Military College of Science at Shrivenham. Which was poetic justice because when I was at school I failed all my math, physics, and chemistry examinations. With the unerring accuracy the British Army has for selecting the right man for the job, I was sent to Shrivenham. This was like Rimsky Korsakov who, after many years in the Russian Navy, was sent to teach musical composition at the St. Petersburg Music Academy and he was always one lesson or only a few bars ahead of his students in their exercises. It's like being chased by wolves. I did that for two very happy years. I then had a sabbatical. I went to the University of London, Kings College, where I studied for four terms as a Defense Fellow; my chosen subject was the history of the British Army's experience with battlefield aerial vehicles from very early times to the present day, which in that case was 1974. Then I went back to Germany for a year at the headquarters of the British Army of the Rhine. I then came back to command the joint air transport establishment at the Royal Air Force base at Brize Norton which was a joint services unit. I always liked serving with the other services. Among other things I made my first parachute descent at the age of 47, a solemn day in my life.

EIR: Voluntarily or involuntarily?

Hickey: Oh no, voluntarily. This is very unusual, because any pilot would always regard anybody who voluntarily leaves a serviceable aircraft in mid-air as in need of urgent psychiatric attention. But I did it, basically because I was serving with elite people who I was having to order to carry out very dangerous and exotic parachuting trials, therefore I thought the least I could do was to do one or two jumps to show that I knew how frightening it all was. So I did one or two jumps, and was irreverently picked out of the English Channel in my wet-suit, and filled full of champagne by my loyal soldiers and returned to my desk.

I then did two and a half years in the Ministry of Defense in the Operational Requirements Department, which was formulating the sectoral requirements for future army helicopters, their weapons systems, equipment, and passive and active homing aids, and target acquisition. It was very interesting, and it enabled me to visit Messerschmidt/Boelkow/Blohm in West Germany, Aerospatiale in France, Augusta in Milan, Italy and the American Army Aviation Command at Fort Rucker. In these two years, I did the last of my flying. I flew all the latest helicopters—with a safety pilot!

So then in 1981 I was invited by Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Hill-Norton and one or two other distinguished gentlemen to consider leaving the army early and be the secretary of their defense lobby group, "Defence Begins at Home." So, I decided I'd come out. I'd had 34 years service in the Army. They were very happy years. I always like to leave a party when there are still bubbles in the champagne and I'm still enjoying it, which is nicer than being carried out feet first with all the rubbish in the morning when the party's over. So, I came out three years early, and I worked for five years with them until last year. And since then I've been very self-employed, freelance consultant on various subjects ranging from aviation to fundraising for charities. And I am now writing a novel on the subject of my last five years. I think its going to be called "Red Sky in the Morning," after the old adage, "Red sky in the morning is a shepherd's warning, red sky at night is a sailor's delight." I'm actually drawing a picture of what might be happening in three or four years from now if the Soviets decide to use spetsnaz against the United Kingdom, which I believe is a far more likely solution than the use of brute force across the inner-German border, and certainly more likely than nuclear attack.

EIR: If we look at your career, you have experience both in irregular warfare techniques in Third World areas, as well as experience in the air-assault/irregular warfare capabilities of the Russians. How would you assess your irregular warfare experience in Africa and Asia in light of Soviet irregular warfare capabilities?

Hickey: We were not against such a sophisticated enemy as the one we might be facing here. In Malaya, we were against the so-called Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA). It was headed by a very resolute leader, Chin Peng, who had fought in the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army from

1941 to 1945, and had been decorated by the British for his part in that. I saw him and a party of his men marching in the victory parade in London in 1946. We all cheered as these guerrillas passed with the Order of the British Empire on their shirts. These were a very ruthless, but relatively small number of jungle based guerrillas.

In Africa, I found myself hoping to sort out inter-tribal fighting, which was breaking out all over East Africa as independence drew near. That could be very unpleasant but it was not what you would call Marxist inspired. It was tribal-inspired. When I was in Aden, the Soviet-backed North Yemenis, with their Egyptian assistance, were fighting to destroy the Federated State with the British government was trying to get started, and which was to have assumed power when our final withdrawal took place in 1970.

EIR: To what extent were there control mechanisms, influence, and direction on the part of the Soviets in these Third World cases?

