

Mercenaries are much misunderstood men

By Kevin Myers

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NO doubt the Labour MP Andrew Mackinlay was speaking his mind, rather than fashionably posing, when he condemned the proposal by the Foreign Secretary that mercenaries might be employed on peacekeeping and other operations abroad. It was, he fumed, "breathhtaking in the extreme" that Jack Straw should even contemplate giving mercenaries "a veneer of respectability".

It is tempting to dismiss such modishness with a yawn or two; but that would be a mistake. Mr Mackinlay probably speaks for a large number of people, for whom the word "mercenary" is a trigger-term, like child abuse with no further thought necessary.

Yet far more important than whether or not a soldier is a "mercenary" are the values he is being paid to uphold. Does Mr Mackinlay know that the first RAF pilot killed in the Second World War was a mercenary? Or that the youngest RAF Wing Commander was one, as was the first RAF VC? Did he know that one of the first SAS men killed in the Falklands was a mercenary also?

What unites Pilot Officer William Joseph Murphy, 107 Squadron, RAF, shot down over Germany on the morning of September 4 1939, and Trooper O'Connell, 22 SAS, killed in the Falklands in 1982, and those other men in between, is that they were Irish. Their country was neutral in the conflicts in which they gave their lives. In any meaningful sense of the word, they were all mercenary; and all honourable men.

Nor were they alone. Much of the campaigns in the Western Desert, Burma and Italy were fought with mercenaries, either from India, or most spectacularly of all, from Nepal. Gurkhas, amongst the most dependable and loyal soldiers who have ever served Britain, are mercenaries. Theirs is a paid service, and for all their traditions of sacrifice and honour, their loyalty is bought also. Yet that purchased-devotion has unfailingly remained inviolable and inviolate - which is more than one can say of native-born Britons.

In their fidelity, Gurkhas might be exceptional; in their choice of profession, they are not. Mercenaries have filled armies and made empires throughout history. The legionnaires of Rome were seldom Roman. Most crewmen in the Spanish Armada were not Spanish. The East India Company's mercenaries conquered the Indian sub-continent, just as the mercenaries of the French Foreign Legion took and held much of North Africa. The male-bondings of armies often transcend or even eliminate other loyalties - in the last resort, the Indian mutiny was put down by Indians, and the most decorated member of the French Foreign Legion during the Great War was a German.

Historically, this sort of group-loyalty was accentuated by the disparagement of soldiers by society. In Britain, to have "gone for a soldier" was traditionally the mark of a failure or a misfit, and most professional soldiers, even in the service of their own country, would have regarded themselves primarily as mercenaries. Indeed, it was largely in the 20th century, and two world wars, that soldiering became respectable.

Of course, being respectable means soldiers are by definition not expendable. Mercenaries are - that's why they're useful. The Foreign Secretary is simply recognising a truth. The mercenary is already making a return, and appropriately enough, in Africa, where once he was such a caricature villain in the Congolese civil wars.

William Shawcross, in his superb study of UN peacekeeping, *Deliver us from Evil*, points out that in it was a South African mercenary army, Executive Outcome, which protected much of Sierra Leone from the machete-wielding lunatics of the RUF. "By defending the Kono area, Executive Outcome had enabled 300,000 people to get on with their lives," he wrote. "Had Executive Outcome been more widely deployed . . . they could have saved dozens around Bo from having their hands, noses and lips chopped off . . . At a time when Western governments were more and more reluctant to commit their own troops . . . it seemed to me that, under proper control, private armies such as Executive Outcomes could play an increasingly useful role."

The withdrawal of the EO in 1996 allowed the vile RUF back at their games, which included sewing up their victims' vaginas and rectums with fishing line, padlocking mouths, and kidnapping thousands of children as conscript infant-infantry.

Now this is an abomination which must be halted, by main force if need be; but no government has the political will to see its volunteer-armies vanish into the murderous morass of Africa. The mercenary soldier, trained for the task, in a mercenary's uniform, is the perfect solution to this African problem. For if he or his colleagues are killed in action, the tabloid sob-industry cannot then move into tearful action, wondering about our brave boys perishing on a foreign field, and for what Prime Minister?

Mercenaries are excluded from such hand-wringing. They choose to enter a contract which makes their lives utterly expendable in someone else's cause: and this is what makes their profession what it has always been - an honourable instrument that will, without complaint or further claim, do civil society's dirty work.

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