Hickey: I think probably in South Arabia, in Aden. Here the British found themselves fighting a war which was publicized by the opposition as a people's war against colonialism, against a government imposed on them by Whitehall, but which in fact was run by what is now North Yemen, and from there through to Egypt, which at the time was very much connected with the Soviets. The Soviets were dictating Nas-serite propaganda.

EIR: Did the Soviets give operational as well as ideological support?

Hickey: It was operational, certainly in terms of equipment, because the rebels up in the hills in South Yemen were almost universally armed with Russian weapons, Russian mines, rocket launchers, mortars.

EIR: What was Soviet influence in terms of operational doctrine?

Hickey: They were following the standard Maoist, Regis Debray, Che Guevara guerrilla-techniques, which we had studied, and therefore we knew what to expect. We could see the pattern of revolutionary war developing. In other words, moving amongst the people, killing off policemen and members of the Special Branch, killing off the whole mechanism of government, whether it was government by the Sheiks, or by the tribal police, or whatever—and using terror. They used terror in Aden, in the town. They soon identified the Arab Special Branch Police in Aden, and they specialized in hitting them in the street, in public, if possible in front of their families and friends.

EIR: Would you say terror is an integral part of their tactics?

Hickey: Certainly, yes. They get it from Sun Tzu, the Chinese warrior sage: "Kill one, terrify 10,000." If I was running a terrorist campaign, pray God I never do, this is one way of doing it with minimal amount of bloodshed or damage to

their infrastructure, and the minimal amount of military effort. You mark down your targets, and you kill them as publicly as possible, and you take hostages as well. But if you kill a policeman, a magistrate, or a civic or military leader at his own doorstep as publicly as possible, then you are achieving your aim.

EIR: In your experience, what policies or tactics are effective against this type of irregular warfare?

Hickey: I think what was called by the British, “winning the hearts and minds of the people” was the effective counter. We were able to do this relatively easily in Malaya during the emergency, when we were still running the country, because the British in 1948-49 in Malaya were still in command of the police, the judiciary, the whole legal system and we were constitutionally in control. Unlike the Americans, of course, who could not do this in Vietnam, because they had what appears to have been a grossly corrupt South Vietnamese regime in power. The Americans would have liked to have done what we did, but could not do it because they did not have control of the police and judiciary—constitutionally—and we did. We were still constitutionally accepted in Malaya. It was still a federation of Malay states and the Straits Settlements under the crown, even in Penang, Malakka, and Singapore which had a somewhat different status, because their citizens were Queen’s citizens. The citizens of the Malay states, with their Sultan, were not. The citizens of Malakka were proud of their status as the Queen’s Chinese, the Queen’s Malays. So that was quite different.

EIR: These were the constitutional-psychological dimensions. What else in addition do you think were the most crucial aspects of effective combat against irregular warfare?

Hickey: First, drawing together of the civil administration, the police, and the military into regional committees.

EIR: So, no separation between the civilian and military structure?

Hickey: No, they must always work together. The second thing was to identify the Maoist philosophy of “moving like fish” amongst the people. The moment you could isolate the terrorist from the people amongst whom he was moving, you started to win. Now, what General Templer implemented in Malaya was what was called The Briggs Plan.* General Sir Harold Briggs, who died of overwork, was working for some

* The reference is to General Sir Gerald Templer who was British High Commissioner for Malaya during the emergency. The “Briggs Plan” refers to Lt. General Sir Harold Briggs who had been appointed Director of Operations in Malaya in 1950. He held the position for a little over 18 months. Cf. “Winning in the Jungle—Malaya,” by Lt. Col. S.N. Mans, in the book: *The Guerrilla and how to Fight Him*, edited by Lt. Col. T.N. Greene (Praeger, 1962).

time on this plan prior to the arrival of Templer in Malaya. He had studied his Mao Tse-tung, he knew how they were operating, how they were bleeding the civilian population white, blackmailing them, and terrorizing them, because the terrorists were still living amongst the people. They were getting their supplies of food, information, their safe houses, their printing, uniforms, clothing, everything, from amongst the civilian population. So, what Briggs did, he realized that in Malaya there was a huge Chinese squatter population, in other words people who really were stateless, who really were not citizens of Malaya at all, but had come in to work the tin mines and rubber plantations, and who were third-rate citizens, with no civil rights, without the vote, without anything. They knew that they could be ejected, expelled back to China. The communist terrorist knew this, and said, “If you support us, we will see that you settle here in this land. If you don’t go along with us, we will kill you.” And they did.

What Briggs did, was to put all these squatters who lived on the jungle edge, where the terrorists would come and get them, into what were called New Villages. Now, the opposition said these were concentration camps. Alright, they may have been concentration camps, in that the people were “concentrated” into new villages. They were taken to areas where a large fence had been erected with watch towers around it, and they were given the materials to build their own houses, schools, and land to grow their own vegetables on. They set up their own shops. And they were protected and helped by the British Army. They had to be inside the compound every night by dark. If they were not, they could be treated as the enemy and shot. They soon got the message, and very few got shot. After a while, they realized they were getting good medical attention, good schools, their own domestic economy was thriving. Many of these new villages, which were created in 1949, ‘50 or ‘51, were still evident as such in 1969, when I went back to Malaysia. There was still a place called Kampong Coldstream up in north Malaya. In other words, the village of the Coldstream Guards, where the Coldstream Guards had been the local battalion that had put them there, helped them, had started their youth clubs for them, helped them with their schooling and trained their Home Guards. The British soldiers had subscribed money for buying agricultural implements and seeds. So they had identified with them, possibly 3,000 or 4,000 of them, with the Coldstream Guards. Other units did the same sort of thing. The qualities of the ordinary British soldiers suit them admirably for this sort of work. He gets the young people playing sports—mostly football! And it is worth years of cultural propaganda.

EIR: These are the vital political, economic and administrative approaches. What about the more concrete operational military side in combating irregular warfare?

Hickey: Once you’ve isolated them from the people and they can no longer, as Mao Tse-tung says, “swim among the

people,” they have to go into the jungle, into the hills, the uninhabited places. They then have to start growing their own vegetables and supplying themselves. And then they have to set up their own printing presses, courier service, and intelligence organizations. The way it worked in Malaysia, is that after the Briggs Plan started, and the new villages were set up, and the jungle edges were cleared of squatters, then the British Army went into the jungle, and lived like the terrorists, and hunted them down. It is no use just going in for one day, and coming out when it gets dark. You go in and stay in, in small groups. This is where the SAS got started again, as a deep-jungle patrol unit.

We put these small groups of SAS in very deep jungle in Malaya, and set up what were called jungle forts. Once the terrorists had been denied contact with the squatters and the people in the rich rubber and tin areas, they went into the jungle, and there they discovered that there were a lot of aboriginals in Malaya, popularly called the Sakei. They were very primitive people who lived like nomads in the jungle, cultivating their crops, moving on and so forth. Meanwhile the terrorists started to use them, to terrorize them, to obtain supplies of tapioca, vegetables, meat. So, we then sent the SAS in to live amongst the aboriginals, who were virtually the same as montagnards in Vietnam, simple people, living a very simple life; or the Meo in North Thailand, who I know, are very similar people. The moment the SAS started to live amongst the aboriginals, their life changed, because the medical personnel among the SAS looked after their children, cured their infections, fed them properly, and we won the hearts and minds of the aboriginals.

The Chinese terrorists had to go into very, very deep jungle, and started cutting little clearings in which to grow their vegetables. Now, we then discovered the techniques of spotting from the air, from our light aircraft, what their clearings were like and we watched them until we could see a clearing appear in the jungle. It might be a clearing the size of this garden, almost never any bigger than my garden here. The trees would come down, and we flew over the jungle every day, thousands and thousands of hours in light aircraft, at 3 or 4,000 feet with powerful binoculars, so as not to alarm the Chinese terrorists. We would see a clearing develop. They would cut down the trees, clear the ground, then put a picket fence around it. This we could see was stage-two. Stage-three, we could see they were digging the ground and preparing it for their Chinese cabbage, their rice, vegetables, their tapioca. Stage-four: We could see the crops coming up in straight rows. The Chinese are creatures of habit, they still planted in straight rows, not like the aboriginals. Stage five: ready for harvest. Then we would guide infantry patrols in, often for 20 or 30 or 40 miles, or drop the SAS in by parachute 10 miles away, and guide them in. We'd surround this garden, and each day at mid-day, I would fly over the top, at some altitude so as not to alarm the gardeners below. We would call up by radio the troops on the ground, they could

be Gurrkas, they could be British infantry, SAS, Malayan police. They would make smoke flares so we could see them through the jungle, and we'd give them their grid reference and a distance and a course to steer. For example: "You have 3,000 meters to go on a course of 045. Go carefully"—meaning the clearing was occupied. So you would then guide them in. And then, from a very great height, so the terrorists could not even hear the engine on this very light aircraft, we would then speak to the infantry as they conducted the attack, and guide them in. Then, always if there was success, they would confirm its result and we would fly down low over the sight. They would lay the bodies out in the middle of the patch. They would cut the vegetables so nobody else could eat them, and that was it. We did this for three or four years, and it wore the opposition down. Their morale and physical health declined.

EIR: So there seemed to have been no direct logistical outside support. Where did they get the weapons from?

Hickey: No. A few of them they captured from the Security Forces. Some from the Malay Home Guard, some were survivors, of course, from the war, because during the war we sent in agents and weapons to help the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), and it was discovered in 1948-49 and in the early 1950s, that the terrorists were still using British weapons dropped during the war. They were supposed to have handed them in in 1945 when the MPAJA were called on to hand their weapons in. They handed a few in for the sake of appearance, but they still had a lot hidden away.

EIR: Now what is your experience with Special Forces like the British SAS; what is your sense of these special organizations in respect to irregular warfare?

Hickey: I think they are very useful if you have these elite units, who are capable of living for long periods at the same level as the guerrillas. You can't expect a regular army unit to do so indefinitely, but units like the Special Air Service are perfectly capable of doing so for extended periods, in merging with the landscape, and living very discreetly amongst the population. Yes, they are invaluable, and they are a very useful source of intelligence. People think the SAS was a gang of gung ho Rambo-types, but the Rambo-type in Special Forces I would regard as absolutely useless anyway. The bloke is still a cowboy, a laughable, pathetic creature. Weaklings like to think of themselves as Rambos. The SAS soldier in my experience has generally proved to be a small, lightly built man, cheerful, intelligent, compassionate, which you see in their work among the aborigines, people like that, amusing people, above all very perceptive, not an armed bully with great big boots and lots of guns and things. The SAS man, of course, reckons that he has failed if he has to fight, either offensively or even defensively. And this is the great misconception about special forces, I think.

To be continued.

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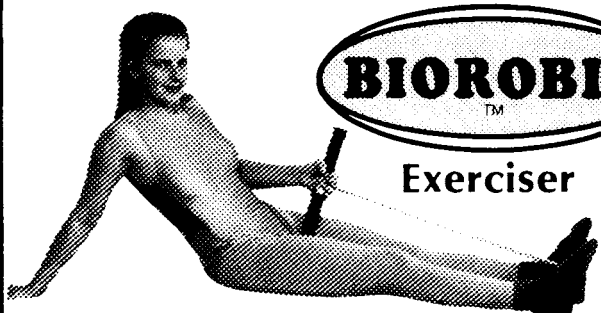
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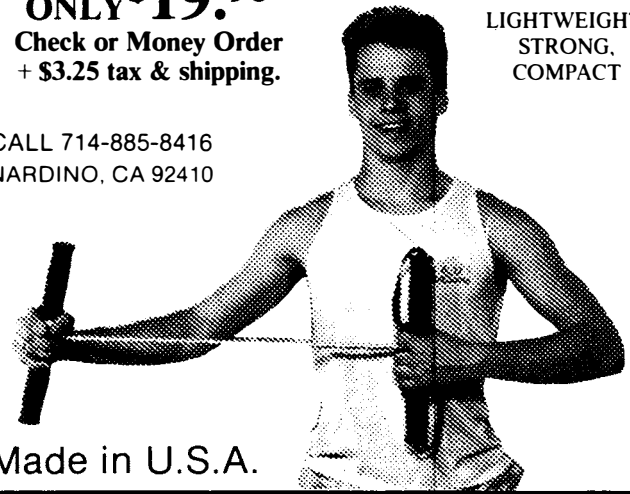
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